

Homily – Parable of the Weeds

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We are in the midst a series of Sundays in which our Gospel reading is a parable. A parable is a story used to teach, but a parable teaches in ways that do not give black and white answers. Sometimes we just want a “yes” or a “no” to life’s questions, but this is not what Jesus does in his teachings. When Jesus teaches us with parables he is giving us gray answers to our questions. He is giving us “maybe’s” and “it depends.”

Now, a parable story is like a prism or gemstone in which you can turn the stone to see the story in various ways. In another well-known parable, the Parable of the Prodigal Son, we can view the teaching of the story from the vantage point of the father, or from the vantage point of one of the sons. We can even use the vantage point of the fatted calf which is slaughtered for the celebratory feast. Each character’s vantage point brings us a different answer to life’s questions. Parables have many facets in which they can be insightful.

Last week with the Parable of the Sower we turned the gemstone to look at the story from the viewpoint of the seeds, and then from the viewpoint of the sower. We also looked at the way the parable would have been viewed two thousand years ago in first century Palestine, and we looked at the Parable of the Sower from the vantage point of twenty-first century America. The Parable has some interesting things to teach as we are all in different stages or places in our spiritual journeys.

This week we have the Parable of the Weeds. And since it is a parable we can look at it from the viewpoint of the weeds, from the viewpoint of the wheat, from the viewpoint of the landowner, or from the viewpoint of the workers in the fields. And, today, I want to do a deep dive into three different ways that we can view the weeds by looking at three different definitions for weeds.

Here is the first definition. A weed is a noxious plant that negatively impacts the other plants around it. This is a very traditional definition of a weed and it is a very traditional way to view the Parable of the Weeds.

As an example, the bearded darnell is a devil of a weed. Known in biblical terms as tares, the bearded darnell has no virtues. Its roots surround the roots of good plants, sucking up precious nutrients and scarce water, making it impossible to root it out without damaging the good crop. Above ground, darnell looks identical to wheat, until it bears seed. Those seeds can cause everything from hallucinations to death.

This traditional way of reading the Parable of the Weeds is to see that the wheat represent good people and the weeds are bad or even evil people. God will judge some people as wheat and send them to heaven. And God will judge some bad, evil people as weeds. These people are in trouble for the rest of eternity. So, you better make sure you live your life as the wheat and not as a weed. This is a very traditional reading of the Parable of the Weeds, but this morning there are two other definitions of weeds that I want to still look at.

A second definition of a weed is a plant for which we haven't yet figured out a use. Throughout history we have examples of weeds that become a source of food. Or, we learn that a weed has medicinal value. And sometimes when fields have been so over used, the nutrients have been leached out of the soil. In this circumstance weeds can help replenish the soil by adding back in nutrients. Sometimes a weed becomes useful to us, and we no longer classify it as a weed.

Using this second definition of a weed, in our parable good people are useful, productive, or serve some type of purpose. Conversely, weeds are people for which we have no use. They are not productive, and they serve no purpose. Some might even view these weedy people as a drain on society.

Now, this second definition of weedy people makes me squirm because it is at odds with my views and understand of God. I believe that God loves and values all people. God loves all unconditionally. There is nothing we can do to make God love us more, and there is nothing we can do to make God love us less. God loves all, and God values us just for being. God does not value us because we are useful. God does not love us because we serve a purpose. Jesus did not die for the productive people. Jesus came to save all because God loves all. And, like Jesus we are to value and love all, not just those that serve a purpose.

When I reflect on Jesus' Parable of the Weeds with this second definition of weed, red flags go up. It reminds me of a trap. Far too often, I fall into the trap of valuing people who serve. And, more specifically I value people who get stuff done here at church. However, like Jesus, you and I are called to value all people. We may spend more time with folks who are working with us on an activity or ministry. But, we must always remember that God loves all, and we should love and value all as well.

The third definition of a weed that I want to look at this morning is that a weed is any plant that is in a location in which you don't want it. Turf grass is a weed when it is in the flower bed. A tree is a weed when it is putting too much shade over the vegetable garden. Blackberry bramble is a weed when it is in the pathway where you want to walk. This definition of a weed shows that what we declare a weed can be very subjective. A person may decide that the dymondia ground cover is great on the

hillside, but when it starts encroaching on the milkweed it has become a weed and it must be removed. Or, one person may plant milkweed to attract and nurture monarch butterflies, but another person will pull out the milkweed because she doesn't want the horses to be poisoned by the milkweed.

This third definition of a weed – any plant that is in a location where you don't want it – this third definition gets away from black and white thinking. Instead, a plant is both good and bad. It is both wheat and weed. By extension this gray way of seeing shows how seemingly good things can be recognized as sometimes bad, and seemingly bad things can also be seen to bear some good fruit. This kind of gracious discernment invites people into yes/and thinking, rather than simplistic either/or thinking. This is the difference between merely having correct information and the true spiritual gift of wisdom.

And, once we have learned to discern the real and disguised nature of both good and evil, we recognize that everything is broken and fallen, weak and poor—while still being the dwelling place of God: you and me, our countries, our children, our marriages, and even our churches, mosques, and synagogues. This nuanced way of seeing is not a put-down of anybody or anything, but actually creates the freedom to love imperfect things. As Jesus told the rich young man, “God alone is good”. We cannot wait for things to be totally perfect to fall in love with them, or we will never love anything. Now, instead, when we live in the gray areas we can love everything.

Now, Jesus uses a number of *mixture images* to illustrate the tension of our own mixture of good and evil. These teachings seem to say this world is a mixture of different things, and unless we learn how to see, we don't know how to separate; we get lost in the weeds and can't see the wheat.

In today's Parable of the Weeds, the servants ask, “Should we pull out the weeds?” Jesus responds, “No. Let them both grow together until the harvest.” Then, at the end of time, he will decide what is wheat and what is weed. But the thing to remember is that we are a mixture of weed and wheat, and we always will be. Each of us is simultaneously saint and sinner. That's the mystery of holding weed and wheat together in our one field of life. It takes a lot more patience, compassion, forgiveness, and love than aiming for some illusory perfection that usually cannot see its own faults. The only true perfection available to us is the honest acceptance of our imperfection. For you see, if we must have perfection to be happy with ourselves, we have only two choices. We can either ignore our own evil (deny the weeds) or we can give up in discouragement (deny the wheat). But if we put aside perfection and face the tension of having both, then we can hear the good news with open hearts.

We must have the humility to accept the fact that we are all part weed. Each of us is some mixture of wheat and weed, of potential fruit and potential destruction. This Parable of the Weeds clearly cautions against a rush to judgment about others. We cannot always tell initially what is a good plant and what is not. The mix of wheat and weed is normal. What we do with it is part of our spiritual journey.

Today we have looked at Jesus' Parable of the Weed in three very different ways. A weed is a noxious plant. A weed is a plant for which we don't have a purpose. And finally, a weed is sometimes good and sometimes bad, and always both.

May we all have the humility to accept that we are a weed and then the courage to still try to live a life of love.