

7th Sunday After Pentecost

July 19, 2020

Sermon by Rev. Zachary W. Johnson

Hill Avenue Grace Lutheran Church
Pasadena, California

Gospel: Matthew 13:24-30, 36-43

²⁴ [Jesus] put before [the crowds] another parable: “The kingdom of heaven may be compared to someone who sowed good seed in his field; ²⁵ but while everybody was asleep, an enemy came and sowed weeds among the wheat, and then went away. ²⁶ So when the plants came up and bore grain, then the weeds appeared as well. ²⁷ And the slaves of the householder came and said to him, ‘Master, did you not sow good seed in your field? Where, then, did these weeds come from?’ ²⁸ He answered, ‘An enemy has done this.’ The slaves said to him, ‘Then do you want us to go and gather them?’ ²⁹ But he replied, ‘No; for in gathering the weeds you would uproot the wheat along with them. ³⁰ 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.’”

³⁶ Then he left the crowds and went into the house. And his disciples approached him, saying, “Explain to us the parable of the weeds of the field.” ³⁷ He answered, “The one who sows the good seed is the Son of Man; ³⁸ the field is the world, and the good seed are the children of the kingdom; the weeds are the children of the evil one, ³⁹ and the enemy who sowed them is the devil; the harvest is the end of the age, and the reapers are angels. ⁴⁰ Just as the weeds are collected and burned up with fire, so will it be at the end of the age. ⁴¹ The Son of Man will send his angels, and they will collect out of his kingdom all causes of sin and all evildoers, ⁴² and they will throw them into the furnace of fire, where there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth. ⁴³ Then the righteous will shine like the sun in the kingdom of their Father. Let anyone with ears listen!”

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SERMON by Pastor Zach

When I was a young child (as I suspect many young children also did this), and the dandelions began to bloom in our yard, I was convinced that they were pretty flowers that my mother would love to receive and place them in a flower vase. So, naturally, my younger sister (who also thought the same thing) and I collected several yellow dandelions and brought them to our mother as a gift. It was only then that my mother revealed it to us young innocents that dandelions were actually a weed that they were trying to get rid of from the lawn. From that point on, dandelions were no longer seen as beautiful to me but something to be despised.



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When I came to Pasadena for the first time this past December, and then again in January for my interviews with the Hill Avenue Grace call committee, I was blown away by the lush vegetation and colors. While the Midwest was desolate and bare from the cold of winter, Pasadena was bright and vibrant with green lawns and trees, as well as all sorts of colorful flowers. It was easy to appreciate the beauty of flower gardens. However, most of the flowers we grow in our gardens are technically weeds just like dandelions. Why is it that we can treat certain flowers, which are technically weeds, like they are beautiful and precious, but other weeds as if they are supposed to be despised? Is it simply because of the way they look? And, if they are all a part of God's creation, what gives us the right to decide which weed is worthy?

Now, while I'm sure most of us don't lose sleep over the question of which weeds are worthy to grow in our gardens, this analogy gets at the heart of what Jesus is trying to convey in the parable of the weeds and the wheat in our gospel story today. In other words, Jesus is asking the crowds to consider whether or not it is right for us human beings to decide who is worthy of salvation, who is worthy of love, who is worthy of God.

In the parable, the master of the household doesn't want the weeds that were planted in the field to be uprooted until harvest time. Now, from a gardening and farming standpoint this doesn't make sense. I used to weed gardens for chores when I was younger, and there was never any worry that pulling out the weeds would affect the flowers and vegetables that grew in the garden. In fact, the worry was that, if we left the weeds in the ground, they would hurt the growth of the flowers and vegetables. So, if this is the case, then why would the master of the household want to keep the weeds along with the wheat? Isn't he worried the weeds will steal vital nutrients from the wheat?

Well, if we understand the master of the household to be God, God's intentions become clear. Where we may see a problem, God sees possibility and opportunity. Keeping the weeds among the wheat gives the wheat an opportunity to influence the weeds. While the weeds might have been planted by the Evil One, and while the wheat may represent the children of God, the master of the household (God) believes that the ministry of the wheat has the power to transform the weeds into children of God.

Yes, it is true that Christ Jesus is final judge and it is up to God to decide if any weeds should be cast out into eternal fire, but God wants to give every planted weed an opportunity to hear the good news, experience the life-giving power of God's love, and grow in love for God and neighbor. Plus, Jesus is also telling us through this parable that it is not our job to determine who is worthy. Our job is to minister to both wheat and weeds and open doors for the Holy Spirit to come in and transform lives.

Part of the reason Jesus tells this parable is because, back in the days of his earthly ministry, the Pharisees and other Jewish religious authorities tried to separate themselves from the rest of society with purity laws. They used these laws to determine who was worthy or unworthy; they used these laws to determine a person's righteousness. It gave them the power to be exclusive.



But again, where the Pharisees saw one that was considered unclean, Jesus saw a lost soul thirsty for God's love. This is why much of Jesus' ministry focused on proclaiming good news to the lost, the forsaken, the unclean, the poor, those who were considered sinners. Jesus spent much time with those considered unrighteous by the Pharisees because he wanted them to know that, while the world might forsake them, God loves them and considers them precious.

This is good news for us for many reasons. Firstly, it is good news for us because it means that God loves us no matter what, even on those days when we feel like dirty weeds rather than wheat. God doesn't care about our past, how many mistakes we've made, or even what other people may think of us. God wants us to know that we are beloved and that, because of Christ's forgiveness, we are free to live unburdened by our sins and mistakes; we are free to live a life that is grounded in love and grace. When we look at ourselves, sometimes it is easy to see failure and brokenness. Yet, when God looks at us, God sees a perfect and beloved child whom God loves beyond measure; so much so that there is nothing we could ever do to make God stop loving us. God frees us from our brokenness so that we too can take a look at ourselves and see, first and foremost, the same beloved child that God sees in us. To God, we are always wheat.

But this good news also means that we have been freed to minister to what society considers the weeds among us. Because we are grounded in God's love and grace, we are free to use the power of Christ's love to draw all people to God. No matter how much society may see a person as a weed that needs to be pulled, God gives us the ability to see them first and foremost as a beloved child worthy of a place in God's eternal garden. This also frees us from any responsibility to determine who should be worthy of God. All we are called and free to do is to love and teach about God's love, as well as show God's love through acts of service. By doing so, God will give us the power to transform our entire community, our entire world into fields of wheat. And when we do that, oh what an amazing harvest that will be for God.

Amen.

