

## Proper 11A 2017 Sermon

July 23, 2017

Matthew 13:24-30

“Do not pull the weeds,” the householder tells the servants, “for in gathering the weeds you would uproot the wheat along with them. Let both of them grow together...”

I would rather not have dandelions growing in my rose bed. But I know that if I try to spray Roundup on the weeds – which are so close to my roses – my roses will likewise suffer.

And the servants in today’s parable have it even *worse* than I do. For I have no trouble distinguishing the dandelions from the roses in my rose bed. But in our Gospel lesson today, the word which is translated “weeds” actually describes a *specific* weed, bearded darnel, which grows commonly in Palestine, and is almost indistinguishable from wheat. So not only would the householder’s servant pull up the wheat if they tried to pull the weeds; they would even have a hard time distinguishing wheat from weed!

Now, let’s face it: we human beings are compulsive weed-pullers. Whenever we find something we think doesn’t belong, or something we don’t like, something we don’t agree with, we want to pull it out, get rid of it. We long to see our lives like undefiled fields of pure wheat. The problem is, both in the parable and in life, wheat and weeds grow together and are often indistinguishable; and even when we *can* distinguish one from the other, pulling up the weeds – rooting out all those among us who don’t meet our criteria -- might harm the good crop.

In the Middle East, Sunnis see Shiites as weeds to be pulled up, while Shiites see Sunnis as the weeds. In Northern Ireland in the not-so-distant past, both sides of the “troubles,” Protestant and Catholic, considered themselves Christian; but each side saw the other as weeds which had to be sprayed with Roundup. Much wheat was killed in the process, for decades. In 1536, Henry VIII had William Tyndale burned at the stake for translating the Bible into English; two years later, Henry changed his mind and ordered that a copy of the Bible in English be available in every church.

We humans are inveterate weed-pullers; so much so that we can easily pour **more** energy into the *negative* activity of identifying, complaining about, and trying to purge society or the Church or our world of what we perceive to be weeds than we spend on the *positive* activities of planting and cultivating the Gospel, sharing the love of Christ, giving of ourselves to God and neighbor, seeking and serving Christ in one another. One of Fr. Richard Rohr’s “Eight Core Principles” is this: “The best criticism of the bad is the practice of the better. Oppositional energy only creates more of the same.” In other words, if you think someone else is going about things the wrong way, instead of telling her she’s

stupid or trying to change the way she is doing things, just do that thing better in your own life. Instead of criticizing a leader of your group or the church, offer to take the leadership yourself the next time the spot is open, and do the job better. Jesus' "new commandment" was simply: "Love one another as I have loved you."<sup>1</sup> He doesn't tell us to kill weeds; in fact, he *commanded* us to **love** our enemies – love the weeds! It is telling, I think, that small children will often present their mothers a bouquet of yellow dandelions, thinking they are beautiful flowers. They have yet to learn that dandelions are weeds.

Despite all our belief that the world can be clearly separated into right and wrong, good and bad (what some have called "dualistic thinking"), the *reality* is that many of the issues and questions of our lives are difficult, or unclear—it is not always easy for us human beings to discern the wheat from the dandelion. As we read in Isaiah: "My thoughts are not your thoughts," says the Lord, "nor my ways your ways." (55:9-10) What *we* are so **sure** is *right* might be what **God** sees as very *wrong*.

Jesus himself did not weed out all the weeds from among his *own* company. On the contrary, he ate with society's outcasts and sinners, even saying to the religious authorities (the "good guys"), "Tax collectors and prostitutes will enter the kingdom of God ahead of you." (Matt. 21:31) Many of Jesus' own disciples exhibited weed-like characteristics at times. At one point, Jesus even calls Peter "Satan"; and yet he does not weed out Peter, who would deny him, nor Judas, who would betray him.

And how blessed we are that Jesus does NOT pull weeds! For if Jesus' criteria for His Church demands a weedless field, who among **us** would be *included*? Certainly not I, with all the weeds in *my* life. Who among us is totally pure in our motivations? Are all of our thoughts godly, our actions self-less, our desires and motivations untainted by ego or pride? In the words of Anglican priest Robert Capon, "Since good and evil in this world commonly inhabit not only the same field but even the same individual human beings—since, that is, there are no **unqualified** good guys any more than there are any **unqualified** bad guys—the only result of a truly dedicated campaign to get rid of evil will be the abolition of literally everybody."<sup>2</sup>

Weeds and wheat grow side by side in this life, Jesus says – and we may not be able to tell one from another. And so the Master in our parable tells his servants, "Let both of them grow together."

