

San Lorenzo Community Church, United Church of Christ

**Sermon: Blooms and Weeds**

Preached by Rev. Annette J. Cook

Sunday, July 23, 2017

**A reading from the Gospel of Matthew 13:24-30, 36-43**

<sup>24</sup> Jesus told them another parable: "The kingdom of heaven is like a man who sowed good seed in his field. <sup>25</sup> But while everyone was sleeping, his enemy came and sowed weeds among the wheat, and went away. <sup>26</sup> When the wheat sprouted and formed heads, then the weeds also appeared.

<sup>27</sup> "The owner's servants came to him and said, 'Sir, didn't you sow good seed in your field? Where then did the weeds come from?'

<sup>28</sup> "'An enemy did this,' he replied.

"The servants asked him, 'Do you want us to go and pull them up?'

<sup>29</sup> "'No,' he answered, 'because while you are pulling the weeds, you may uproot the wheat with them. <sup>30</sup> Let both grow together until the harvest. At that time I will tell the harvesters: First collect the weeds and tie them in bundles to be burned; then gather the wheat and bring it into my barn.'"

<sup>36</sup> Then he left the crowd and went into the house. His disciples came to him and said, "Explain to us the parable of the weeds in the field."

<sup>37</sup> He answered, "The one who sowed the good seed is the Son of Man. <sup>38</sup> The field is the world, and the good seed stands for the people of the kingdom. The weeds are the people of the evil one, <sup>39</sup> and the enemy who sows them is the devil. The harvest is the end of the age, and the harvesters are angels.

<sup>40</sup> "As the weeds are pulled up and burned in the fire, so it will be at the end of the age. <sup>41</sup> The Son of Man will send out his angels, and they will weed out of his kingdom everything that causes sin and all who do evil. <sup>42</sup> They will throw them into the blazing furnace, where there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth. <sup>43</sup> Then the righteous will shine like the sun in the kingdom of their Father. Whoever has ears, let them hear.

**This ends the reading from the Gospel of Matthew. Thanks be to God.**

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Have you noticed how often people try to divide the world into, well, two kinds of people.

Mark Twain said, *“There are basically two types of people. People who accomplish things and people who claim to have accomplished things. The first group is less crowded.”* Amen to that.

A man named James Thorpe said – *“The world is divided into two types of people: those who love to talk, and those who have to listen.”* Ooh, I wonder which one I am.

I like this from Joy Mills, *“There are two kinds of people in the world: the Givers and the Takers. The difference between the two is that the Takers eat well, and the Givers sleep well at night.”* Ouch.

Of course, good old Dear Abby weighed in on this: *“There are two kinds of people in the world – those who walk into a room and say, ‘There you are!’ – and those who say, ‘Here I am!’”*

And finally, we have humorous writer Robert Benchley’s *Law of Distinction*, *“There are two kinds of people in the world, those who believe there are two kinds of people in the world and those who don’t.*

In today’s gospel lesson, we are dealing with people who believe there are two kinds of people in the world, the wheat and the weeds, the good and the bad, the righteous and the evil.

And these people who believe in two kinds of people also believe, with all their hearts, that not only are they themselves the wheat, the good people, the righteous ones; they also believe that they know who the weeds, the bad people, the evil ones are. And what is more, they apparently believe that it is their job, their responsibility, their holy obligation to rid the world of the weeds. And to all this, God says NO! God says, *“Let them live together.”*

When I was in seminary training to become a pastor, my ideal congregation was The Church of Our Savior’s in Washington, DC. Among my peers and friends, that congregation was the ideal, the inspiration, the model to which we aspired. It was a congregation of about 200 people who renewed their spiritual vows each year. Their vows were to tithe 10% of their income to the church, attend Bible study every week, pray every day, and be politically active for the poor every week. And they signed on the dotted line every year. These people were committed. I wanted a church like that.

I kept thinking that that was my ideal community, an ideal example of being the church. But not anymore. Maybe I have matured and maybe I have expanded my faith view. But now, I want a community that is wide open to *all* people, including the uncommitted, the half committed, the lukewarm, the confused, the puzzled, the materialists, the messed up; the addicted, the afflicted: we are all welcome here. I want weeds *and* wheat in our church and besides, I am *no longer sure* which is which and who is who, as I used to be when I was younger.

There have been times when I have seen people decide they can’t or shouldn’t take communion. They don’t feel worthy enough, pious enough, prayerful enough, good enough. And I remember during a visit to a church on Sunday, the pastor told the congregation that only members could take communion, only those who had been saved could take communion. And I remember thinking then and there that, when I was a pastor, our communion table would always be open to everyone. If you are wheat, come share communion. If you are weeds, come share communion. If you

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are half and half, come share communion. And that's what we have here -- *All* the doors into this church are to be wide open for all kinds of people, for God's kinds of people.

