



## “Growing Among Weeds”

Seventh Sunday after Pentecost  
Saturday and Sunday, July 22 - 23, 2017

All Services

The Reverend Jennifer A. Crist  
Trinity Evangelical Lutheran Church  
Camp Hill, Pennsylvania

Matthew 13:24-30, 36-43

Let us pray. . . Nurturing God, may the words of my mouth and the meditations of our hearts be pleasing to You, God who is with us in all of life's circumstances, bringing growth and life even in fields of weeds. Amen.

If you were here last week, you might be thinking, didn't we just hear a story about seeds and fields? We even planted marigold seeds during the children's message, and I imagine that by now, some of the children have begun to see little plants emerging. For many years, my children would get very excited and want to prepare and plant a vegetable garden. Over the fall and sometimes early spring, we would raise a pig in our garden space who would till and fertilize the soil for us. Then late spring, we would clear out any overgrown weeds, prepare the soil, and buy small plants or seeds to begin our garden.

Usually the first week or two of gardening, the kids would be really diligent watering and weeding and watching for the first buds to emerge. Then the plants would start to grow, and all of a sudden, the heat and rain would hit, summer would get busy with traveling and friends, and before we knew it, it was hard to tell what was a vegetable plant growing and what was a weed in our garden. Has this ever happened to you? And this was complicated even more, because we often fed the pig things like overripe tomatoes or other vegetables that would go through the pig and seed themselves. So, we never knew what would come up that we had not even planted. In fact, many times, we had to let both the plants and the weeds grow for a while in order to figure out which was which. At first, the leaves were indistinguishable, at least to us, but with a bit more time, we could tell what was what. It would always be a surprise that we had to wait for.

Though you and I might be familiar with gardening, most of us are not farmers, at least not in the way so many farmed in ancient Israel. In Jesus' society, a huge population of peasants worked in all sorts of farming industries, providing not just wheat for the daily bread, and fish for the occasional meat, but also labor to provide grapes for wine and olives for oil for the elite class who owned most of the land and the people. And in Jesus' time, society commonly thought that your status in life was directly connected with God's favor. If you were an elite, of high status, God favored you. If you were a peasant, barely able to survive, you were unclean, dishonored, and not favored by God. You had done something to deserve your place in life, something to deserve the struggle and hardship. Peasants had a very hard time having enough to pay taxes to

the emperor, let alone all of the temple's religious taxes, often without left over seed that they could retain to plant again the following year.

And seed. . . Seed was life. Having good seed for the next year was crucial. The value of the seed has been well noted over the years by theologians, scientists, and farmers. One of my favorite seed quotes is attributed to the mystic Julian of Norwich, who upon holding an acorn in her hand in the fourteenth century said, "In this is all that is." And we have the familiar Martin Luther quote as well, "Even if I knew that the world would end tomorrow, I would plant an apple tree today." Seeds are life. Seeds are potential future sustenance. Seeds are hope.



Seeds are linked with survival, and we see the importance of seeds in the parable we heard from the gospel of Matthew with the first question asked by the servants of the householder. They asked, "Master, did you not sow good seed in your field?" Maybe this question doesn't catch our attention at first, but think about it. First of all, slaves are questioning a very high-level decision made by the householder. The householder and his managers would be responsible for deciding which crops to grow and where to get the seed. The slaves are asking the question here directly to the householder, and they are questioning his source. Where did you get your seed? They are questioning his competency.

The servants are expecting the householder to be defensive and answer, "Of course, I sowed good seed. I have the right sources." So, the servants follow up with another question, before the householder can even answer the first. . . "Where, then, did these weeds come from?" The servants are assuming that the seed was tainted. The grains of wheat were not pure and separated correctly from the seeds of the zizania weed. The zizania weed was a weed in Jesus' time that resembled wheat. So, an inexperienced farmer might not have a discerning eye to dry and preserve the wheat grains from one harvest properly and purely for the next.

