

Lectionary 16 A – 8th Sunday after Pentecost

Isaiah 44:6-8; 16-19 Psalm 86:11-17; Romans 8:12-25 Matthew 13:24-30, 36-43

Grace and peace to you from God our Father and Jesus Christ our Lord, and the Spirit who continues to breathe and move among us.

Newsflash: There are weeds in the world: dandelions and crab grass, purple loose strife and the aptly named skunk cabbage that reminds me of its presence every time I walk around the back of our shed and step on its lush green leaves! On any given Saturday morning, home owners are out in force: mulching, pruning, weeding and weed-whacking; wrapping the ground around their plants with black plastic or newspapers or wood chips, scouring the blogs for the latest natural compound that will kill weeds but not harm edible plants, and often giving up and giving in. hiring one of those companies that sprays potent chemicals and posts those little yellow flags that say NO! ⓪, as in no kids, no pets, no rolling around and no nibbling or you will be sorry.

Sometimes we succeed pretty well. I've yet to find a dandelion to puff with my grandchildren in their oh so perfect Connecticut neighborhood. And the rabbits that multiply by the dozens on Killeen Road seem to be able to read the little yellow signs - or maybe they have just developed immunity to those toxins.

Still, we all know that in the battle between the lawn and the weeds, victory is only temporary: the weeds *will* be back! They know just what to do in that good soil to grow strong, and grow they do, even in the most trying conditions: too much water or not enough? Not a problem. Too much sun or too much shade? No worries. Lime and fertilizer in short supply? Easy peasy! The weeds will ride out any deficit or surplus, or at least be back before you know it.

Take the weeds in today's gospel reading. The King James bible calls them tares; the Greek text uses zizanion, but most people call the plant darnel. It still grows in great profusion in Palestine, challenging the modern farmer as it did his forebears. There are a couple of important things to understand about darnel: first, it is a "look-a-like" weed: unlike dandelions or crab grass or even the infamous kudzu which are easily identifiable from the get-go, darnel is not so easy to spot in a field of growing wheat. Until the grain is visible - grain that is darker on a grain head that droops rather than stands tall - they are almost identical plants. "Cheat wheat" you might say, as Midwesterners call a similar plant in the US.

And darnel doesn't kill the wheat plants growing nearby right away, the way broadleaf plants like dandelions smother the grass beneath them. But by the time the grain begins to appear and the imposter plant is revealed, its roots are so intertwined with the roots of the true wheat that it is

impossible to pluck up one without uprooting the neighboring wheat as well, and it is already dropping seeds to start the process all over again next season. On the other hand, those roots are tenacious and eventually become so deep and widespread that nothing else will grow in that field, thus the “rip it out now” vs. the “wait for the harvest” dilemma.

Of course, the skilled farmer then, just as now, would have had it pulled out, sacrificing a few adjacent plants but avoiding the long and tedious work of separating good wheat from bad darnel after harvesting and possibly losing a good field anyway.

But not our Sower, not our parable teller. Like the shepherd who goes after that one lost sheep, and the woman who searches for that one lost coin, and the father who waits for that one prodigal son to return, our Sower lets both grow together until the harvest.

We do not live in a perfect world. Ships bearing wheat for the world are under attack in the Ukraine while its cities and civilians continue to be bombed; violence flares in the Holy Land as a centuries old conflict still roils and settlers oust Palestinians and rock throwing is met with gunfire; thousands continue to flee gang violence and poverty south of the border and find themselves unwelcome here, shipped like lost luggage to cities far away. Gun violence continues to make headlines that fade all too quickly with no sensible change to laws and a numbing of righteous outrage because of their frequency. Addiction...abuse...hunger...housing: sorting out the mess leaves well-intentioned people on both sides of the divide, and no solution seems likely to end the violence, restore order, resolve differences and bring life rather than death.

The creation itself groans under hundred-year storms that arrive almost monthly, and scorching temperatures, floods, droughts, and fires that ravage our land and fill the nightly news with tragic video, as we barely acknowledge our part in this changing climate and are frozen in place by an inability to address it in even a small way.

Makes one want to pull the covers up over one’s head and cry out with the psalmist,

How long, O Lord, how long? Will you forget me forever?

How long will you hide your face from me? (Ps. 13:1)

Life presents us with ambiguous, mixed blessings all the time, the roots of our joys tangled with the roots of our (or someone else’s) pain: the good but expensive college that gives us a step up in the job market but saddles us with enormous debt; commitment to excellence at work that keeps us toiling too many hours away from our family; the cheap clothing prices that have others working in appalling conditions; the righteous anger at crime but prison conditions that are inhumane.

