

Wheat and Weeds
Sermon by Fred Joblin, July 20, 2008
St. Paul's United Church, Orillia

Psalm 139: 1-12, 23-24, Matthew 13:24-30

I was out weeding the lawn this week, having neglected that chore for some time. We don't use any pesticides, so many different kinds of weeds find a happy home in our lawn, until I come along with my weeding prong and haul them out of the ground. As I was doing this chore, I wondered again why I do it, as I have no desire to have a perfect lawn. "Weeds" are just plants that for the most part are harmlessly trying to find a place to live like any of God's other creatures.

Dandelions in particular have had a renaissance of sorts recently, now being seen by many, not as weeds, but as pretty flowers that also have many potential dietary and medicinal benefits, since they are rich in vitamins A, B complex, C, and D, as well as minerals such as iron, potassium, and zinc.

As farmers and home gardeners well know, however, some plants we call weeds can be a problem for the raising of crops in order to get a maximum yield, so they have to be removed or prevented from growing in the first place.

In today's parable that Jesus tells, a unique problem arises in removing the weeds from a wheat crop. The weed Jesus refers to, bearded darnel, is bitter and mildly toxic, so it would ruin the flour if not removed. However, darnel looks just like a wheat plant in its early stages, so it's impossible to identify in order to remove it. As the wheat and darnel grow together, their roots intertwine, so the darnel can't be removed without also removing the wheat plant. The only way to separate the darnel from the wheat is by hand after the threshing, when the two plants can be distinguished by their colour. By waiting until the harvest, however, the situation is complicated by the problem of contaminated fields for next year if darnel seeds fall to the ground.

So in a very short story, Jesus was describing a situation that would be well understood by his listeners, especially when you add in the awareness that to a wealthy landowner, a contaminated field and crop could mean loss of profit. To a peasant family, however, it could mean a child's death due to malnutrition. So underlying implications to this story would include life under the empire of the day, in which the rich benefit from the labour of the vulnerable poor, with the fear of the rich being profit loss, and the fear of the poor being their very lives.

Add to all this understanding the idea of an enemy purposely planting the darnel seeds, which competing neighbours sometimes did, and the story takes on even deeper potential meaning.

In rabbinic tradition, Jesus would not explain the parable but rather let his listeners grapple with its meaning. If we find the parable challenging to interpret, I imagine his listeners must have also found it challenging as well, especially considering that Jesus appears to be saying the landowner—who would be viewed as an oppressor of the poor to his listeners—is like God, with his patience and wisdom over how to deal with the darnel and to get the best crop possible.

The writer of Matthew gives his own interpretation, putting words in Jesus' mouth that mainstream scholars agree reflect not Jesus' thoughts but rather those of the author at the time of writing, generally considered to be between 80 and 90 C.E. He represented Christians with Jewish roots who were in conflict among themselves, who had a mixture of good and bad among them, and who expected Jesus' return in glory any time.

So in this interpretation, Jesus is the good sower of the seeds, the field is the world in which these seeds are planted, the good seeds are the children of God's kingdom, the enemy is the devil, the weeds are the children of the devil, the harvest is the end of the age, and angels are the reapers.

I find this interpretation interesting and understandable from the writer's point of view, and helpful to some degree, with Jesus sowing seeds of love and compassion, and us growing and doing the same. The image of the devil, and other people—certainly not us!—being the children of the devil, I don't find helpful. In fact, I find it worrisome that this interpretation easily lends itself to an "us vs. them" mentality, and a literalistic image of an out-there devil. It's easy to look "out there" for people who are "weeds" and want to dismiss them, or lock them up, or blow them away. And it's tempting, if we feel powerless to do anything, to get angry with God for not doing something to deal with them.

So let's do what Jesus invited people to do: search for meaning in the parable that is relevant to our lives, consistent with Jesus' life and passion and teachings. I will offer some ideas, and you can be reflecting on these as well as ideas of your own, hopefully with God's spirit guiding us in our reflections.