However, when we hear the answer of the householder, the plot thickens. The weed problem is not as simple as buying the wrong seed, one tainted with zizania seeds. Instead, an enemy has come at some point when no one noticed, maybe at night, or maybe early morning before the workers arrived to tend the fields. And this enemy sowed zizania weed seeds right alongside the grains of wheat. And so now, the wheat is growing up among weeds.

Then we hear a lesson in ancient farming, given by the householder who explains why the weeds cannot be taken out of the ground at this early stage of growth. The root systems of the wheat and the weeds are intertwined. They are taking up nutrients and water from the soil together, in the same space, wrapped around each other. And so, plucking the zizania weeds out at that stage would damage and even kill the budding wheat plants. The weeds and the wheat would need to be left to grow together until harvest-time.



One way to interpret this parable is to see the wheat and weeds as two groupings of people. We are told in Matthew's interpretation that the wheat represents the children of the kingdom of God, while the weeds represent the children of the evil one, the devil. In this interpretation, we also hear a warning: Let anyone with ears listen! At the end of the age, the wheat will be gathered together as God's kingdom, while the weeds will be plucked up and thrown into a furnace of fire. Over time, many interpreters of this text have used it to make judgments about groups of people. Who are the wheat? And who are the weeds? In Jesus' time, society thought that God favored the elite. That is why they had high status in the culture. The elite thrived and grew fat at the labor of the peasants, the unfavored, the unclean, those God did not favor. And in the early church community that would have been the audience of the gospel of Matthew, the same sort of categorizing was going on. Who was part of the kingdom of God? Those who continued to strictly follow the Pharisees and rabbis, or these new Jewish Christians?

These questions were also the same ones Martin Luther was addressing in his time. Who was out and who was in? And if you were out, how could you get back in? Maybe by buying indulgences? And lest we think we are any different, we do this still today, don't we? Who is right? Who is wrong? Who is in? Who is out? Who should be saved? Who should be condemned? Who is the right kind of Christian? Who is reading the Bible correctly? And which translation is the correct one?

Did you notice in the explanation of the parable that each part of the story was correlated with something specific? Look back at the scripture in your bulletins, starting at verse 37. What do we see in this interpretation? The sower is the Son of Man; the field is the world; the good seed are the children of the kingdom the weeds are the children of the evil one; the enemy who sowed the weeds is the devil; etc... But did you notice the one category of people the parable who were NOT explained? Who is missing from this interpretation? Anyone? THE SLAVES. It's the servants of the Master, the ones who were asking what to do with the wheat and weeds. . . who do the servants correlate to? We might imagine in Jesus' time, they were the disciples. And we might imagine in our time that they are us, as we are servants of our Master, God. In times when weeds grow up all around the wheat, we like to ask what we can do about it? What can we do to take the weeds away from the wheat? Surely, we can DO something, right?

This parable about the wheat and the weeds is not about division; it is not about categorization; it is not about being on the right side; it is not about BEING wheat or BEING weeds or even about what WE can do to remove the weeds.

We as the children of God exist in our world among weeds. The kingdom of God has broken into our reality with the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus. However, the kingdom of God has not yet fully come, and so though we live in hope and trusting in God's promises, our reality is a broken world with much pain and suffering. And I think that many of us might feel this way a lot of the time. We seek lives full of peace, happiness, and purpose, but find ourselves growing among the weeds.

What happens when one grows up among weeds?



I am often asked how many children I have. . . and this is a very hard question for me to answer. I technically have seven children in my immediate family, but many nights when I come home, there are others in my home who I consider my children. . . young adults who often have grown up most of their lives in some pretty traumatic weeds, who are considered part of my extended family. I bet some of you have extended family like this as well. And when I go to Guatemala, as I am this coming Tuesday, I will reunite with even more of these extended family members who share in life and its struggles together. One young woman who I consider my god-daughter is named Lorena. When she was six years old, Lorena and her mother came home to find their house set on fire by her alcoholic and abusive father. Her mother and Lorena left their village in

search of a safe place. As they settled into a new village, Lorena's mother sent the other children to school, while Lorena was kept at home to take care of the laundry, the home, the cooking, and the young children. When Lorena was 16 years old, her mother took her to the neighboring orphanage to ask if she could get a job washing the laundry to further contribute to the family. The directors of the orphanage asked what grade she was in. Upon hearing that she never started school, they agreed to give her a job only if her mother permitted her to begin. And so, at 16 years old, Lorena began first grade.

