

Seventh Sunday after Pentecost – Proper 11 – Year A – 7.19.21 - The Rev. Canon Joan Anthony
Isaiah 44:6-8, Psalm 86:11-17, Romans 8:12-25, Matthew 13:24 30,36-43

I will be the first to tell you that I am not a gardener. From time to time, I have lived in homes with a yard, and so I have planted bulbs, mowed grass and weeded flower beds. That doesn't make me a gardener. Although I do not claim to know much about gardening, I do find this parable odd. To allow the weeds to grow up alongside the wheat stalks seems to go against logic. As every good gardener knows, weeds compete with the good crop for nutrients and water. Weeds can prevent the good crop from having optimum growing conditions and if they are fast growing, weeds can choke out the good plants.

This particular weed, known in more traditional translations of scripture as tares, is especially pernicious. Ralph Waldo Emerson has famously said that a weed is merely a plant whose virtue has not yet been discovered. Not so with the tare, also called the bearded darnel. Its roots entwine themselves around the roots of the wheat stalks, making it impossible to weed out the darnel without damaging the good plants. Further, the bearded darnel above ground looks exactly like wheat, making it difficult if not impossible to decide what needs to be weeded out. And worse, when it goes to seed, the seeds produced are poisonous, causing hallucinations and in some cases death. Not something you want in your garden. Parables are metaphors, where the physical characteristic helps us to see the traits of a concept or idea. The parable helps us talk about concepts in a form of shorthand. The purpose of the parable is to cause its hearer to actively think about those concepts being underscored. Another important aspect of a parable is that they apply across time and across cultures. The parable of the wheat and weeds had something important to say to the crowds around Jesus, to the churches founded by the apostles and to us today.

You can see where Jesus is going with this parable. Human beings, whether first century or twenty-first century people are like that field. Within our personhood we have the capacity to be both wheat and weed, sometimes at the same time. We act in ways we think are for good and find later that they were not. To paraphrase St. Paul, we do those things we don't want to do and do not do those things we know we should. When we try to eliminate that which we see as weeds in ourselves, in others, in our congregation or our community, we can sometimes destroy much that is good. It does not mean we should not try, just that we do so in concert with others and very carefully. My woodworker husband used to remind me often to "measure twice, cut once."

At the most surface level, the wheat is equated with "Good" and the weeds with "Bad". Simple enough, until you dig a bit deeper. It is not always easy to tell what is good and what is bad, what is wheat and what is weed. Like the bearded darnel, sometimes the bad masquerades as the good and we are left with unintended consequences. Sometimes what is good for one person or community is not good for their neighbor. Life is like that field in the metaphor, often a mix of wheat and weed. Sometimes what is seen as good and what is seen as bad is dependent on the person who is looking.

It has been said that the people of the first century who gathered as Christians were asking the question: "How can we be faithful to God in a time of great stress and ambiguity?"

How can we be faithful in this time of great stress and ambiguity, faithful as individuals, as a church and as a nation? Knowing that our lives, our world is a mixed field of both wheat and weeds, how can we do the best that we can do to nurture the wheat and at the same time hold under control the weeds?

In this life, we will live in a mixed field, not able to make things perfect all the time so how do we remain faithful in trying to make things a little more wheat and less weeds?

First to acknowledge that we alone do not have all the answers and that our way is not the only way. Second to understand that we cannot make a totally weedless world, but that we can do our part to lessen the impact of the damage that the weeds can do.

The earliest churches were brought together by the Holy Spirit to be the new way of living according to God's plan. They were called to do four things. The Holy Spirit continues to call those of faith to those same four things today.

The four things were to imitate Jesus, follow Jesus, present the face of Jesus to the world and to act in accordance with the command of love. To imitate Jesus is to see God and God's design for the world, to follow Jesus is to do our part in making that design visible in our small part of the world. To present Jesus' face to the world is to be willing to be a witness to our faith often by actions rather than words. To love is to be willing to open ourselves up to the other and the other's needs even at the expense of our own. All concrete actions. Things we can do each day of our lives. In that way, day by day and person by person the world becomes more holy, more in line with the vision God has for us.

Many years ago, my nephew, Jason, who was at the time about 10 years old, came to spend the weekend with me. On Saturday morning we set out to weed one of my flower beds. Jason was willing to do this with me, but he had some hesitation. In his words he didn't really know the flowers from the weeds and he might pull up the wrong thing. Not a problem, I said, indicating that if he was unsure he could ask me whether a particular plant was a flower or a weed. Problem solved. We worked along for about 15 minutes. Occasionally Jason would ask about a particular plant and I would say, flower, or weed. That worked well until he pointed to one particular plant and asked: Flower or weed? I replied, flower and his next question said it all. "So, he said, how come that when I asked before this was a weed?"

Each situation we encounter has the potential to be a flower or a weed. More importantly, situations and people we meet can be transformed over time from weeds to flowers. In the words of Emerson, the weed can become the flower whose potential has been recognized.