

Adventures in Horticulture: A tale of three weeds (or “Oops, oops, ahhhhh!”)

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Community Presbyterian Church - Rochester, Minnesota

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Texts: Psalm 86:11-17, Matthew 13:

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Teach me your way, my God, my guide, so that I walk in your truth;
give me an undivided heart to honor your name.

Matthew 13:24-30; 36-43 After explaining the parable of the sower and the good soil, 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. So when the plants came up and bore grain, then the weeds appeared as well. 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?’ He answered, ‘An enemy has done this.’ The slaves said to him, ‘Then do you want us to go and gather them?’ But he replied, ‘No; for in gathering the weeds you would uproot the wheat along with them. 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.’”

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.” He answered, “The one who sows the good seed is the Son of Man; the field is the world, and the good seed are the children of the kingdom; the weeds are the children of the evil one, and the enemy who sowed them is the devil; the harvest is the end of the age, and the reapers are angels. Just as the weeds are collected and burned up with fire, so will it be at the end of the age. The Son of Man will send his angels, and they will collect out of his kingdom all causes of sin and lawlessness, and they will throw them into the furnace of fire, where there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth. Then the righteous will shine like the sun in the kingdom of their Father. Let anyone with ears listen!”

O God, give me an undivided heart; so that my words and my will may honor you.

The church I served in Indiana was literally carved out of cornfields. In the winter, wind howled across the flat land, and drifting snow made the roads almost impassable. But by mid-July, the corn was seven feet high. I felt as though I was driving through a tunnel of living green. Morning glory vines twined through the stalks, creating a pink and purple bower under the golden tassels. I loved those morning glories! Then a parishioner gently pointed out that farmers regard them as vicious weeds, whose tough, viney stems fouled up the farm equipment, and whose seeds contaminated the crop. Oops.

Who planted those darn things anyway? Did some enemy sneak into the field, scattering wicked seeds? Probably they’d just escaped their original home in someone’s garden, though I’m sure

the farmers must have cursed a bit to see them pop up year after year. impossible to eradicate without damaging the crops. A lot like the story we just read.

I confess this parable, which shows up only in Matthew, has given me more than one sleepless night. I hate to think of anything or anyone being thrown into the “furnace of fire, where there is weeping and gnashing of teeth.” It’s a frightening image and one used almost exclusively by Matthew, who tends to take a pretty grim view compared to Mark, Luke, and John. But there is good news as well as bad news here. Destructive weeds are bad news. The good news according to Jesus is that it’s not our responsibility to get rid of them.

This is especially good news because we can so easily be mistaken in our judgment. Like the time my best friend Janet and I volunteered to clear out another friend’s somewhat overgrown garden while she was away. We went after the weeds with fierce determination. Then the owner of the garden returned. “Noooooo!” she cried. “My phlox, my beautiful phlox!” Oops.

When they’re not actually blossoming, flowers can look a lot like weeds; and I’ve noticed weeds have an uncanny habit of mimicking the plants they surround. The bad news is that evil sometimes masquerades as good, and good is sometimes mistaken for evil. The good news is that God gives us cues about which is which; as Matthew says elsewhere, “*You will know them by their fruit.*” (Matthew 7:16). But sometimes you have to wait for the flower to blossom or the fruit to show up. In the meantime, God relieves us of the burden of judging.

Probably by now all you’re convinced of is my utter failure as a horticulturist. But wait a minute, because there is a point. Human beings tend to respond to unfortunate events in some unhelpful ways. A lot of times errors are due to a dualistic mindset. By that I mean, we often think in terms of right/wrong, good/evil. And if I believe that I’m basically good, and certainly not evil, then I’m not the problem; so clearly someone else must be.

This is bad enough when we’re kids and blame a sister or a brother for “starting it” (whatever “it” is). It’s worse when our blame game is magnified in society. *My* people in *my* circle of friends are good kind people, therefore some *other* people must be at fault. We locate badness in in the other. Taken to extremes, we get the Holocaust, we get Hutus killing Tutsis in Rwanda, we get Buddhists killing Muslims in Myanmar - all genocides, all sanctioned by people in power who identify the other tribe, or race, or religion, as the source of whatever is aggravating them. We get “my people, my country, first, and let the rest of the world rot.”