I met Lorena that year, and though I couldn't communicate well in Spanish at that point, I was able to tell her that my family wanted to sponsor her education. And at that point, she began to call me godmother. I told her that I would come to her high school graduation WHEN, not if, she graduated, knowing full well the chances of her graduating high school were very slim. Over the years, I would visit Lorena, as she continued to grow among the



weeds of poverty, oppression, abuse, hunger, and desperation. At times, we wouldn't even talk, but she would just hug me and hold me tightly and cry. She had so much hardship her entire life, and she was struggling, but she borrowed courage from the community around her to continue in school.



And guess what? I did go to her high school graduation. And now I am proud to be walking with her in her college journey to being a psychologist to help children who are experiencing trauma and hardship as she did as a child. And this journey is a difficult one as well. Can you imagine how hard it is to pass college classes when you didn't even begin first grade until the age of 16 years old? But Lorena's goal is to be our first school psychologist at Hope Academy, the school for girls that we are fundraising for and gearing up to build in Guatemala, hopefully this coming year. Lorena's story is not one of eliminating hardship and struggle. But it is one of walking through continual struggle in community with those around her who bring God's love and

grace and strength to her in very tangible ways.

There will be many things in this life that you and I will never understand. We ask questions like: Why do bad things happen to good people? Why does evil exist? Why do those oppressing others thrive, while those being oppressed suffer? How could God let this happen to me or to



someone I love? Priests, pastors, rabbis, and imams have been asked these questions for centuries, and likely even millennium. And some of us even go to seminary seeking answers to exactly these questions. But if I am completely honest with you, I will admit to you that the answers to these questions cannot be learned at seminary, nor can they be learned through life experiences, at least to the fullest extent that we would like them to be explained.



They simply can't.

Rabbi Harold S. Kushner, author of a book entitled, *When Bad Things Happen to Good People* responds to this common question, saying, and I quote: "Is there an answer to the question of why bad things happen to good people? The response would be. . . to forgive the world for not being perfect, to forgive God for not making a better world, to reach out to the people around us, and to go on living despite it all...no longer asking why something happened, but asking how we will respond, what we intend to do now that it has happened."

This does not mean, however, that we should not ask these questions. When we are in the middle of traumatic and painful times, it is human and honest to be asking these questions, even if in anger to God.

And I think that the questions the servants were asking in this parable from Matthew were in response to exactly these types of questions. How do we remove the weeds of our world? And the answer. . . we cannot remove the weeds from the world around us.

God's promise is NOT that we won't suffer pain and brokenness in our lives.

God's promise is NOT that we won't struggle and cry out in anger and hurt.

God's promise is NOT even protection for ourselves or those we love from the evil that is present in the world.

We can't remove ourselves from the weeds all around us.

BUT God's promise IS to be with us in our struggle, in our pain, and in our anger.



God's promise IS to be the light shining in the darkness. God's promise IS life in an eternal kingdom that has broken into our world, but it not yet fully realized.

And God intimately knows suffering, as Jesus, Emanuel, God with us, who suffered on the cross so that our sins may be forgiven. Jesus, an example of living and walking with those who are suffering in love and grace and hope. Jesus, who brings eternal life and salvation to us and the Holy Spirit who renews us each and every day, moving with us into the world and the struggle of daily life.



May we be brave enough to get close to those who are suffering as Jesus did.

May we be seeds that grow despite the weeds around us.

And when we feel smothered by weeds, may we find courage and strength through the community around us who brings forth God's love and grace and hope. Amen.

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