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Weed Be Gone

Prayer for Enlightenment

O Lord, we pray, that you speak in this place, in the calming of our minds and in the longing of our hearts, by the words of my lips, and in the thoughts we form.
Speak, Lord, for your servants listen. Amen.

Things are not always what they seem.

There was a story that made the rounds in Chicago a few years ago.
There was a certain prominent woman who had gained much publicity because of her faith.
She was known for long public prayers;
she was known for her care of and concern for children;
and she was known for her unabashed zeal for Sunday School.
Then she became known for the *Traffic Light Incident*.

A man was stopped, waiting for the light to turn green, she pulled up behind him.
When the light changed, he was distracted and he didn't budge.
This prominent, pious woman behind him honked her horn.
He did not move.
She honked again...longer this time.
He STILL did not move.
Then she began to pound on her steering wheel and blowing her horn non-stop.
Finally, just as the light turned yellow, the fellow in the front car started up and drove through the intersection.

Now she had to wait for the red-light to cycle to green...again.
She was beside herself.
She called out curses on his disappearing car...shaking her fist.
Mid-rant, she heard a tap on her car window.
She looked up to see the face of a police officer.
"Lady, you're under arrest," he said, "Get out of the car. Put your hands up."

He took her to the police station, had her finger-printed, photographed, and put her in a holding cell.
Hours passed.
Finally, the officer returned and unlocked the cell door.
He escorted her back to the Booking Desk.

"Sorry for the mistake, Lady," he said, "But I pulled up behind you as you were blowing your horn and cursing out the fellow in front of you. I noticed the stickers on your bumper. One read "Follow me to Sunday School."

The other, "What Would Jesus Do?"
So, naturally, I assumed you had stolen the car.

Things are not what they always seem.

This morning we continue with the parables in the middle of Matthew. I think the question that Jesus is answering...at least in part...is WHAT WILL THE KINGDOM OF HEAVEN BE LIKE?

What is the kingdom of Heaven like?
Things are not always what they seem.

It is clear from today's scripture that there will be a time of judgement.
There will be a time when the weeds will be cleaned out.
The church has believed this from her earliest days.

I think the early church took comfort in this idea as they hoped for a time of safety and justice...during a time of great persecution. The early church could only see this justice as the absence – or overthrow – of their enemies.

But Jesus has slightly different ideas about how judgement works!

If we look in Matthew 25 we see that an awful lot of folk who thought they were good seed—sheep in that story— turned out to be goats; that is, what today's parable would call weeds. And a lot of what the good people and the powers-that-be thought were weeds, turned out to be good wheat!

I read an interesting quote many years ago...I have forgotten who said this, but the quote has stayed with me.

When the day comes and I find myself in heaven, the first surprise will be that I am there at all.

Secondly, I will be surprised by who else is there.

Finally, I will be surprised at who is **not** there.

In this parable, note that we are not the ones pulling weeds.

They are cleaned out by the angels in the second part of the parable, or they are pulled out by the reapers; that's in the first part.

In both cases, we do not weed.

We are the slaves of the householder and the householder says don't pull them up because "in gathering the weeds you would uproot the wheat."

Matthew is clear that judgement is not our business.

We read in Matthew 7:

Do not judge, so that you may not be judged. ²For with the judgement you make you will be judged, and the measure you give will be the measure you get.

Judgement is not our business.

Here is the gospel for today... hear this... it is the gospel, the GOOD NEWS.

The kingdom of heaven is like a field with weeds and God says don't pull them out.

If we judge and pull out weeds we will damage the kingdom of heaven.

Judgement is not our business.

So what do we do if we spot a weed coming up right there in the third pew?

Well, we might ask, is it doing anything?

Is it a clear and present danger?

If the answer is NO, as it usually is, then leave it alone.

It might get converted and bear fruit.

After all, isn't that what happened to us?

A weed might even teach us something!

I learned some of my best lessons from people who, frankly, I often thought I would have been better off without!

So it's pretty risky for me to call people weeds and to try and uproot them.

So what do we do?

Our job is to keep this place (this church) safe for people...for all people.

We are to make it a place of growing and healing.

We are meant to bring tax collectors and sinners IN to the church so that they may meet the love of God in God's people, and be healed and transformed.

We love them all the more, while at the same time making sure we do not behave in the way they were behaving.

That's a challenge!

But it's real.

A few verses after this story, Peter asks Jesus a question.

²¹ Then Peter came and said to him, 'Lord, if another member of the church sins against me, how often should I forgive? As many as seven times?' ²² Jesus said to him, 'Not seven times, but, I tell you, seventy-seven times.'

