

SEVENTH SUNDAY AFTER PENTECOST 2020 A: The Parable of the Weeds

Last week we talked about planting seeds. This week we're talking about pulling weeds. The two go together. Every gardener knows that planting seeds is the easy part of having a successful garden. It is much more time consuming to weed the same garden. And it's hard work. As someone has said: "When weeding, the best way to make sure you are removing a weed and not a valuable plant is to pull on it. If it comes out of the ground easily, it's a valuable plant."

I doubt than anyone likes pulling weeds, including Jesus. In today's lesson Jesus used another illustration. He said, "The kingdom of heaven is like a man who planted good seed in his field. But while people were asleep, his enemy planted weeds in the wheat field and went away. When the wheat came up and formed kernels, weeds appeared. "The owner's workers came to him and asked, 'Sir, didn't you plant good seed in your field? Where did the weeds come from?' "He told them, 'An enemy did this.' "His workers asked him, 'Do you want us to pull out the weeds?' "He replied, 'No. If you pull out the weeds, you may pull out the wheat with them. Let both grow together until the harvest. When the grain is cut, I will tell the workers to gather the weeds first and tie them in bundles to be burned. But I'll have them bring the wheat into my barn.'" When Jesus had sent the people away, he went into the house. His disciples came to him and said, "Explain what the illustration of the weeds in the field means." He answered, "The one who plants the good seeds is the Son of Man. The field is the world. The good seeds are those who belong to the kingdom. The weeds are those who belong to the evil one. The enemy who planted them is the devil. The harvest is the end of the world. The workers are angels. Just as weeds are gathered and burned, so it will be at the end of time. The Son of Man will send his angels. They will gather everything in his kingdom that causes people to sin and everyone who

does evil. The angels will throw them into a blazing furnace. People will cry and be in extreme pain there. Then the people who have God's approval will shine like the sun in their Father's kingdom. Let the person who has ears listen! I am pretty sure all of us have ears. I guess we better make sure to listen!

On its surface, there is not much to be said about this parable except **make sure you're not a weed, because one day the weeds will be thrown into the fiery furnace.** The weeds are all those "who do evil." Oops. That's a little disconcerting. All "who do evil." Where does God draw the line? Murderers? Adulterers? Thieves? Does fibbing on your tax returns count? How about gossiping, particularly if it borders on bearing false witness? How about the sins of omission? What about those who ignore their neighbors who are in need? Where is the line drawn? Could it be that Paul was right when he said in Romans 3:23, "All have sinned and fall short of the glory of God?" Of course he was. What's our hope then? Isn't it that the blood of Christ covers all our sins? I don't know about you, but a fiery furnace doesn't appeal to me, and if that day comes when God begins pulling weeds I certainly don't want to depend on my own virtue. Having said that, however, we need to take this lesson seriously.

Pulling weeds is an important part of the Christian life.

They say that TIMING IS EVERYTHING. Unfortunately with both weeds and bad habits, by the time that anybody can recognize them, it's too late to do anything about them." Just go outside and look at the church's garden plants and weedy lawn. The weeds are real chummy. It's hard to get rid of the weeds in the garden—or the bad habits we or our loved ones have slipped into out without more than a little effort and pain.

I'm pretty sure we aren't all here to celebrate our perfection, as individuals, communities, or as societies. Lives are still being destroyed. Hearts are still being

broken. Relationships are being torn. Our health is still being endangered. And here's the sad thing. The people whose lives are being choked by these weeds are, for the most part, not bad people. They are good people who simply weren't vigilant about pulling the weeds.

A few wrong turns. It happens in life. It happens to good people. A few bad judgments and suddenly you are lost, entangled, trapped in the weeds. Sometimes much is at stake. A marriage. Your health. The safety of others. **Pulling weeds is an important part of a successful life.**

Here is the second thing we need to see: **God is our Savior.** You might not think so after reading this parable. God sounds like He is eager to destroy us when we do wrong. However, if you read this parable to say that God is a vengeful judge, you miss an important truth. The last thing God wants to do is destroy us. God makes us mindful of the weeds growing in our lives that God might help deliver us from them.

God is our Savior. God offers us forgiveness and the opportunity to start over. God's only desire is to free us from the messes we've made in our lives. God is the gardener who wants to pull the weeds from our life. It is not God's will that any of His children should suffer. God wants to help. Regardless of what messes we have in our lives right now, God can still turn that mess into a masterpiece.

The third thing we need to see is that **sin is communal.** All of the sins that destroy people, destroy families, destroy relationships, destroy human potential God wants to pull them out and throw them in the fire. That is what the cross is all about. God wants to restore us to the beautiful creation God intended from the first for us to be.

There is a parable of God's plan in Kurt Vonnegut's strange and disturbing book, *Slaughterhouse Five*. The central character is an optometrist named Billy Pilgrim who lives a rather ordinary existence in a fictional town in New York State. However, when the novel begins, he is a prisoner-of-war in Dresden, Germany during the Second World War.

At one point in the novel Billy Pilgrim turns on a television and begins to see a movie about the war except he sees it in reverse. Use your imagination for a moment and visualize a war movie played backwards. Planes are in the air over a city that is in flames, but the bay doors beneath the planes open and rather than destroying the city below they actually seem to rebuild the city. As the planes fly backward away from the city, they seem to extinguish the fires. Meanwhile bombs, rather than falling from the planes are sucked upward into the belly of the planes while the planes continue flying backward to the base from which they had embarked.

Meanwhile, on the ground the enemy has anti-aircraft guns, but rather than shooting missiles into the air destroying the planes and the men who fly them, the missiles return to the muzzles of the guns and planes which have fallen are restored whole to the sky where they rejoin the V-shaped formation of their squadron. Soldiers who have been blown apart are restored to wholeness and they are shipped backward to their homes where they turn in their uniforms. Soon they are high school students remember we are going backwards then young children, then mere babies with worlds of potential. Can you see it?

In Billy Pilgrim's mind he sees all of humanity moving backward through time until only two people are left, two perfect people without sin living in a perfect garden, Adam and Eve. (5) Can you see it?

That's what God sees. The world as God created it to be. A world without pain or suffering or hatred or violence or envy or greed. A world where people love and are loved without being used, without having their hearts and their lives broken because of the actions of others or by their own weaknesses. This is the world God wants for all of us.

To be sure, we live in a broken world. And we cannot expect things to be perfect in this world ever again, but we can make a start in that direction, and we do that by making our way to the foot of the cross where we kneel in deep contrition and we ask God to pull any of the weeds that may be growing in our hearts. These may be weeds of bitterness, weeds of envy, weeds of whatever...the list goes on and on. You know which weeds are your greatest challenge. Give them to God. Let God throw them into the fire and consume them forever. God is our Savior. God is our Redeemer. God is the Master Gardener of our lives. Let God put the garden of our life in perfect order again.

And all of God's GARDENING ASSISTANTS said...AMEN!