The first thought that comes to mind is to recognize that in every community, organization, family, and individual, there is good mixed with bad, and you can't always tell which is which! We are complex beings, blessed with goodness yet also vexed by our shadow side, the side of ourselves that sees the bad in a situation, snatches defeat from the jaws of victory, and messes things up despite the best of our intentions. We can show unlimited patience and kindness in one situation, and yet harbour nasty thoughts and judgments in another. We can be helpful and kind at one time, and unhelpful and mean-spirited at another. We can look at some people, often the ones like us, and see good things and be forgiving of their shortcomings, and yet we can look at other people and see something negative about them, whether it's how they look, or what they do or don't do, or what they say or don't say.

So a little humility seems to me to be a good starting point, recognizing we all have, to one degree and another, both wheat and weeds within us. Plus, we don't know what scars people carry, or what griefs they bear, or how they have come to the place they are today, or how God may be working in their lives. We don't know how we, or they, will be in another moment, or in another year, or at the end of their lives.

Not knowing how things will turn out, and being surprised by how they do, is good fodder for Pearly Gates jokes. Take this one, for example:

A minister and a taxi driver die and are waiting in line at the Pearly Gates.

The taxi driver, covered in tattoos and dressed in dirty jeans and a leather jacket, approaches St. Peter first. St. Peter examines his list and looks up. "I see you were a taxi driver in New York City. Welcome! Here are your silk robe and golden staff. Ride on into the joys of heaven!"

And off goes the taxi driver, delighted.

The minister, dressed in his best ministerial garb, is next. St. Peter examines his list and looks up. "I see you were a minister, serving in many churches over a long and distinguished career. Welcome! Here are your cotton robe and wooden staff. Enter into the joys of heaven!"

"Hold it just a minute," the minister says. "That guy was a taxi driver, and he gets a silk robe and golden staff? How come I just get a cotton robe and wooden staff?"

"Well," said St. Peter, "we have to take into account the fruits of people's labour. As it turns out, when you preached, people slept, but when he drove, people prayed!"

Let me give you a couple of personal examples to further illustrate the need to look within first and become aware of our shadow side.

When I was about 12 years old, my cousin and her family came to visit when it happened to be my birthday. She planned an elaborate treasure hunt for me with about 20 clues I had to find, one at a time, in order to find her gift. After finding the first few clues as given, I happened to find one meant for much later on, which led me right to her gift. I felt quite proud of myself and laughed about so cleverly getting to the gift quickly, but I left her in tears that I had circumvented her clues, and I overheard her later, asking her mother why I was so mean, and why I teased her so much, which I did. Her mom told her sometimes when boys like girls, they are embarrassed to admit it, so they do the opposite instead. Touché.

Another example is my yearly golf game with my older brother Doug. Here is where my shadow side and my light side co-exist clearly. As he is teeing off, my shadow side wants him to duff the shot or send his ball into the woods. My light side cheers for him to do well. My shadow side laughs when he misses a two-foot putt. My light side says encouragingly, "Nice try." My shadow side keeps track of the score to see who is winning. My light side says the score doesn't matter; it's the fun of having a good game of golf together. It's a close call as to which part of me will emerge in the end, but it is true that as the years pass, the lighter side is doing a bit better!

A more serious example for me is a thought process my shadow side went through when I found out I didn't get a course I'd applied to teach this summer for Laurentian. Out of my disappointment, part of me hoped the teacher who got the course would be boring, and students would complain, and the course would flop, and they'd plead for me to teach it next time... Our egos can take our minds in scary directions!

Thankfully, those were just passing thoughts, but they are important to recognize and acknowledge and let go of; otherwise, they can fester and lead to bitterness.

That's the gift of recognizing our shadow side—the one that complains and judges and gossips and criticizes others and hopes they will mess up. For once we become aware, the energy of our shadow side dissipates, and we can choose a healthier response. Thus I can choose instead to hope that the course was successful, students learned a great deal, and the teacher and students had a rewarding experience.

