

## PENTECOST X

***Jesus put before them another parable: ‘The kingdom of heaven may be compared to someone who sowed good seed in his field; but while everybody was asleep, an enemy came and sowed weeds among the wheat, and then went away.’***

Matthew 13:24

We are in the agricultural section of Matthew’s Gospel. Last week we heard about what happens to seed in various kinds of soil. This week, it’s all about weeds.

Matthew, perhaps more than any other gospelist, concerns himself with practical human problems, with daily life and with community issues. Anger, divorce, hypocrisy, sexual behavior, taxes, church discipline, the snare of material possessions – these concerns surface frequently. And while Matthew’s teachings on these matters may make us uncomfortable sometimes, while we in the 21<sup>st</sup> century may not always *relate* easily to 1<sup>st</sup> century conditions, we can’t say the Gospel is too abstract. We can’t say Matthew doesn’t live in the real world – his real world, that is.

As I have worked with and preached this gospel over the years, I have found that nearly everyone can *relate* to weeds. I still remember vividly my first sermon on this passage. I was a new priest, working in Dover. I was not yet a gardener, not at all, but I had a backyard planting of new groundcover that I was trying to rescue from a plague of weeds. I felt intimately acquainted with these weeds, and described them in elaborate – and, I am sure, despairing detail.

I don’t think I’ve ever had more response to a sermon. People helpfully offered to identify what kind of weeds these were, in particular. People commiserated. People told me their own weed agony stories. It was quite an outpouring.

Now, back to the weeds. I don’t remember, honestly, what I said about the parable, that is, what Jesus, or Matthew, meant the weeds to represent. But I expect I said the weeds were sins, invading our souls, entwining themselves in the depths of our being. That is, I made a very personal, individualistic, internal interpretation.

Now, I’ve been presiding over congregations for twenty years, and at times, when I think about the weeds and their meaning, it’s tempting to move in the direction of a communal or collective interpretation. And indeed, when Matthew has Jesus interpret the parable himself there is a cast of characters: children of the kingdom and children of the evil one, the devil and the angels. This is not a private internal drama of personal sin –this is community, this is group weediness.

Here's what one commentator says.

“Who has not wrestled with the paradoxical character of a congregation?... Who has not wanted to be rid of the bad apples that spoil the barrel?” (**Texts for Preaching**, Bruggeman et al. ) Clearly this guy had just had a bad day of parish ministry.

And as I say so, so often, Jesus and the Gospel writers, and indeed the poets, historians and prophets of Hebrew Scripture, are not majorly concerned with individual and personal sins and peccadillos. Their focus is on group behavior and misbehavior; the falling away of the Chosen People from the dream of God, the failure in human community to love one another as God loves us.

A few words here about weeds. In the last few years I have become a serious gardener, and I have a much more intimate acquaintance with weeds. Here's some of what I know. Weeds are ubiquitous and opportunistic. And they are hardy. They are everywhere, and they will take over everywhere. An article about weeds and weed research in the Sunday New York Times a couple of weeks ago described weeds as the possible future of the planet.

Weeds come in infinite varieties, and different ones crop up indifferent environments. Some like dry, some like wet. Some can be very attractive, and can closely resemble legitimate specie plants. I had something growing in the back garden at Alveston Street that really could have been a strawberry plant. It was very handsome and glossy. But I knew I hadn't planted any strawberry plants, it was bigger than any strawberry plant I've ever seen, and it bore no strawberries. Clue! Clue! So finally the other day I ripped it out.

But if you are unsystematic gardener, as I am, or I suspect even if you are much more orderly, it's often impossible to distinguish what you've put in your garden from a weedy imposter, until fairly late in the game. And by that time invader may have a very firm roothold.

So, twenty years from that first sermon on this parable , I know a lot more about weeds, and I know a lot more about congregations and group behavior. And I also know a lot more about sin, my own and others. And what's changed for me?