I'd like to focus for a moment on that one word "let". The Biblical word translated "let" in this passage is the same word Jesus uses when he says, "**let** the children come to me;" and it is the **first** word Jesus utters from the cross: "Father, **let** them go, forgive them, they know not what they do." You see, the word for "let" and the word "forgive" in the Biblical Greek are the *same* word. Let the wheat and the weeds grow together; forgive them – 70 x 7! (Matt. 18:22)

This is so *hard* for our analytical, dualistic minds, for our egos, which are always so eager to judge right from wrong, good from bad, Democrat from Republican, Christian from Muslim, wheat from weed. What Jesus is telling us in our parable is that the world isn't *like* that; it **isn't** that simple; it isn't that clear-cut. Weeds cannot always be easily distinguished from wheat, nor good from bad, light from dark. Sometimes they are so intimately entwined with each other that uprooting one will uproot the other. In the real world, there are ambiguities, uncertainties, paradoxes. Even in the realm of quantum physics, an electron cannot be labelled particle or wave, for it is both/and. *St. Paul* wrote quite often about the paradoxical nature of faith, which the dualistic mind cannot comprehend. "For the message about the cross is foolishness to those who are perishing," he said, "but to us who are being saved it is the power of God." (1 Cor. 1:18) And again Paul wrote **these** paradoxical words: "I am happy when I have weaknesses, insults, hard times, sufferings, and all kinds of troubles for Christ. Because when I am weak, then I am truly strong." (2 Corinthians 12:10)

"I am increasingly convinced," says Richard Rohr, "that all true spirituality has the character of paradox to it, precisely because it is always holding together the Whole of Reality, which is always 'everything.' Everything in this world is both attractive **and** non-attractive, light and darkness, passing and eternal, life and death—at the same time... [Y]ou cannot grow [spiritually]... without (1<sup>st</sup>) a strong tolerance for ambiguity, (2<sup>nd</sup>) an ability to allow, forgive, and contain a certain degree of anxiety, and (3<sup>rd</sup>) a willingness to **not** know and not even *need* to know. Faith is not a matter of always seeing clearly; more often, it is walking in darkness and trust..."

"By teaching 'Do not judge' (Matthew 7:1), [Jesus and other] great teachers are saying that you cannot start seeing or understanding anything if you start with 'no.' You have to start with a 'yes' of basic acceptance ['letting', forgiving], which means not too quickly labeling, analyzing, or categorizing things as in or out, good or bad, up or down. You have to leave the field open, a field in which God and grace can move. *Ego* leads with 'no' whereas *soul* leads with 'yes.'"

"Let both of them grow together," our parable teaches us.

In his book *Immortal Diamond*, Fr. Rohr says something which, when I first read it, profoundly shocked me (because it goes against what most of us have told ourselves God is like). Fr. Richard writes: "God is the Great Allower, despite all attempts of ego, culture, and even religion to *prevent* God from allowing. **Show** me where God does *not* allow. God lets women be raped and raped women conceive, God lets tyrants succeed, and God lets me make my own mistakes again and again. He does not enforce his own commandments. God's total allowing of everything has in fact become humanity's major complaint. Conservatives so want God to smite sinners that they find every natural disaster to be proof of just that, and then they invent some of their own smiting besides. Liberals *reject* God

because God allows holocausts and torture and does not fit inside their seeming logic. If we were truly being honest, God is both a *scandal* and a supreme disappointment to most of us. We would prefer a God of domination and control to a God of allowing..." (pp. 18-19)

These words are shocking to us, I believe, for the same reason that we react so strongly against Jesus' other parable of the landowner who pays workers who have worked one hour the same as he pays the workers who have worked all day: we cannot give God freedom to do what God chooses. God must conform to our ideas of God. You may remember that when the workers who have worked all day grumble because the workers who worked only one hour receive the same wage as they (even though the day-long workers get what they had agreed on), the landowner replies, 'Friend, I am doing you no wrong; did you not agree with me for the usual daily wage? ...I choose to give to this last the same as I give to you. Am I not allowed to do what I choose with what belongs to me? Or are you envious because I am generous?' (Matthew 20:13-15) What we miss from that parable is that **we** may be that worker who only worked one hour; in which case God's grace toward us **saves** us. And I would be willing to bet that each of us, at one time or other in our life, has **been** that one-hour worker who gets more than she deserves; or we have been those very weeds in the field which God allows to grow along with the wheat. We are all dependent on the grace of God, the Great Allower.

I will finish with the words of another contemporary spiritual teacher and author, the Quaker Richard Foster. In his book on prayer, Foster writes: "The truth of the matter is, we all come to prayer with a tangled mass of motives—altruistic *and* selfish, merciful *and* hateful, loving *and* bitter. Frankly, this side of eternity we will *never* unravel the good from the bad, the pure from the impure. But what I have come to see is that God is big enough to receive us with all our mixture. We do not have to be bright, or pure, or filled with faith, or anything. That is what grace means, and not only are we *saved* by grace, we **live** by it as well." <sup>3</sup>

AMEN

<sup>1</sup> John 13:34; 15:12

<sup>2</sup> *The Parables of the Kingdom*, Eerdmans, 1985, 1998, pp. 101-102

<sup>3</sup> Richard J. Foster, *Prayer: Finding the Heart's True Home*, HarperCollins, 1992, p. 8