

“What About the Weeds?”

Matthew 13: 24-30; 36-43

Every gardener knows the importance of getting rid of the weeds. According to our Gospel lesson this morning, so does God. Let's face it, most of us recoil at the idea of a God of Judgment instead of Justice. That's why this morning's Gospel parable of Jesus is not a favorite. Even so, sooner or later we have to answer the question: what about the weeds? We don't like considering another human being as being a weed either, yet we might concede that there are some likely candidates for such a designation: for instance, Torquemada of the Medieval Church's Inquisition; Adolf Hitler; Pol Pot of the Killing Fields in Cambodia; these are sure bets. And, if we look around, there might be other possible candidates for weed status.

There is, however, another way of looking at this parable; a way that potentially could make us more uncomfortable than considering other people for weed designation. That way is to look at ourselves. What about the weeds within; the hatred, bigotry, envy, bitterness, lust, anger, greed, and so on? What about the weeds in us?

Our concern this morning is not about the Final Judgment that Jesus describes here, when the wheat and the weeds will be separated. For you and me, as those who have accepted God's grace in this matter, that matter has already been settled. By faith we know who and whose we are. By faith we know that we belong to the Lord. We know that it is all by God's grace, and we can be assured that we are part of the wheat of God's field. We take comfort in that when we hear a passage such as this one. Our salvation, however, does not keep weeds out of the garden of our own character and soul. How do we deal with those weeds, those persistent personality defects, those moral letdowns, those times of ethical failure that keep us from being all that God intends us to be? For, you see, God has created you and me to be persons of strong inner character with sturdy souls that can stand up to

the harsh realities of life. Or, to use the Biblical analogies suggested here in our Gospel lesson, a hardy abundant field or garden, bearing fruit whose taste is sweet and refreshing, or bursting forth in blossoms whose beauty is pleasing to the eye of God. But, what about the weeds? How do we whack the weeds in us, and become that sturdy soul, that beautiful garden Christ intends us to be? Well, Jesus' metaphor of gardening can guide us here.

The first thing is to recognize how weeds grow. In gardens, or lawns, we all know, weeds grow without effort. That's the key to spotting them. No one cultivates it, waters it, sees that it gets enough sunshine. Weeds require no labor. They get started and grow unnoticed. That's how they succeed. The things worth having in life require effort. Beware of anything in life that requires no commitment; we're probably dealing with a weed.

But once recognized, how do we get rid of those weeds? Do weed-whacking? What does it take to become God's beautiful garden; to become that strong person within, with a sturdy soul? It takes three steps: a vision, a plan, and a commitment. There are some people who take better care of their lawns than they do their lives. Somehow they do not see that these same principles are involved in both tasks.

So, let's begin with that first step: vision. In order to have a beautiful lawn or hardy field or garden, we begin with a mental idea of what we hope to achieve; a vision. We picture the finished product: for a garden, the roses and irises, or the tomatoes and the cucumbers, and the borders and walkways. But do we have that same clear-cut vision concerning our lives? If we need help forming that detailed picture of our inner selves, of what the very character of our soul should look like, remember, the ultimate Christian image is Jesus himself. The character traits found in him are to form our templates.

This is where Bible Study comes in. Concentrate on reading and rereading the words and actions of Jesus. Reading the Gospels regularly will illumine and restore that vision of what we are to strive to become in ourselves. Capturing that strong vision of Christ in us, of our inner selves becoming more and more Christ-like is the first step. That's the vision.

And here's the second step: a plan. That beautiful garden, that strong inner person and sturdy soul requires a plan. There was once a great Quaker leader by the name of Rufus Jones. Jones wrote and published one book a year for over fifty years. He did this while holding a college professorship, attending countless meetings, making frequent speeches, editing a magazine and taking care of countless other chores that his position required. Someone once asked him how he found the time to write so many books. He answered, "I wrote my books on Tuesdays." Throughout his career he set aside Tuesdays as his one "cleared" day, accepting no appointments that could be avoided. He began after breakfast and wrote until dark. He might be thinking about his next project all week long, but he did not put it on paper until Tuesday. By following that simple plan, he left behind a great body of work.

We've all heard it before...because it's true: those who fail to plan, plan to fail. Jesus talked about the foolishness of those who build towers without first planning the steps and cost. Successful spiritual living requires that we give some thought to the future. We have a vision of the garden we hope to be in Jesus. Now we make a plan. What would I have to do to grow into his image? Prayer is critical here. God is very good about revealing to us what needs to be worked on first, and revealing what will follow. The Holy Spirit is already at work in you and me to give us the power and wisdom to act on what is revealed. So, ask God to show you what to work on first, and ask for the Spirit's help for wisdom and planning. That's the second step to true inner strength and

character and sturdiness of soul; to becoming that hardy field, that beautiful garden within. It's the plan.

Here's the third step: make a commitment to cultivate this vision and plan for life. A famous football coach once said, "I have a job to do that is not very complicated, but it is difficult: to get a group of athletes to do what they don't want to do so they achieve the one thing they have wanted all of their lives." Cultivating your life and soul requires doing those daily little tasks that are not complicated but are difficult because they're not always convenient. Such as, a period of quiet time to talk with and listen to God, daily Bible reading and study, periodic check-ins with God throughout the day, and actions of giving God's grace and kindness to others. That's not complicated, but it can be difficult when other things call us away from that commitment.

But we do them because in our mind's eyes we can see the beauty and the bounty that awaits us. That, of course, is what disciplined living is all about. Some people do not understand the nature of spiritual discipline. They think of it as the drudgery of mindless routine. But disciplined living is not mindless routine. It is the commitment to the vision and the plan for we who have caught a vision of life's purpose; to become like Jesus in character and soul. That's the commitment.

So, heed Jesus' warning about weeds. He loves you and me, and that is why he would have us be free of them; so that we can grow and flourish. Jesus is against the weeds in your life because he is for you.

So, what about the weeds in our lives? Weeds are the enemy of a beautiful garden whether that garden is the sanctity and health of our bodies, or our relationships with our families, or our progress in our vocations or avocations, or, most importantly of all, our relationship with God.

But you and I can be a beautiful garden, a strong inner person and soul: with Jesus as our vision, the cultivation of his life in us as our plan, and a life given to growth in him for life as our commitment. There it is: the vision, the plan, and the commitment. So, let's get weed-whacking!