

Sermon for Sunday, July 23, 2017 - "Permission to Ignore the Weeds"

Seventh Sunday after Pentecost
July 23, 2017
Good Shepherd Lutheran Church
Decorah, Iowa
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[Click here to read scripture passages for the day.](#)

Permission to Ignore the Weeds

Beloved of God, grace to you and peace in the name of Jesus. Amen.

This passage raises several questions and concerns for me, but there's one thing I really appreciate about it. It justifies my approach to gardening! The servants want to purge all the weeds but the master tells them to let the weeds and the wheat grow together because if they try to gather the weeds, they'll uproot the good stuff too.

So, when I let the weeds grow up in my flower beds I'm not neglecting my duties as a homeowner - I'm taking scripture seriously! The home we bought in 2012 is surrounded by so many beautiful flower beds. Beds that, this summer especially, have been totally overtaken by weeds. When we first moved in, I tried to keep up with the weeds but I ended up doing just what the master in this parable warns about. I pulled out the good stuff with the weeds.

We moved into our house in the fall and I wasn't sure about all that we had in the beds. In the spring, as plants came up, I couldn't tell what was weed and what was flower. I tried to do a video call with my mother-in-law in Georgia hoping I could show her what was there and get her opinion of whether to pull or leave. Not surprisingly, gardening via Face Time doesn't work so well. There are any number of other places I could have gone for help after that, but I had limited time and wanted to get the weeding done that day. I ended up pulling a bunch of daisy plants that looked to me like grass. I created big empty patches that are a perfect breeding ground for weeds. I was too zealous and it backfired.

Gardening isn't the only time I'm tempted to overzealous weeding. I can easily get self-righteous and judgmental, especially when it comes to other Christians. When I hear about priests abusing children, Christians using scripture as a weapon against others, or pastors teaching that if you just believe enough then life will go well and you'll have lots of money, I just want to uproot all that. I've seen too much damage caused by this kind of stuff. There are times I just want to get out a huge shovel and a massive weed whacker and purge Christianity of all that.

Yet, my trip to Ireland reminded me that it can be hard to tell what is a noxious weed and what is a fruitful plant. For instance, before our trip I learned about Irish monasteries that were devastated by Viking raiders. I was under the impression that the Vikings had only been a destructive force in Ireland. But as we traveled around the country, we heard about the ways the Vikings also positively impacted the island. Their early settlements were influential in the growth of key Irish cities like Dublin and Cork. The "barbaric" Vikings were certainly no worse than the Christians from England who ruled Ireland as a colony for 800 years. We heard so much about the brutally oppressive tactics the English used to control the Irish. Yet of course, they also made positive impacts.

It's not always so easy to tell what chokes life and what leads to its flourishing. And, when we try to attack the weeds, we often end up exhibiting the same tendencies we deplore in others.

Perhaps it would be better to take the approach that Irish monastics used when facing some very weed-like actions and attitudes. In the 5th and 6th centuries, Ireland was extremely violent - raiding, slavery and warfare were central aspects of life. Religious practice included the sacrifice of humans to the gods. Yet in a very short time, St. Patrick and other early Christians had a profound effect on Irish culture. They did this not by attacking the weeds of violence, but instead by nurturing good wheat - by creating peaceful, fruitful monasteries that impacted the whole society.

When we think of monasteries, we often think about people seeking separation from the world. That was the focus of the desert fathers and mothers in Egypt who founded monasteries to escape the corruption of the Roman Empire. But Irish monasteries were different; they weren't places just for monks and nuns. They were settlements that included craftspeople, artists, farmers, families, and children. The focus was not on separation and purity but on creating peaceful, Christian communities that offered a compelling alternative to violence. Rather than trying to uproot the weeds or create a weed-free zone, the Irish monastics focused on nurturing good wheat. This was a fruitful approach. After 30-40 years of Irish monasticism, Christianity was flourishing, human sacrifice was eliminated, and slavery was almost completely abolished. The whole field of Ireland had been transformed.

I think our Gospel reading today invites us to take a similar approach to the fields around and within us today. If we take this reading in isolation, it can sound like there are two kinds of people - wheat and weeds. The Son of Man sows the wheat; the evil one sows the weeds. At the end of time the weeds are separated and burned. It all seems so fixed. It sounds like we are either wheat or weed from the time we're planted to the end of time.

Yet when we read this passage in conversation with the rest of scripture and Christian tradition, we see that we aren't just one thing or the other - we are each a field of wheat and weeds growing together. Each person and each society is a field of both.

We could get fixated on all the weeds and get discouraged about the world and ourselves. We could spend time wondering whether we're wheat or weed and what others are. We could get angry that God allows there to be weeds and evil in our world.

Instead, this Gospel passage encourages us to trust that God will deal with the weeds in us and in all creation. It reminds us to seek the growth of good wheat in our own lives and in the larger world. It calls us to turn towards the master gardener who plants good seeds and tends to them.

Rather than getting out the shovels and attacking problematic things, we're called to focus on bearing the good fruit of love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, generosity, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control. We're called to look to God to work the fields of our lives and our communities so that good growth happens.

So the next time I look at my weed-filled garden, I'm going to try to just enjoy the daylilies that are thriving despite all the ryegrass. I may try to weed them, but maybe I should nurture the growth of some good groundcover.

How is God calling you to redirect your attention and bear good fruit in this week?
Let's take a moment for silent prayer and reflection.