Well, I remember an intermediate sermon I preached on this passage – in 2002, when the Gospel came up a several cycles ago. I preached it for the Cathedral's radio broadcast. I talked about a time – a time before I was ordained, when I'd gotten into a nasty parish battle and witnessed and endured some really bad behavior on the part of a

fellow parishioner. I said in that sermon that I thought at the time the rector should have kicked her out of the church. But I reported that over time I had changed my view. I said,

I was all too ready to want that woman weeded out of the parish. But who knows what was happening in her life that caused her to be so angry, so unhappy, and so underhanded at that moment? Who knows what she learned from all that conflict that may have made her wiser and more compassionate, a more co-operative parishioner, a more fruitful Christian?

And who knows what would have happened to her spirit if I'd had my wish, and she'd been weeded out of our community?

It was not my business to weed her out; it was not the rector's business either, and he was wise enough to know that. He set some boundaries for her, contained her venom in some way I'll never know. And for years after that I got the parish newsletter and I would see that woman's name, heading committees, working away, an active and contributing member.

So, that's what I preached a few years ago, and I got a memorable notes from a couple of people who'd heard the sermon on the radio saying how glad they were that I'd become more compassionate and merciful with increased age and wisdom.

And then a couple of months ago I had a message from a friend who's still in touch with the goings on at that parish where I had wanted a fellow parishioner weeded out all those years ago. The message was that this very same woman had been excommunicated by the now rector of the parish.

And I was appalled, as was my informant. This woman may be small -minded and old fashioned and rigid, and she may be devious and somewhat malicious, as she was with me so many years ago. But my friend sent me a copy of the excommunication letter, and by no stretch of the imagination did the grievances enumerated there warrant something as radical as excommunication. This was clearly a political move, an attempt to eliminate a dissenting voice in what has become, in my opinion, a virtual cult church.

So it has become clearer to me than every before what is our proper response to weeds in our community garden. In Matthew's parable, the workers in the field are alarmed at the presence of the weeds, but the householder doesn't seem alarmed. He tells the workers to hold on. He's not oblivious to the weeds, or unconcerned about them. But he has a plan, he knows what to do. Turn the whole operation over to the reapers at harvest time, and they will separate out the weeds from the wheat. Try to weed earlier, and you will damage the good plants. Just as if I try to pull out weeds too early, I will

undoubtedly eliminate some flowers who would beautify my gardens and feed the bees and butterflies and hummingbirds.

Just so, if we try to rip out or eliminate strange behavior – in ourselves or others– to get rid of whatever may seem alien or discomforting in the first instance. Maybe there’s trouble ahead. Maybe we’ll have to challenge some behaviors – in ourselves or others– somewhere down the line. Maybe some truly bad acting – by ourselves or others– may have to be rooted out. But perhaps we are not dealing with evil, but simply with difference. Perhaps what looks like a weed is a creative adaptation of a lovely species. Time will tell.

Analogies and parables like this go only so far. Weed will always come back, and we do have to try get rid of them, knowing that the struggle against them is everlasting– as is the struggle against sin. But in the human realm, the parable tells us, and we believe, the ultimate weeding out, the ultimate judging, belongs not to us, but to God.

Last week, as I was thinking and writing about the seed falling on rock or sandy soil or good soil, I thought about a garden plot I have been working on at our house in Maine. It’s below a lovely granite ledge featured in some very old photos of our property, and I set out to reclaim the ledge area. Sam and a friend began by digging out a multitude of old forsythia and lilac stumps and roots, and then I set to work. First I discovered that the area had been used as a dump for a whole roof of asbestos shingles, which I had to dig out, bag up, and cart away.

And then I began to double dig the soil, and excavated a seemingly endless pile of rocks and small stones. My arm muscles bulked up from using a pickaxe for hours on end. I moved granite slabs several feet in length, some weighing 50 or 75 pounds. The pile grew and grew, as did my renewed astonishment that anybody would be crazy and persevering enough to farm the relentlessly rocky soil of Maine.

My digging project extended over three years. But a year ago in the spring I was ready to plant. The soil, which had laid fallow, building up rich humus for who knows how many decades, and now purged of major rocks, seemed promising . I selected plant more carefully and systematically than is my habit. And this year I have been rewarded by a most spectacular array of flourishing perennials. All my efforts have paid off beyond my dreams.

And you know what? The more the plants thrive, the less room there is for weeds!

*Let anyone with ears listen! Alleluia! Amen.*