

Message for the Seventh Sunday after Pentecost, Year A (7/19/2020)

Isaiah 44:6-8

Matthew 13:24-30, 36-43

“Let both of them grow together until the harvest...”

One of the items on my home improvement to-do list is to tear out the weedy lawn all around my house and replace it with new sod. Who doesn't want lush green grass to cool the soles of your feet on a hot summer day and, let's be honest, to look at least as uniform as the neighbor's lawn? All I'd need is the determination, a couple thousand dollars, a watering routine, and the time and energy to pull or poison the new weeds that are bound to spring up over time. Is it worth it?

What is a weed, after all? What are the criteria for judgment? You know a weed when you see it, right? But, I suppose it depends on your perspective. I have fond memories of walking down the alley behind my childhood home in midsummer to discover blackberry brambles laden with fruit. My sister and I would return with buckets to harvest the berries and enjoy them right there on the spot, warm and sweet. Those overgrown plants were “weeds,” of course, and if they lined the alley alongside my house today, I'd probably want them gone. But, why?

Ralph Waldo Emerson famously remarked that a weed is “a plant whose virtues have not yet been discovered.” Or, if its virtues are known, like the luscious fruit on blackberry vines, those virtues are unacknowledged or

underappreciated. In other words, **a weed is any vegetation that thrives against our wishes, a flourishing of life that is outside the scope of our planning or control.** “My definition of a ‘weed,’” writes Barbara Brown Taylor, “is anything I did not plant.”¹

“Do you want us to go and gather [the weeds that have been sown among the wheat]?” the fieldworkers ask the landowner in Jesus’ famous Parable of the Weeds. “No,” the Master replies, “for in gathering the weeds you would uproot the wheat along with them. Let both of them grow together until the harvest; and at harvest time I will tell the reapers, Collect the weeds first and bind them in bundles to be burned, but gather the wheat into my barn.” *Let both of them grow together until the harvest.* That doesn’t sound like an especially prudent agricultural strategy, since the weeds compete with the good crop for precious water and nutrients.² Weeding the field would maximize efficiency, wouldn’t it?

As usual, Jesus’ parable includes a striking and counterintuitive detail. *Let both of them grow together; let the weeds be.* What may seem like a simple judgment between the good growth and the bad isn’t quite so simple.

This is one of the great biblical examinations of evil. “Where did these weeds come from?” the laborers ask, alluding to the perennial question, *Why does evil exist in the first place?* And, the Master explains, “An enemy has done

¹ “The gardener in question,” <https://www.christiancentury.org/article/2011-10/gardener-question>.

² Talitha J. Arnold, in *Feasting on the Word*, Year A, Vol. 3, 260.

this,” without saying much more about the enemy’s precise identity or purpose. According to the parable, **evil is simply a reality in contention with good, a menace that slips into the world against the Master’s will.**

Even as it acknowledges the fact of evil, however, Jesus’ parable also cautions against a rush to judgment as to what qualifies as evil. Apparently, the Master is uncertain of the fieldworkers’ precision. In their zeal to remove the undesirable plants, they’re likely to harm the good ones, too. No, best to let the plants grow up alongside each other for now, trusting that those who are ultimately responsible for the harvest will reliably separate the wheat from the weeds – the good from the evil – even if we can’t.

The “purposeful ambiguity”³ at the heart of the parable reflects the conviction that **we are simply not in a position to pass judgment.** Does God’s sun not “rise on the evil and the good” alike? Are we called to condemn our enemies, or to love them?⁴ “Do not judge,” Jesus insists, “so that you may not be judged.... Why do you see the speck in your neighbor’s eye, but do not notice the log in your own eye?”⁵ **If I’m quick to identify the weeds in the Master’s field – to point my finger at allegedly unworthy others – have I considered the possibility that I might be a weed? Or, to put it in less dualistic terms, how can I distinguish between the wheat in my life – the ways in which Christ is**

³ Theodore J. Wardlaw, in *Feasting on the Word*, Year A, Vol. 3, 263.

⁴ Matthew 5:44-45.

⁵ Matthew 7:1-3.

causing me to thrive for the sake of God's harvest – and my weeds – those areas where I'm complicit in evil?

The caution against judgment, of course, doesn't preclude resistance to evil. We can and should hold ourselves and others accountable for the harm we cause. Indeed, **the work of discipleship involves the pursuit of justice, and justice requires that we attend to the interests of "the least of these,"⁶ often in confrontation with power. But, this labor is akin to tending the earth, and thus encouraging the good growth; the final separation of the crop from the weeds will be up to another.⁷**

Friends, we certainly don't like to sit with paradox. We aren't patient with complexity. Our first impulse is to identify and remove anything in our field of perception that's unwanted or unplanned. But, God is faithful. "Do not fear," God speaks through the prophet Isaiah, "I am the first and I am the last." **The one who has established the field and sown the good seed in the first place is the same one who will gather a bountiful harvest in the end.** Thanks be to God for the privilege of our work in the meantime!

⁶ Matthew 25:40.

⁷ See Taylor.