We get European invaders killing 9 out of 10 of the original inhabitants of this continent, some by outright massacre, some by forced relocation, and some by intentionally seeding their blankets with smallpox. We get a certain segment of society blamed by a few religious leaders for the tragedy of 9/11. We get young black men disproportionately killed by state-sanctioned use of force. We get dead raccoons next to defaced “Black Lives Matter” signs. I say “we” not

because we've personally committed these outrages, but because we have allowed them to continue, and have profited from them; because the winners wrote the histories and left out some crucial facts, and because we grew up content to accept half-truths as *the* truth, the whole truth, and nothing but the truth. My Dutch great-grandparents raised their corn and cattle on Ponca and Santee land in Iowa. I was 60 years old before I met the descendants of the people whose land they stole, and realized what *my* people, my kind Christian forebears, had done. We see the weeds we planted generations ago bearing ugly fruit in the vast inequalities of today. Yet we are surprised and offended when our incomplete histories are challenged and our cities burn. So we start to look for the "bad apples," sure that if we root out a few "monsters," we can get back to law and order and business as usual.

I know this is hard stuff, and I want to be clear. George Floyd died without justice and without mercy; he died a death he didn't deserve. The person whose knee stopped his breathing ended a life that didn't need to end that day. But to portray one as a saint and the other as a devil is wrong, too. Doing so makes it too easy for me to say, "See, *that bad officer* is the problem, therefore I'm not." What happened was wrong. What's worse is if we don't see that weeds are not so easily uprooted; that we are all growing in the same field, and that we're all liable to errors in judgment. The capacity for terrible evil lives in all of us. So does the capacity for tremendous good. That's why Jesus says, "Don't pull the weeds. Leave judgment to God."

As the parable of the morning glories and the phlox tells us, what's good and what's bad can be simply a matter of perspective, a matter of location, or a matter of ignorance. In any case, one thing is very clear: people make mistakes. Evil does exist. It exists wherever people and planet are wounded, or denied the chance to flourish. We need to name evil. We need to recognize it in ourselves. As Christians, we are quick to acknowledge that we are sinners. We confess our personal sins every time we go to church. We bask in God's forgiveness, and then go out for brunch. It's harder to confess our societal sins: that we are racist, heterosexist, wary of strangers. It's harder to admit that we are part of a larger system of mixed wheat and weeds, mixed good and evil, and that confessing my sins without also committing to change in myself is futile. Whatever weeds are growing in the field are growing also in me. I need to spot them in here, inside myself. So how do we go forward, without shame or blame?

Meet Miriam. She was born in Cameroon. She introduced me to some of the beautiful plants in her garden at CPC, various species of amaranth. Even the name sounds beautiful. You know what we call it? Pigweed. Yuck! If you're a gardener, you've probably seen it and pulled it. But this hardy weed is not only incredibly nutritious, it's a helpful companion to other garden plants, trapping insect pests and breaking up hard soil. Miriam plants amaranth for a reason.

Ahhhh - amaranth. A weed with a mission, despised by some, valued by others. What does this lowly weed teach us about God? Jesus, too, walked humbly over the earth, doing good, speaking

peace, teaching love, preaching justice. His life was ended by government-sanctioned authority that couldn't tolerate his truth. He was rooted out for sharing a love and goodness that threatened the powers that said, "Rome first," and dismayed the religious leaders that kowtowed to Rome.

We worship a God who loves us each and loves us all, a God who is present, inviting you to come and be fed and nourished. Pray for an undivided heart, so you may never seek comfort and security anywhere but in God. But remember that true connection to the divine connects you also to the world. When you pray, you "borrow the eyes of God." Fear and distrust are replaced by genuine love for the other. Systems change when we change, from the inside.

This scary parable ends with the amazing promise that when all we regret about ourselves has been burned away, we too will shine like the sun in the kingdom of God. We are not perfect yet, but beloved brothers and sisters, we can let our light shine here and now - not alone, but together as congregation and pastor; not by ourselves, but as part of a larger church in a wide world. Together, let us reflect the light of Christ and let his greater light shine. Amen. Thanks be to God.

Prayers

God of the fertile fields, we thank you for all the opportunities that lie ahead of us as we enter this blessed relationship of pastor and congregation, presbytery and worldwide church. May we see your hand guiding us down unexpected pathways to bear fruit that will honor you, fruit that will last.

In our confusing world, let us borrow your eyes to see people as you see them: saints and sinners, lost and found, reluctant and eager to do your will as best we can. Teach us to see the good and evil that co-exist within us.

Pour out your compassion on those who most need to feel your love: ... Be with those in essential services and frontlines during this pandemic; comfort those dying alone, far from loved ones; teach us to think first of protecting others when we go about our daily activities. Show us your ways of justice and of mercy, in the name of Jesus who taught us to pray, Our Father who art in heaven, hallowed be thy name...