Indeed...that is a challenge.

OK, let's go beyond theory.

I have a friend who is an ex-convict.
She was convicted of attempted murder...yep...attempted murder.

Alice lived in Rockford.
One day she got mad at her husband and shot him...not once...not twice...but FIVE times.
Today Alice will tell you, she is thankful that he lived.
Now if you know anything about these types of relationships, you know there is a LONG back story into which we will not go this morning.

So my friend Alice got mad and shot her husband at close range.
The police were called, Alice was arrested and jailed.
As the court processes ground along, Alice started getting visits from the local police chaplain, Bart. Bart and Alice connected.

Once Alice was convicted, she was imprisoned for 8-years down in southern Illinois. Chaplain Bart would regularly make the 4-hour drive to go and visit Alice.

Long story short, Alice turned her life around in prison...actually, she let God turn her life around.

When Alice was released from prison. Nobody wanted anything to do with her...she was a weed. She was a convicted felon...with a violent past. Nobody wanted anything to do with her. Nobody except Chaplain Bart.

He found her temporary work and housing with the Salvation Army. I suspect that he had to be very convincing for this to happen. Alice says, the Salvation Army would only give her temporary work for 90-days. At the end of 90-days, they would hire her again for an additional 90-days. This continued for several years, until they decided to hire Alice permanently.

Gradually, slowly, Alice rebuilt the tatters of her life with lots of prayer, help from God, and help from Chaplain Bart. BTW, he and his family often included her in their lives, and over time she became one of the family.

Alice had been a weed.
Not just any weed, but a noxious weed.

Slowly, Alice became less noxious...and finally became she began to bear fruit.

Because of her experience, she can connect with those who are jailed. I have made some jail visits with Alice. Our visits were mostly with young men jailed because of multiple arrests around drug and alcohol issues.

Alice would often begin our times with these young inmates by saying, "Boys, this place is a country club compared to where I have been."

Once they realized that she shared a similar history and offered them new life...they would begin to listen to her.

This weed was now producing fruit.

The point being, that we do not weed.

That's our instinct, but the Gospel says don't uproot the weeds, because we will also uproot the wheat.

The thing is that weeds are part of the kingdom to the very end.

And we are to love them like we love the tax collectors and sinners.

But I still struggle with the master's instructions to the servants that they are not to get involved with separating the wheat from the weeds until that final harvest.

It seems that the we could actually do harm to the new life Jesus is bringing into the world if we put on our garden gloves and head out with our bottles of Round-Up aimed and ready, confident that we know what is useful to God and what is not.

Instead, I hear Jesus saying: Leave it me. Wait for the time I have set....

Things are not always what they seem.

It's hard to wait. And it's hard to understand - especially when we see such terrible things happening:

- Drive-by shootings
- Dear ones become ill & die
- People without food or water or homes
- The list could go on and on...

Of course, we are to resist evil - in ourselves and in others.

We are called to pray to God that God will take care of it, as we do what we can.

We ARE to do good ins place of evil...

- to plant instead of to pluck up
- to bless instead of curse
- to praise instead of criticize
- to help instead of stand off
- to love instead of hate
- to forgive instead of resent
- to tell truth instead of lies.

Why DOES God allow weeds in this field?

I stewed on this over the past week. I like the landowner gaining as he harvests and has both crop and kindling...but this waiting for the harvest to pull weeds is hard for me. I don't like to wait.

Then I remembered something that changed my mind.
This memory made me thankful that God waits to pull weeds.

I remembered that sometimes I am a weed.

I know that I've been a weed in the past - things I have done or failed to do that were more weed than wheat.

In fact, at one time in my life, my church home considered me too weedy...and weeded me out.

And knowing that - and knowing what God has done and can do with weeds like me - when I let God; maybe it IS good to have the weeding put off to the end!

Things aren't always what they seem.

There is almost no explaining these things -
but there is a truth -
there is a substance to it -
that can be touched and experienced.

That truth is a saving truth, a healing truth, a truth that can only be found in that crazy mixed-up field where God plants his seed among the weeds.

That truth is that God is patient and merciful and full of grace...even to a weed like me.

Big sigh.... it's hard, isn't it!?
Did you expect to be hearing a sermon like this? I didn't expect to preach this.

But it is good news.
Because even at my most weedy, it means that the Kingdom of Heaven, and the church that seeks to be like the Kingdom of Heaven, will not abandon me.

God says, "I will never leave you nor forsake you."
That is also the kind of people we are meant to be.

Thanks be to God.
Amen.