

Homily – In the Weeds

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We are in a series of Sundays in which our Gospel reading is a parable. As I said last week a parable is a story used to teach, but a parable teaches in ways that do not give black and white answers. Sometimes we just want a “yes” or a “no” to life’s questions, but this is not what Jesus does. When Jesus teaches us with parables he is giving us gray answers to our questions. He is giving us “maybe’s” and “it depends.”

Now, a parable story is like a prism or gemstone in which you can turn the stone to see the story in various ways. In another well-known parable, the Parable of the Prodigal Son, we can view the teaching of the story from the vantage point of the father, or from the vantage point of one of the sons. Each character brings a different answer to life’s questions. Parables have many facets in which they can be insightful.

Last week with the Parable of the Sower we turned the gemstone to look at the story from the viewpoint of the sower, from the viewpoint of the seeds, and from the viewpoint of the soil. We also looked at the way the parable would have been viewed two thousand years ago in first century Palestine, and we looked at the Parable of the Sower from the vantage point of twenty-first century America. The Parable has some interesting things to teach as we are all forced to be replanted and adapt during this time of the Coronavirus.

This week we have the Parable of the Weeds. As with any parable we can look at it from the viewpoint of the weeds, from the viewpoint of the wheat, from the viewpoints of the landowner, or from the viewpoint of the workers in the fields. And, today, I want to do a deep dive into three different ways that we can view the weeds by looking at three different definitions for weeds.

First a weed is a noxious plant that negatively impacts the other plants around it. This is a very traditional definition of a weed and it is a very traditional way to view the Parable of the Weeds.

The bearded darnell is a devil of a weed. Known in biblical terms as tares, bearded darnell has no virtues. Its roots surround the roots of good plants, sucking up precious nutrients and scarce water, making it impossible to root it out without damaging the good crop. Above ground, darnell looks identical to wheat, until it bears seed. Those seeds can cause everything from hallucinations to death.

The traditional way of reading this Parable of the Weeds is to see that the wheat represent good people and the weeds are bad or even evil people. God will judge

some people as wheat and send them to heaven. And God will judge some bad, evil people as weeds. These people are in trouble for the rest of eternity. So, you better make sure you live your life as the wheat and not as a weed. This is a very traditional read of the Parable of the Weeds, but this morning there are two other definitions of weeds that I want to still look at.

A second definition of a weed is a plant for which we haven't yet figured out a use. Throughout history we have examples of weeds that become a source of food. Or, we learn that a weed has medicinal value. And sometimes when fields have been so over used, the nutrients have been leached out of the soil. Weeds can help replenish the soil by adding back in nutrients. Sometimes a weed becomes useful to us, and we no longer classify it as a weed.

Using this second definition of a weed, in our parable good people are useful, productive, or serve some type of purpose. Conversely, weeds are people for which we have no use. They are not productive, and they serve no purpose. Some might even view these weedy people as a drain on society.

Now, this second definition of weedy people makes me squirm because it is at odds with my views of God. I believe that God loves and values all people. God loves all unconditionally. There is nothing we can do to make God love us more, and there is nothing we can do to make God love us less. God loves all, and God values us just for being. God does not value us because we are useful. God does not love us because we serve a purpose. Jesus did not die for the productive people. Jesus came to save all because God loves all. And, like Jesus we are to value and love all, not just those that serve a purpose.

I like this second definition of a weed in Jesus' Parable of the Weeds. I like it because it reminds me of a trap. Far too often, I fall into the trap of valuing people who serve. And, more specifically I value people who get stuff done here at church. Like Jesus, you and I are called to value all people. We may spend more time with folks who are working with us on an activity or ministry. But, we must always remember that God loves all, and we should love and value all as well.

The third definition of a weed that I want to look at this morning is that a weed is any plant that is in a location in which you don't want it. Turf grass is a weed when it is in the flower bed. A tree is a weed when it is putting too much shade over the vegetable garden. Blackberry bramble is a weed when it is in the pathway where you want to walk. This definition of a weed shows that weeds can be very subjective. A person may decide that the dymondia ground cover is great on the hillside, but when it start encroaching on the milkweed it has become a weed and it must be removed. Or, one person may plant milkweed to attract and nurture monarch butterflies, but another

person will pull out the milkweed because she doesn't want the horses to be poisoned by the milkweed.

This third definition of a weed – any plant that is in a location where you don't want it – this third definition gets away from objective truth and reminds us that so much of what we think or know is opinion rather than fact. And, using the metaphor of today's parable, this means that the value we put on some people as wheat and others as weeds is also very subjective.

Now, the scientific method is famous for trying to get at the truth. One of the components of the scientific method is that you drop a theory, hypothesis, or truth when it fails to be proven true or if it proves to be false. We might like to think that the scientific method will give us eternal truths, and that is what it does, except when it doesn't.

We also like to think that spirituality can lead us to objective eternal truths, but look how often our religious institutions has lead us down false pathways. Slavery, patriarchy, homophobia, classism are all ways that our churches have historically led us astray. I wonder what we are still doing today that leads us away from God. I wonder what I am doing to lead you astray.

I learned a new truth about my family this past week. I have been playing with ancestry.com and there is a wealth of genealogy information in this website. Looking at census records I discovered something about my mothers, mother's, father's, mother's father's, father's, father. This is my fifth great grandfather, John Henry Moyer, and his wife, my fifth great grandmother, Maria Franck. The 1810 census records in upstate New York, show that they had three slaves in their household. The 1820 census records show that they had one slave, a female, and the 1830 census records show they had zero slaves. By 1830 slavery was illegal in New York State. Now granted, I have 128 fifth great grandparents, but at least two of them owned people as property. Evil has been done in my family. Does that mean I am part weed?

One of the sayings that I used to have on the wall of my office was "I must always remember that even my most cherished beliefs may be utterly wrong."

There are a few things that I am going to cling to about Jesus but almost everything else may be utterly wrong. By extension this means that the people with whom I disagree, may be correct. We must always remember we can be wrong. It frees us from judging others.

How much of what I believe to be a truth is subjective? This doesn't automatically make it wrong, but again how much of what I know and believe is subjective truth.

And, here is a truth about human beings. Almost nothing is more valuable to a person than the feeling or belief that I am good. We will tell ourselves almost any story that keeps us from identifying with the weeds. However, we must have the humility to accept the fact that we are all part weed. Each of us is some mixture of wheat and weed, of potentially fruitful and potentially destructive. This Parable of the Weeds clearly cautions against a rush to judgment about others. We cannot always tell initially what is a good plant and what is not. And, in fact, we are all part weed. We have all had the experience of being wrong or having a cherished belief about ourselves fall through. What we do with it is part of our spiritual journey.

May we all have the humility to accept when we are wrong and then the courage to still try to live a life of love.