The good news is that God knows all of this and understands and accepts everything about us. God knows our inner thoughts, both good and bad. As the Psalm we heard today expresses, God knows us so deeply that even before we speak, God knows what we will say. This might seem scary, that God knows every little thought and feeling we have, especially if our minds are filled with secret negative thoughts and constant judgments of others. But if we think of God in terms of the metaphor of our Higher Self, we can say that our inner being—the part of us made in God's image—knows our own truths. We can't hide from ourselves, for when we try to do that, we shift into denial and unconsciousness, which is when our shadow side often ends up predominating.

We don't need to pretend we don't have a shadow side as well as a light side. We don't need to be afraid that God knows us this deeply, or feel guilt or shame around it, for when we let God in, what we experience is love, understanding, forgiveness, patience, encouragement, and inspiration.

By letting in love, we become able to let go of fear. We become more patient with ourselves and others. We become less critical and judgmental. We become more and more able to live from a place of love. And it helps to know that in the process, God patiently waits for us to grow and become who we are choosing to be.

I also find certain assurance in this parable, if we view the wheat field as our lives and our inner being. For whatever "weediness" is within us—any ego, any inability to forgive, any negative judgments, any denial, any attempts to look good, any stinginess, any apathy—will someday be gathered up and (metaphorically) burned. And all that will remain will be the good things.

Of course, we don't need to wait till later or our life's end to do this "burning." We can do it any time, or more realistically, a bit at a time, so we journey daily toward living as Jesus did, with love and compassion for all.

We do need to recognize situations where people are confronted by evil, which is real, but which never has the last word. When there is abuse, oppression, injustice, or intentional inflicting of pain, how do we respond? Here is a prayer that was written by a prisoner in the Ravensbruck concentration camp and that points beyond the poisonous evil action to the harvest that is possible and that is reminiscent of Jesus forgiving his torturers when on the cross:

*“O Lord, remember not only the men and women of good will,
but also those of ill will.
But do not remember all the suffering they have inflicted;
remember the fruits we have bought, thanks to this suffering --
our comradeship, our loyalty, our humility, our courage, our generosity,
the greatness of heart which has grown out of all of this,
and when they come to judgment,
let all the fruits which we have born be their forgiveness. Amen.” **

I watched the movie *Ratatouille* again last week. It’s a Pixar/Disney film that was reviewed in the recent United Church *Observer*, and it tells the tale of a country rat who ends up in the city of Paris, following and realizing his dream of becoming a gourmet chef, although in a secretive and charming way. In usual cartoon style, he is the “good wheat,” coming to harvest.

One of the darnel, or “weedy” characters, is a food critic, who takes great delight in criticizing and ruining the fortunes of restauranteurs. At a climactic moment, he dines at this restaurant, expecting—and hoping for—the worst, when he is served a dish of ratatouille, a peasant dish, prepared by our hero. As the critic takes his first bite, he is deliciously swept away by memories of the ratatouille his mother used to make. His hard countenance softens, and he writes a review that not only recommends the restaurant highly, but also includes self-reflection about his critical nature. He “burns” the poisonous weed within and allows the healthy wheat, deeper within, to flourish.

In real life, we’re all a mixture of both weeds and wheat. Our challenge is to accept this reality so that we no longer deny or pretend or resist. Once we accept it, we can then choose to let go of judgement of others and of self. We can choose to be patient with others and with ourselves, as God is patient with us. And we can focus on the task at hand: to live life fully and passionately and lovingly in each moment, using the gifts God has given us to be forgiving, generous, compassionate, and trusting in God to take care of the greater harvest to come.

By the power of the Spirit, may it be so! Amen.

* Michael Counsell, compiler, *2000 Years of Prayer* (Morehouse, 1999), p. 469.