And there lies the hard part. We *want* to be able to sort things out. We *want* to interpret the signs and make the decisions. We *want* to make things right!

You'll notice, though, that as we think about this story the immediate assumption all along is that the wheat is us and the weeds are them. We are certain that we can circle the wagons, round up the weeds, and keep our portion of the field neat and tidy.

But if we are honest, we know that on any given day, we ourselves are a pretty weedy bunch. Sometimes we make bad choices. Sometimes we make choices that are good for us but not for our neighbor, or our world. Sometimes we forget that loving and serving one another is not limited to loving and serving only the folks who are easy to love and work with. And sometimes, even when we make good decisions and open our hearts and hands to others, things go wrong and evil rears its awful head.

What we do need to do is actually to *be...* to *be* that wheat plant that soaks up the rain of God's word... that leans on the stakes that the master Gardener provides to hold us up... that flexes with the wind and partakes of all the nutrients God provides: wisdom, courage, strength, joy, and the fellowship of other wheat along the way. We need to *be* the bearers of the good fruit that God created us to be.

Even as Jesus calls us to responsible living, teaching us to love and serve... even as he reminds us that there is a day of reckoning to come... even as he acknowledges that there is indeed evil in the world to struggle against, he also reminds us that God our Sower will give every seed a chance to grow into wheat. God is and will be the final judge, and in the meantime, God will protect those fragile plants that may not seem like they are worth very much to the neighbors. God will protect us, too, and hold a place for us forever.

Make no mistake: it is important to sort out the darnel and the wheat at harvest time. As folks learned the hard way, darnel may look like wheat, but it is bitter and mildly toxic: mix some into the grinding mill and the entire batch of flour will be impossible to eat. Jesus is not telling us that anything goes, that evil is OK. His heart is filled with justice along with mercy. It breaks for those stuck in sin *and* for the innocent damaged by that sin. There are evils that must be cut down, dangers that must be contained, hard choices that must be made right now. But they need to be made with deep thought, much wisdom, broad vision and lots of prayer. They need to be made with God's love and justice for all as a guide. And we need to treat others, even those with whom we disagree, with the civility and compassion that is sorely missing in our current society.

Unlike agricultural wheat and weeds, we humans are not locked into an either/or... good/bad situation. In fact, as we Lutherans are often heard to acknowledge, we are both saint and sinner,

wheat and weeds mixed in together, and often so tangled we despair of ever separating the two. Our internal field produces a mixed bag of results and instead of wishing we were in charge of the harvest, we can be mighty thankful God is so patient, and mighty determined to try our best to live into the gift of God's word. It is God's grace that gives us hope, God's mercy that offers us a new start every day, and God's love that saves us from ourselves and our sin.

It is this hope - this hope and promise - that lies at the heart of this parable of the Kingdom of God. God *will* protect the fragile wheat. God *will* sort out and dispose of the evils that threaten us and all of creation. God *will* wait patiently, giving each of us and all of us a chance to bloom.

Ralph Waldo Emerson once said, "A weed is a plant whose virtues have not yet been discovered."

That purple loosestrife that spoils a flower bed sure looks great along the highway. Those yellow dandelions that wreck a lawn sure brighten a city street and delight a child's heart. The bamboo that spoils a farmer's field makes great furniture, and even Kudzu has been used in Asian folk medicines for centuries.

As I drove through my neighborhood this week, I saw neatly manicured lawns, blooming flowers, and wonderfully creative landscaping, the result of a lot of hours of planting and pruning, spraying and weeding. And when we traveled the highway back from Connecticut, I saw lush green grasses and trees, arranged haphazardly along the roadside, interrupted by blossoms of white and yellow, all waving in the breeze and creating a refreshing respite from the concrete pavement and utility wires that lined our way. They grow untended, and the only blight to be seen was the human generated trash carelessly thrown out of car windows.

How do we deal with the weeds in our lives and our world? We look to the Gardener who plants abundantly, waters freely, shines light warmly, and nurtures growth regularly with a hunger for justice and the soothing balm of mercy. We keep our eyes open for the good and we listen for the possibilities that allow growth and change. We trust that indeed, all will be safely gathered in, because the One who gathers is the One who plants the Word everywhere and anywhere, the One who tends us all with redeeming, weed-changing love.

Amen.