

I have wondered at times how certain plants earn the designation of weed. I remember as a kid being surprised that dandelions were considered weeds. The little puff balls were so cute and fluffy! And who doesn't love a plant that you can make wishes with? Ralph Waldo Emerson said of weeds: "A weed is but a plant whose virtues remain undiscovered." Maybe that's why I found this parable of the weeds so intriguing.

I was reminded of two stories as I read this parable. The first from my days working at Harry and David in Medford, Oregon. Harry and David is a company that is most well known for the pears which are often given as gifts during the holidays. I learned a bit about orchards while working for them including the fact that asparagus often grew among the pear trees. Since asparagus was not a crop they were cultivating, it was viewed as a weed. I was flabbergasted! I couldn't believe they considered asparagus a weed. Didn't they know how delicious grilled asparagus is? When the company was still family owned, they used to allow the people to help themselves to the asparagus in the fields. While the company didn't want the asparagus, for the neighbors it was a welcome addition to the dinner table.

I shouldn't have been so surprised by the concept that one person's weed is someone else's side dish given a similar experience growing up in Arizona. When I was in middle school and high school our neighbors were a family in which the parents had immigrated to the US from the country of Jordan. Many mornings my mom and the woman next door named Nawal, would sit on the short brick wall that contained a garden bed in front of our house and share a cup of Turkish coffee. My mom was lamenting at one point that she had fallen behind on removing the weeds. Nawal looked a little confused and said, "what weeds?" My mom pointed to a little leafy plant that was becoming a little too prolific in the garden. Nawal said, "Oh that's not a weed. Back in Jordan we make salad with it."

Jesus is using a series of parables and similes to try to describe what the kingdom of God is like. What kind of world does God the Creator envision and call us toward? All three of the examples in our text this morning point to the surprising nature of God's kingdom – the seed of a mustard plant that is so tiny and yet grows into a large

tree that provides shelter for birds, or yeast which in small amounts makes bread rise or it is like a landowner who lets the weeds grow right next to the wheat even though they were planted by an enemy.

At first glance it seems that the concern of the farmer is that the weeds are so entangled with the wheat that if the servants try to remove the weeds, the good wheat plants will be uprooted in the process. And that's one possibility. But I think it's equally possible that Jesus is saying to the disciples, "You don't know which plant is the wheat and which is the weed." ... What we think are weeds, God may see as valuable plants.

Rev. Eric Fistler says "Who are we in this story? If we are the servants in this story, it is not our job to figure out who's wheat and who's weeds. And if we are the wheat in this story, it is not our job to go around and point out the weeds. And maybe, way too often, we're actually the weeds and thank God, God lets us grow anyway."¹

Jesus tells us over and over again, that the kingdom of God is not what we expect. That the kingdom of God values the things that this world too often deems as worthless or undesirable. Maybe Jesus is saying that the Kingdom of Heaven is what the world would think is a weed.

We are inundated with messages about who people think the weeds are. Our president just this week declared a national emergency in order to build a wall to attempt to keep those he perceives as weeds from infiltrating our crop of good wheat. Later this week our siblings in the United Methodist Church are preparing for a General Conference in which the future of Gay, Lesbian, and Transgender church members and clergy of the Methodist church will be discussed. A significant portion of the worldwide United Methodist Church perceives their LGBTQ siblings as weeds and wants to remove them from the field. There are churches in this community and throughout the country who see a woman pastor and preacher as a weed that has infiltrated the good manly wheat.

¹ Fistler, Eric. "Proper 11A (OT18)". *Pulpit Fiction*. Podcast audio, July 23, 2017. <https://www.pulpitfiction.com/notes/proper11a>

But what some see as weeds, God sees as wheat. Don't let anyone tell you that you are a weed in God's kin-dom. In doing so, they are trespassing in God's field and making judgements that they are not qualified to make.

If we are really honest with ourselves, none of us are purely wheat or weed. All of us have weedy parts. Every church community, every family, every individual is comprised of both wheat and weed. Which makes the weeds being thrown in the fire part of the story a little unsettling. But I think there is also good news and grace and hope there. Fire has the ability to refine and purify. Fire is used to separate impurities from metals like copper and gold. As we encounter God and invite the work of the holy spirit into our very beings, this fire has the potential to burn away our truly weedy parts. But the parable tells us we are not equipped to judge what is weed and what is wheat. Even in ourselves there are parts of us that we might think are weedy, but God considers them wheat. While I worked in a corporate environment, the fact that I often experience my emotions fairly easily felt like a weakness or a deficiency. I beat myself up for the times that I couldn't hold back tears. But I have come to embrace this part of me as a gift in my life. My emotions give me empathy and authenticity. I used to assume this quality of mine was a weed that I just couldn't get rid of, but it turned out to be beautiful wheat all along.

This doesn't mean that we should look the other way at injustice. Matthew 18 tells us "If a bother sins against you, go and show him his fault." We are seeing more and more cases of clergy sexual abuse being brought to light. The church must always stand up for victims and the marginalized. So let us not be afraid to stand up to abuse and injustice. To call out greed and exploitation. But the moment we start believing we can decide if a person is a weed deserving of removal from the kingdom of God, we have taken on a job that is not ours. And if we allow others to claim they know who the weeds are, we become complicit in that judgment as well.

This is the good news friends. We are weeds AND wheat. Saint and sinner all at once. May we allow God to do the weeding and resist the temptation to try to be in control of the process. Amen.