



Mount Carmel Lutheran Church

Time We Talk About Weed

Sermon by Pr. John Strommen
on Matthew 13:24-30, 36-43 (Romans 8:12-25)
on Sunday, July 19, 2020 (7th Sunday of Pentecost)

As I reflect on this text today of the wheat and the weeds, I remember well when my then 5-year-old son, Thomas, was first coming to grips with the fact that there were bad people in the world. And it was unsettling to him. This realization started for him when he began to notice that every night we closed the garage door and locked all our doors, and he was curious:

“Dad, why do you always lock the doors every night?”

One of those awkward moments where you don’t want to be fully candid, right? So, I tried to keep it vague. “Well, Thomas, to keep people from walking into our house after we’ve gone to bed.”

It wasn’t vague enough.

“But what if it’s our neighbor who needs something?”

“If that happens, we’ll go to the door and help them.”

“But who else would come to our door??”

“Well, there are some people who try to get into someone else’s house and take things that don’t belong to them.”

“Are those people around here?”

“Well, we don’t know for sure, but people who steal things can be anywhere, really. But remember, Thomas, there’s not much of a chance that it will happen to us. If it does, it’s usually when no one’s home.”

So, my sensitive son now had to try and go to sleep thinking about these things. It was particularly sad when I no longer had to lock doors at night because

my five-year old son had already beat me to it. His anxious little soul had been fully engaged.

He was realizing of course what everyone eventually learns: there are bad people in this world mixed in with the good, or at least people who you can't trust. And they are often active while we sleep.

Thomas was learning a lesson that Jesus taught long ago in the parable of the wheat and the weeds. In it, we learn about the servants who plant good seed, but while they're sleeping, an enemy plants evil seeds among the good seed. As the good seed grows and bears grain, the servants learn that there are also many weeds in the field, intermingled with the wheat. They ask their master if they should go out and pull up all the weeds. The master says, "no," for in uprooting the weeds the wheat could be uprooted as well. Better to let them co-exist, and at the time of harvest, the reapers can separate the weeds out to be burned, then gather the grain.

Our parable today is telling us that that wheat field is the world (and even the church) and the weeds represent the presence of evil among us. As biblical scholar Holly Hearon puts it: "The world has places of wonder, but alleys of cruelty, too. Families cause deep pain as well as great joy. The church can be inspiringly courageous one moment and petty and faithless the next. Good mixes in with the bad."

And the unsettling thing here is that you can't easily tell the wheat apart from the weeds, for evil often masquerades as good. This truth would have been very clear to those who listened to Jesus telling this parable, for they knew the kind of weed that Jesus was talking about: the "bearded darnel." A weed in that part of the world that was poisonous and destructive to wheat, and as it grew, it looked *virtually identical* to the wheat. So, it's understandable that the servants in our parable didn't detect the presence of the weeds until late in the game. They thought it was all wheat!

Indeed, evil rarely looks like a man with a pitchfork and tail. It's far more subtle most of the time.

And how, pray tell, did the evil weeds get there?? The parable only says that someone who is the enemy has sown the seeds of evil in the middle of the night when you are sleeping - someone who willfully intends to rob the wheat fields of life and produce. The parable, I think, warns us to take evil seriously because it's there to do harm. Evil is more than just people making mistakes and poor judgments. There is a darkness in our world that we often underestimate. When Jesus introduces the idea of the "enemy," he means there is another kingdom or reign at work, where subjects in that kingdom are sowing seeds of divisiveness and death. This is why most of us understand that it's somewhat ludicrous to entertain the idea that we can abolish the police.

M. Scott Peck, author of the book, "People of the Lie," tells the story of asking his young son what he thinks evil is, what it means. His son said that "evil" is "live" spelled backward. Smart kid, huh? Henceforth, Peck has adopted that definition. Evil chokes and diminishes life, rather than helping life to thrive.

So, given that these bad seeds among us are pretty bad, how can Jesus say we should just let the weeds be and not try to pull them up? Are we just supposed to look the other way with evil among us? No, we are not. But when Jesus says in the parable, "do not uproot the weeds," something very important and basic is being said here, and it has to do with having some perspective. You see, it comes all too easily for human beings to play the game of rooting out bad people, judging them, and trying to remove them from their community. This parable, in fact, was directed originally against building boundaries and trying to create a "pure" community. In Jesus' time, this was attempted by such groups as the Pharisees and Essenes, a desert dwelling sect. But no matter who does it, it usually doesn't work out that well. For starters, we find that we can't keep the weeds out, not matter how hard we try. But even more importantly, when you or I or the Pharisees play judge of someone else's character or worth, we often get it wrong. When the Pope declared Galileo to be a big bad weed because Galileo discovered that the earth revolved around the sun, he was uprooted by and all self-respecting Christians and thrown out of the church. Of course, Galileo was right, and it was silly to uproot him. We easily confuse the wheat with the darnel.

Our problem is that we all have our various litmus tests of goodness and badness. We usually don't see broadly enough and often end up excluding people who are simply different from us or have a new opinion about things. Then we end up doing harm to them as well ourselves, because we summon the worst that is within us; something other than love, that ends up being a Molotov cocktail of pride, self-righteousness and heartlessness.

Also, trying too hard to fight the weeds can have the opposite effect than what is sought. As theologian Lee Ramsey puts it: "We cannot cast off these destructive weeds by clawing away at them on a daily basis. They only multiply under such stimulation."

God gives us a great gift here to steer us away from our worst tendencies. When the master tells the servants to let the reapers pull the weeds at the harvest, God is telling us, "Let me handle the judging of whether someone is good or bad and what their ultimate fate will be."

This means two things for us: first, we can rest assured that God will hold everyone accountable in the end. And that's a good thing. No one can do whatever they want. God is still in charge. Trust that.

And second, we are then free to focus our efforts on loving our neighbor, not judging them. And that includes loving the people we're not so sure about. Their life can change for the better as a result of love and respect that you show them. We are called to focus on the positive, not negative; working to bring forth the fruits of the harvest of God's kingdom. And those fruits are always about love and the affirmation of life.

But lest any of us think we are being urged to ignore or brush off the weeds around us, we all need to pay attention to the imagery of this parable, and how extensively the weeds have infiltrated our communities. How near they are to us. To put it bluntly, one starts to wonder if one's own self is also a weed. Certainly, depending on who's telling the story, you or I might be weeds, not wheat. One is mindful of the saying, "we have met the enemy and the enemy is us." Just as there are weeds in any human organization, there are weeds in any and every human

being as well. But panic not! To recognize this is critical to one's spiritual health and to receiving God's grace.

Ironically, when we are too focused on being "good" and driving out the weeds around us, we fool ourselves into thinking there is no weed in me. And that would be wrong. As the good book says, "If we say we have no sin, we deceive ourselves and the truth is not in us." Telling the truth about ourselves lets God go to work in us.

Our nation is currently wrestling with the realization that there is more destructive weed in us than our self-image allows. By that I mean racism. When are in denial about these dark alleys in our collective soul, we become even more blind to them. Every time someone wants to insist that America is "exceptional," I cringe at the implication that we as Americans are better than everyone else. We have much to be proud of and thankful for as Americans, for sure. But it's a dangerous thing to believe you're better than other nations, that you're always the good guys. A careful look at our history will bear out that there weeds in our fields and a lot of them. We can be at our best when we get real about this.

This is a very core Christian point. We are in bondage to sin, all of us, and in need of confessing those darn weeds within us. That way God can forgive us and we have a chance to love our neighbor with appropriate humility. Something like, "if not for the grace of God, so too will I be uprooted as weed."

Amen.