

Living in the Messy Middle

By: Meagan McLaughlin

July 19, 2020. Any gardener knows that weeds are a never-ending challenge. Pastor Meagan preaches today on Jesus' parable of the weeds among the wheat, and how our world and our lives are a lot like the field in the story.

Readings: [Isaiah 44:6-8](#), [Romans 8:12-25](#), [Matthew 13:24-30, 36-43](#)

*** Transcript ***

In our gospel today, Jesus takes his parable about the sower and the seed from last week and he extends it, saying that these gardens that have so many weeds growing in them are like the Kingdom of Heaven. And as much as I love gardens, I am not a very skilled gardener, so my first reaction to hearing this image quite honestly is, “Ugh!” Any gardener knows weeds are a never-ending challenge. This spring, it seemed like every time we thought we had gotten all of the dandelions up, we would turn around and there would be half a dozen more. And of course dandelions aren’t ones that you can just grab with your hand and pull up easily. It takes some work with a weed puller to get at the roots. And even so, often at least part of it will remain tightly entrenched in the soil. Or more seeds, unseen in the earth, are preparing themselves to sprout, leaving the possibility that another dandelion will pop up where the last one lay.

And being new to St Louis, and tending new gardens, there are of course many things growing in our yard with which we are not yet familiar. Often, as a new plant would sprout, one of us would say to the other, “Is that a plant or a weed?” And as often as not, the other would say, “Beats me.” We've learned a lot by uploading photos to online plant identification apps, or posting pictures on Facebook and asking friends what they thought. But we've been left with a certain amount of guesswork, pulling out what we believed to be weeds, and leaving what we weren't sure of. In the front yard, we had several small lily flowers pop up in just random places. They bloomed beautifully and then they died, leaving green leaves and a brown, crusty stem behind in the midst of the grass. I initially advocated to leave them where they grew. But once the flowers died, they provided far more of a challenge as Karen would attempt to mow around them than they offered in beauty. So I relented, and Karen took them out. “Are they plants or weeds?” “Beats me.”

And the process of weeding, as we all know, is an ongoing one, requiring patient, hard work — and it is as much about tending the plants and flowers as it is about removing the weeds. I learned long ago to take it in blocks, addressing one section, then another, then another, of the garden beds. Attempts to remove all the weeds at once have never ended well. So, this parable of the weeds in the wheat as the Kingdom of Heaven definitely gives me pause. But the more I think about it, the more it resonates. Because in spite of my initial “ugh” reaction to this image, truth be told, this world, and our lives, are an awful lot like the field in Jesus’ parable — not clean and neat, yielding only wheat and no weeds, but a mix of wheat, weeds, and things we can’t even identify.

I remember as a teenager getting into an argument with one of my brothers, probably about something really silly, and feeling desperate for him to know that I was right. And the more we got into it, the more my voice went up — and the more I tried to make myself tall (a futile effort at any time). And my brother said, “You’re really mad about this!” And in the midst of my unawareness, I replied of course, “No, I’m not.” “Oh yeah, you are.” “No, I’m not!” “Uh huh!” “No I’m not! Stop telling me I’m angry! You’re just wrong!” I was so frustrated and angry. It was happening right inside me, and yet I couldn’t

see it. Has anyone else ever had that happen? Where something was going on around you, or with another person, or inside you, and you just couldn't figure it out?

Over the years, getting to know myself, understanding how I am feeling or what I am doing, and what is helpful and what is not, what is wheat and what is weed if you will, has been a process — much like the ongoing process of weeding a garden. Because being human is not a clean, neat, clear venture, but really super complicated at times. Paul describes it in a lot of different ways, today using the image of labor pains to describe the challenges of living through this process of becoming, of finding our way when so many things can distract and block us from seeing and doing God's will in the world. In Luther's language, we are all sinner and saint. We all have weeds and wheat. I think of it as living through a really messy middle, certainly in process, but not there yet.

The good news in all of this is, God knows this. And as it tells us in Isaiah today, no matter what, we belong to God. We have been adopted, *chosen*, to be God's children, beloved. And from "of old," Isaiah says, God has told us that only God is God. In other words, in all this messiness, of good and evil, saint and sinner, God is ultimately in charge. We are not. We, along with all of creation, are in process, family of faith. And God is with us in that. God will be faithful right up to the end. And we can have hope that in the end, God will heal all wounds, remove all evil, leaving only the wheat that is growing along the way. Jesus' parable tells us this too. He says it is not up to us to pull out all of those pesky weeds and create a perfect garden. It's enough for us to live what we call the theology of the cross — we name the wheat and the weeds, the good and the evil that we see, as best we can. We do what we can with God's help to nurture the good, in ourselves and in others.

C. T. Vivian and Congressman John Lewis, who had been working for decades for civil rights and racial justice, against the evils of racism and oppression, know this. Last year Congressman Lewis said, "Do not get lost in a sea of despair. Be hopeful. Be optimistic. Our struggle is not the struggle of a day, a week, a month, a year. It is the struggle of a lifetime. Never be afraid to get in some good trouble," said congressman John Lewis. And we too can do this, trusting that in the end, only God will be able to sort it all out. Twelve Step spiritual wisdom tells us this too — it is our job to listen, to tend, to notice, and to name, and to ask God for help. But removing the weeds of our lives is up to God and not ours.

Jesus tells his followers that in the end, the weeds will be cast into the fire, conjuring up perhaps images of the devil and those overcome by sin, burning in hell. Interestingly, overwhelmingly in scriptures, fire is very sacred. Fire lets Moses know that he should pay attention, that something is happening that he needs to learn about. Fire guides the Israelites in the desert by night. And tongues of fire come upon the disciples at Pentecost, purifying them and empowering them for the work that they have ahead.

We all tend to resist the refiner's fire. Moses comes close to the bush, but he's shaking in his boots. Israelites get weary and frustrated because the end isn't coming soon enough. The disciples go out after having been blessed by fire, and the people notice their transformation and question it, because of its power. We do this too, when we resist facing the realities of racism and other evils, and see how we ourselves have been blind and complicit with systemic oppressions in this world. Or when we are called out for something we aren't aware that we were doing, we can resist that. Or when we in shame realize something of our own sinfulness, our own being, to change. Because being transformed isn't comfortable, is it? Recognizing the weeds in us isn't comfortable. Living in the messy middle is hard. And sometimes all we want is for this process we are living in to be over. "Is it wheat or weeds?" "Beats me."

We can be encouraged by Isaiah's words that God's promises are from the beginning, and they stretch all the way to the end. Jesus promised that God is not going to abandon us to be overcome by the weeds, even though it may seem that way at times. It's not our job to pull all those weeds out — thank goodness! Because that is a job that is beyond us. It is enough that we tend our gardens as best we can, ask God for help, and trust in God to sort it all out.

Thanks be to God.

*** Keywords ***

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