Let them grow together. It's a gentle rebuke to the ones who try to go around naming what represents a weed and what doesn't, a rebuke to the one who tries to tell the Gardener what belongs in the field and what doesn't.

Imagine how different our world — even our churches would be — if every time we saw something that we didn't think belonged, every time we perceived a weed among the wheat, we took the Gardener's attitude rather than the servant's. Let those that don't belong to each other grow together. Let those who don't fit into each other's neat fields of categories grow together. Let the wheat and the weeds grow together.

Notice that Jesus flatly says "no" to the idea of tearing out weeds, condemning the weeds, excommunicating or ostracizing the weeds. Jesus says, "Forgive them to grow together until the harvest." The word in Greek is *aphete*. It may be translated as "permit," "allow," or "let," but its most frequent meaning is "forgive." The word occurs 156 times in the New Testament. About a third of them are regularly translated as "forgive," and probably more should be. Evil is to be dealt with through letting it be, permitting it, forgiving it. Or, as the Apostle Paul has said, "Do not be overcome by evil, but overcome evil with good."

Do you remember the story of Oskar Schindler, the German industrialist, who saved over a thousand Polish Jews from the concentration camps in World War II? One of the people he saved said of him, 'He was our father, our mother, our only hope. He never let us down.' Yet many who saw the film *Schindler's List* were surprised, if not quite put off, by his vices. He was a man subject to all the human vices.

Schindler was no saint. He was riddled with contradictions. Unfaithful to his wife, he certainly knew how to enjoy the so-called good life—cigars, drink, women. He was a Roman Catholic, but in name only. He was a member of the Nazi party, and his avowed aim was to end the war with two trunks full of money. He exploited the Jews as a source of cheap labor.

But there was another and better side to him, and in spite of his lapses, he always returned to that better side. There was basic goodness about him. As the war went on he became appalled at the horrors of 'the final solution' and at considerable personal risk (he was arrested twice), he protected his workers from the death camps.

Schindler was a mere human being; there was goodness in him, but that goodness was seriously flawed. He was both wheat and weeds. The divided nature of Schindler, and the divided nature of each of us, is something this parable reveals. All of us are wheat and weeds—at one and the same time both sinner and righteous.

The psychologist, Carl Jung, talked about our personalities having a 'shadow' side which we must somehow learn to recognize and befriend. However, no matter how you want to express it, we cannot escape the truth that evil isn't all about what's outside ourselves. Weeds are not just somebody else's problem; we are also weeds. Which is what makes this parable so gripping.

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This parable, out of all of the stories of Jesus, is inherently troublesome because it talks of the end of times – what happens when we die? What happens when we all die? When happens at the end of the world as we know it? And those last few sentences when Jesus starts talking about burning those weeds and it becomes a metaphor for the fires of hell and judgment. He says “They will throw them into the blazing furnace, where there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth.” And all of a sudden, the whole parable has been reset.

Way too many sermons have used the fires of hell to judge one and all. It is right here in this interpretation that Christians get such a bad name for ourselves because we jump into the role of judge, choosing to condemn others, as if we have the wisdom and authority to stoke the fire and throw in the weeds.

But, to me, I think the generations of well-meaning preachers and church folk have missed the point. This is not a promise of judgment at the last days. This story is a promise of harvest. This is a promise of growth. God is more concerned with everything growing than having just the right things grow. It is only our own hubris to read a story about punishment into this parable.

Because this is a story of harvest and harvest is all about feeding people. It’s about sustenance. It is about bounty and abundance. Harvests bring together communities. Harvests are hard-work and getting to the harvest takes a long time, to be sure, but the harvest is to be celebrated.

When the harvest arrives, we are not concerned with the weeds any more. We are thrilled at the bounty and abundance springing from the land. We are thinking about putting up food for the lean months. We are excited about a season’s work bringing forth fruit. When the harvest arrives, weeds are a concern only for those who can’t see the joy of the harvest.

This duality of good versus evil, us versus them, wheat versus weeds does not serve the Kingdom of God. There is no “us versus them” in the Kingdom of God.

One of the best Christians I've ever known was a Roman Catholic who cursed and smoked and drank had a heart as big as the Gulf of Mexico. She was not the kind of person you would find serving punch in the church fellowship hall. But she started the shelter movement for the homeless in Atlanta. I remember when she stopped a knife fight at the night shelter by walking calmly between two men and saying, "You guys know better than this." And that was the end of that.

When one of our homeless friends died on the street, she claimed his body, paid for the cremation, and waited for someone -- friend or family -- to come. No one ever came. She drove around for weeks with his ashes in the backseat of her car. Finally, she asked the rector of a downtown Episcopal church if the ashes could be placed in the church's memorial garden. "Our policies will allow only the remains of relatives to be placed here," the priest told her.

"Perfect," she said. "Jesse was my brother."

We are one people. We are all in the same garden. Planted in the same soil that we all might grow in love. That we all might harvest love, share love, overcome evil with love. May we grow together.

Amen.