

Sunday, May 21, 2017

What To Do...The Weeds Are Back Again!"

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Matthew 13: 24-30, 36-43

When I had the choice of parables for sermon topics, it did not take much thinking on my part to select one about weeds. As I said "the weeds are back again!" However, unlike the servants in today's parable, I have gone ahead and tried once again to rid my garden and pasture of the Class B noxious weed, the yellow archangel. That is a misnomer; it is definitely not angelic. It has spread over the years despite my best attempts to get rid of it. I have sprayed it, dug it up and put it in plastic bags and have burned it. None of my actions have done any more than slow it down for a few weeks. Ah, but there is hope: I am going to try tarping and mulching. I may be able to suffocate the stuff.

In today's parable, the wheat fields are infected with tares, a plant that looks so much like the wheat that it cannot be removed during the growing season. Also, the tares roots become entwined in the wheat so the tares cannot be removed from the wheat without damaging it. Tares are not any more welcome than my yellow archangel. It is slightly poisonous and causes dizziness and has narcotic effects. Not to mention it has a bitter taste. The tares were used in Biblical times by enemies to ruin wheat crops.

All of these facts are those that would have been well known by the persons who heard Jesus' parable. Jesus was a master at storytelling and he understood the qualities of a good parable. He made use of everyday examples with which people could readily identify. Jesus created interest in his larger message by getting the listeners' attention. He created a word picture that would make a truth more concrete. His parables would begin with an illustration with the here and now in order to get to the there and then. In this case he started with growing crops and that was something the listeners would understand. By the end of the story he led them to understand a larger life lesson about where they ought to be.

Another value to a parable is the ability of any of us to discover a truth for ourselves. For most of us if we discover a truth as it applies to our lives we are more likely to change our behavior and not to forget the object lesson. The parable can also have the opposite effect: it can conceal a truth for those who are too blinded by prejudices to see beyond them.

There are some sharp contrasts in this parable that show up in Jesus' explanation of the parable to his disciples. He states that in the end times, all persons whose actions are sinful and all evildoers will be cast into the "furnace of fire." The only ones left to go into the kingdom will be those who are righteous. Taken just as it is written, it is not very hopeful as we all have sinful natures. One commentary suggests that those things that cause us to be sinful will be burned away. If we consider our sins as stumbling blocks, then we could say that the stumbling blocks will be removed. Following that line of reasoning, remember what Jesus once said to Peter, "Get behind me, Satan! You are a stumbling block to me, for you are setting your mind not on divine things but on human things." But in spite of Peter's many failings, Jesus did not

give up on him. In fact he trusted him to go on to be the leader and developer of the early church.

The ultimate weeding job is not our job. In the church, this lesson points to our responsibility not to pass judgement on others nor to consider some people insiders (the wheat) and others as outsiders (the tares). This warning not to pass judgement is not confined to the church; obviously it is meant to apply to all of our dealings with others. After all, we live in an imperfect world and no human effort will be able to eradicate that. Just knowing that should be humbling and bring us up short when we hasten to judge others for just that, being others. I hasten back to the parable. The tares were indistinguishable from the wheat and the roots became entwined with the wheat. Prematurely pulling up the “tares” may have resulted in pulling up the good plants, the wheat. Making hasty judgements about those whom we meet more often than not causes damaging results. In newscasts we see all too often the results of making rash judgements. Kids who have been bullied, committing suicide. Radical religious or political leaders exterminating innocent people just because they do not follow a narrow set of “acceptable beliefs.” Then closer to home we might all squirm for judgements we have passed upon other people, often for traits we do not admire in ourselves.

In a recent Courier Herald Church Corner article, Jim Thoburn did a good job of illustrating these ideas, borrowing from the musical, “Beauty and the Beast.” I would like to read a short portion of that.

My wife and I recently watched the live movie version of “Beauty and the Beast.” It is indeed a “a tale as old as time.”

The Beast, who was previous to his enchantment a self-centered self-indulgent so and so, has under a spell, become his frightening ignoble self. It is not pretty. His castle is dark and his heart as well.

He is a person of shadows and black scowls and jowls, seemingly without an ounce of redeemable qualities. Then along comes Belle. She is pure-hearted and honest, without an ounce of guile within her. Belle eventually looks beyond the Beast’s repulsiveness-both physically and in his character. She sees him for what he can become and for what he has always meant to be. She sees nobility rather than somber grimness. In a sense Belle loves the Beast into the princeliness always intended for him. He would have died within his Beastliness, never experiencing life as it was intended for him, if Belle had not saved him with her love.

This short summary of the article made me rethink something I said about my battle with the yellow archangel. Remember I said that not any of my actions to get rid of the yellow archangel have done much more than slow it down. When I put cardboard over the weeds and add some compost over the top, the weeds will decompose and be transformed into compost as well. Something good can come from trying a method that is transformative rather than destructive.

Recently in a staff meeting, Erin Luchi made an astute observation. She said that when God looks down on us, we all look the same, like a sea of heads, if you will. Compare that to our more limited view of looking at a person in full profile, one at a time. God is not concerned with all of the minute details of our appearance; instead, God is looking at the big picture. Separating members of the covenant community is God's business and not ours. If we believe in the promises of forgiveness given as a result of Christ's death and resurrection, then we can be comforted that we will not be rooted out any more than Peter was in Jesus' time. That is not only a comfort, it is a challenge.

Let's give each other the benefit of the doubt; Jesus did and still does.

Let us Pray.