

7th Sunday after Pentecost
Lectionary 16 (A)
July 19, 2020
Text: Matthew 13:24-30, 36-43

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This spring, Melinda and I created a garden in our yard. Here you can see the little squash plants just starting to grow. The chicken-wire covering is to keep the deer out.



And this summer, after a couple of months of growth, it looks like this. And this past week we enjoyed the first summer squash from our garden. And it was so fresh and delicious. Of course, we have been weeding the garden regularly. Otherwise the weeds would have taken over.



I wonder, then, whether you were a little surprised by the farmer's instructions in Jesus' parable. "Don't pull out the weeds. You'd uproot the wheat along with them. Just leave them both to grow together." Jesus wants us to be surprised, because he's not really talking about weeds that grew in some farmer's wheat field. Jesus is telling a parable, which is a vehicle for helping us understand something new or unfamiliar by telling a story about something we already know. We know weeds—and we know that a healthy garden, or a healthy wheat field, is better off without them. So we pull those weeds with a vengeance.

But Jesus is really talking about what the world is like when God's values drive human choices, when our shared life as the human family reflects Jesus' way of compassion and forgiveness. So the kingdom of heaven is like this: a farmer sowed good seed in his field, but when the seeds began to sprout and grow, it turned out there were weeds planted all among the wheat. An enemy had snuck in at night and sabotaged the farmer's crop. In other words, in this beautiful

world God made, some people are wheat—their lives produce the kind of fruit that God desires, compassion and faithfulness and generosity. And there are people who are weeds—their lives produce violence and pain and selfishness. What's to be done!? The servants have a solution—pull up all those weeds.

Now, in Jesus' time, a lot of the religious leaders believed that was exactly the proper course of action. And they were sure they knew how to identify who was a weed—those people, the ones who didn't obey the law or weren't able to keep the purity code, the sinners and tax collectors and foreigners, they were weeds, endangering God's good harvest. And the religious leaders were sure they knew exactly what to do with those weedy people—shun them, exclude them, shame them, and in certain cases, stone them to death! But Jesus' whole life was spent caring for those who were the object of others' scorn. Jesus shared God's love and forgiveness with those who were condemned by the religious leaders. He extended God's own welcome to those with messy lives and painful histories. Jesus invested his whole self in the promise that God is gracious and merciful, slow to anger and abounding in steadfast love—that God is all about love and compassion and forgiveness, and there is no limit to God's grace.

There are plenty of people in our time as well, who are convinced they know exactly who the weeds are, and they have no hesitation naming and shaming those they imagine are on God's naughty list. Maybe there has even been a time when you felt yourself to be labeled that way—judged and condemned and dismissed as having no place in God's good field. But notice how, in Jesus' story, the farmer tells the workers to not bother the weeds. Leave them all alone. Pulling up the weeds would only endanger the wheat. Just let them grow together, side by side, until it is time for the harvest. And here's the thing about parables—they're not just simple stories with some didactic point that could just as easily be expressed with a "do this" or "don't do that." Instead, they're meant to be odd and puzzling. They're meant to get under our skin and challenge things we thought we knew, maybe even open our imaginations to see something new, or to change our minds about something we thought was settled.

And that's exactly what this parable does. The more we think about it, the more questions it asks of us. When the farmer told his servants not to pull up the weeds, did that mean he didn't really trust them to recognize what was a weed and what wasn't? I wonder what that suggests about God's confidence in our ability to judge another person's worth. The farmer tells his workers not to pull up the weeds because that would damage the wheat. I wonder what kind of damage it does to the church when self-identified good people try to purify it by getting rid of those they identify as bad people. When it is harvest time, the reapers will then separate out the weeds to be burned. Does that suggest that no one is able to really evaluate a person's character, or the worth of their life, until the very end, because redemption is always possible? I wonder if we should feel gratitude for being given time to turn our hearts to God, and for God's redeeming power to work in our lives and for God's love to grow in our hearts.

Reflecting on this parable, it seems to me that Jesus tells it because he wants to give us three beautiful gifts that are particularly timely for this season we are living through.

The first gift is freedom from judging, freedom from feelings of superiority, which is where hardness of heart comes from. Jesus invites us to not invest any energy in judging other people, deciding whether they are wheat or weeds. After all, we can really never know the kind of burdens another person is carrying. Jesus wants to nurture the practices of compassion and humility in our lives. And with compassion and humility comes the most amazing gift. We become free from comparing ourselves to others, free from feeling the need to put ourselves above others, free from judging others and judging ourselves. It's a truly beautiful and life-giving gift.

The second gift is a hopeful spirit. Jesus invites us to expect that love is actually able to transform people's hearts and change their lives. When we treat others with compassion, redemption is really possible. I read recently about a white supremacist whose outlook on the world and attitude toward other people was changed by a group of Jewish friends who talked with him, accepted him, welcomed him into their circle. Over time, the love they showed broke down his racist beliefs, and he finally turned his back on his racist past. Jesus wants to nurture the practice of patience in our lives, expecting that God is at work all around us in ways we can't see to bring about redemption. And when we can patiently wait for God's redemption, we can experience feelings of hope for God's world. And that is a genuinely beautiful and life-giving gift.

The third gift is freedom from fear. Jesus invites us to know in our hearts that dealing with the weeds is God's job, and God will do it. When we practice trust—trusting that God is only one capable of judging this world—it sets us free from fear, free from worry about the injustices of life, large and small. It sets us free from resentment and bitterness. And that is a beautiful and life-giving gift.

And I believe that these beautiful and life-giving gifts are particularly important right now. We're headed into the election season. We'll have political conventions and non-stop political advertisements on TV. I expect to hear a lot of judging and condemning and dismissing. But perhaps with Jesus' wisdom directing our hearts, we can nurture the kind of community around us that gives life and blessing. It doesn't mean we can never stand up for what is right, but we don't have to regard people we disagree with as enemies. We don't have to participate in tearing anyone down. Instead, our lives can become a kind of garden, that grows compassion and humility, and patience and trust in God, and yields the fruit of hope and freedom from judging and freedom from fear. And in that garden, the kingdom of heaven will be visible. Thanks be to God. Amen.