

I've wrestled with this passage many, many times not only this week but it's one that creeps into my mind every now and then and I think it's because of that image of the wheat and the weeds. It challenges me and there's a major challenge in here for the church too. "The kingdom of heaven may be compared to someone who sowed good seed in his field," Jesus said, "but in the night, weeds were sown by the enemy. . .and when the plants came up and bore grain, the weeds came up too all mixed in together. So then, the workers came and asked the owner, 'Do you want us to go and gather the weeds?' and he said, 'No, because if you did that, you'd uproot the weeds too. Just let it all grow together until the harvest, and then, in the end, I'll sort it all out.'" This is really an incredibly challenging parable. And more and more I think it's a passage we desperately need to take to heart. Here's what I mean.

First, nobody likes weeds, so I get that a natural impulse would be to remove them whenever we find them. Webster's actually defines a weed as "a plant that is considered undesirable, unattractive or troublesome. . . an obnoxious growth. . . a plant that grows wild and profusely especially among cultivated plants." We know that weeds can mess up the look of a garden or a lawn and they take soil and space away from the intended plants whatever those happen to be: grass or vegetables or herbs or flowers. Weeds are as Webster's says "troublesome and wild;" so it's no wonder that when it comes to well kept lawns and flower beds and gardens and fields we'd want the weeds gone. If you're trying to grow something that looks good, something that's undeniably safe, that has an order and consistency and predictability to it – you want no weeds to be part of it. And so like it was for the workers in the parable, we try to remove them, and the direction to "let the weeds grow" sounds absolutely ridiculous.

But here's the other thing. If I listen to this parable from a different place in myself, the message isn't ridiculous at all. It actually brings me a whole lot of relief, because, I know what it's like to be called a weed. And maybe you do too. It's not fun. In fact, as Episcopalians we can all claim "weed" status as some people in the larger church would consider our actions of inclusion to be troublesome and wild, obnoxious and undesirable – fitting all the definitions of weed hood. We've actually been told by some that our presence in the Anglican Communion is inhibiting growth, causing damage, upsetting the order of the fields. Given the opportunity, or the right tools, or the authority to do so there are some who would uproot the whole Episcopal Church in a minute and sort us right out of the field.

And yet, here's where it gets tough: While we in the Episcopal Church are not by any means all of one mind (we never have been and never will be on most things) while we're not all in agreement on issues of inclusion, those who have helped open our church, do so with the genuine intent of growing the wheat, of expanding the harvest and enriching the crop. So while some might interpret it as such, neither the consecration of Gene Robinson nor the election of Katharine Jefferts Schori were intended to do damage – in fact just the opposite. The intent was and is simply to continue to do gospel. And so if you hear this parable from that place, as someone who has been labeled "weed" this parable comes as comfort, as protection as a reminder that the sorting is God's to do. Our work is simply to do the growing that we've been given to do.

And historically we can see how vitally important it is not to make sorting our work. Under Hitler Jews were considered weeds, upsetting the purity of that order. In Salem and other places,

women who were “wild or troublesome” were considered weeds that needed to be exterminated. Blacks at various times in various circumstances were considered weeds and therefore needed to be kept separate. And the sorting in all of those cases were inarguably horrible acts of human cruelty and unfortunately the list could continue on and on. And while those examples are way more extreme than what we’re dealing with in our church, you get the point. We all need to hear this parable not because of the ways in which we care for our lawns, but because there is a human tendency to want to decide who is wheat and who is weed and according to Jesus, we shouldn’t be doing that at all. If for no other reason than we have proven we often get it wrong. Just let it all grow. And like we heard last week put your energies elsewhere: “Be light. Be water. And do the kind of growing that you have been given to do.”

In the parables Jesus talked about the kingdom of God and the kind of communities he was trying to build among us here and now. “Here’s how the kingdom works,” was the introduction behind every parable and “start living that way now” was the point of the stories he told. He knew human beings, and was especially attentive to the human tendency to divide ourselves along clean lines – clean lines of wheat and weed, sinner and saint, good and bad, Gentile and Jew, male and female, pure and impure. Since the good news of the kingdom is that many of our ways get turned upside down, in this parable the message is a simple one -- let the weeds grow. Leave the sorting up to God. Let the good plants and the obnoxious weeds (however you happen to define either group) grow side by side and actually, while your at it try dropping the labels all together. Which makes very little sense if you’re trying to keep your lawn but it is truly something like an amazing bit of grace if you’ve been labeled a weed in the world, or if you’re trying to grow something like a church that is grounded in the love of a sower who planted us all.

“What is a weed?” Ralph Waldo Emerson pondered, “Any plant whose virtues have not yet been discovered.” May we be a church that is open to and encouraging of that kind of discovery. It’s then that I believe (in the words of the parable) we will begin to “shine like the sun.”