

Sunday July 23rd, 2017

Proper 11

PRAYER: Gracious God, you have searched us and known us. You, indeed, discern our thoughts from afar. You lead us in the way everlasting as we gather to bless you for your bountiful mercy, for the compassion and care you extend to us. You surround us with a mantle that protects us from danger; our breastplate is your righteousness fulfilled in Christ Jesus. You are our shield and defender, our hope and our comfort. We give you all praise as we assemble in Christ's name. Amen.

PRAYER OF CONFESSION: We confess, O God that our lives are a mixture of weeds and good seeds. The weeds choke us and limit our will to respond. We admire the good seeds and want to nourish them. When the harvest comes, we know that the good seed will be kept and all else will be judged unfit for your realm. Christ have mercy upon us as we learn of your will. Give us guidance and determination as we obey your command. Forgive our misplaced allegiance when we settle for weeds. May we broadcast the landscape with the good seed of your Word.

WORDS OF ASSURANCE: The Apostle Paul writes of our assurance when he says: "We know that the whole creation has been groaning in labour pain until now; and not only the creation, but we ourselves, who have the first fruits of the Spirit, groan inwardly while we wait for adoption, the redemption of our bodies. For in hope we were saved."

STEWARDSHIP: As wheat is gathered into the barns, so the fruits of our labours are brought into God's house. Through the purging fire of God's judgment, our gifts are rendered acceptable to enter God's kingdom. Let us pray that these gifts we now present may be worthy and that Jesus Christ, the bread of life, may nourish others.

PASTORAL PRAYER: O Spirit of power, you are so patient and kind. You do not insist upon your own way but call us to it, if we dare. You bear all things, believe all things, hope all things, and endure all things. And your promise has come to us, that we, too, can bear all things, believe all things, hope all things, and endure all things, if only we will pray.

What a strange and mysterious thing is prayer! Perhaps it is not a thing at all, but a verb-not a way of life, but the living of a way of life. Like Paul, we do not know how to live as we ought. But, like Paul, we are assured that you will help us. You will not only help us find appropriate words and postures for addressing you, but you will give us the fullness of your presence.

How we want you to be with us, Holy Spirit! You surround us, fill us, abide with us, turn us around, and carry us into directions never taken. Your presence takes us not by storm but by sights too deep for words. You do not make demands from afar, but you place yourself between us, that our loving of others might be a loving of you and that our failure in loving others might be a failure to love you.

How often we fail to love, O Holy Spirit! We who have been rejected turn our backs on outcasts; we who have been betrayed walk away from friends; we who have fled shut doors on refugees; we who have stood alone have no patience with rebels.

Reason with our minds, Spirit! Argue with our souls! Show us our lives in your mirror, and then reveal to us a vision of our living the life of prayer! Help us to pray as we ought; hear us and answer us with sighs too deep for words!

Sunday July 23rd, 2017

Proper 11

Matthew 13:24-30, 36-43

“Growing Like a Weed.”

There was a very disturbing incident a few years ago, aboard a British Airways flight from Johannesburg South Africa, heading to England. It seems a wealthy, middle-aged, white woman, upon boarding, discovered she was sitting next to a black gentleman. This woman immediately called the cabin crew attendant over to complain about the seating arrangement. “What seems to be the problem, madam?” asked the attendant.

“Can’t you see?” The woman snapped loudly. “You’ve seated me next to a kaffir. (This is, a South African slur indicating a black man.) I can’t possibly sit next to this disgusting man. Please find me another seat!” “Please calm down, madam,” the attendant replied. “I believe the economy section is full today, but I’ll check to see if we have any upgraded seats available in club or first class.”

The woman struck a snooty pose, looking condescendingly at the very embarrassed black man beside her (not to mention many of the outraged passengers who heard all this). A few minutes later, the cabin attendant returned with good news. “Madam, as I suspected, our economy section is full. I’ve spoken to the cabin services director, and business class is also full. However, we do have one seat available in first class.

The woman gave the people around her a smug grin. The flight attendant continued, “Please realize, it is most extraordinary to make this kind of upgrade, and I have to have had to get special permission from the captain. But, given the extreme circumstances, the captain felt it was outrageous that someone should be forced to sit next to such a disgusting person.”

With that, the attendant turned to the black man and said, “Sir, if you’d like to get your things, I have your first-class seat ready for you.” As the man got up and walked to the front of the plane, the surrounding passengers gave him a standing ovation. (Hot Illustrations for Youth Talks 4, pg. 150) I am so glad the crew of that plane got it right. Everyone, including the other passengers knew who the truly disgusting person was.

People who behave, and have attitudes like this woman, are like weeds in society. Everything about them looks good; but there is something sinister in their hearts, that steals the common good, and crowds out the positive aspects of others around them. Everyone knows weeds are not valuable. They are to all farmers and gardeners, a kind of herbicidal parasite. Most weeds are aggressive, out growing other plants, and keeping the valuable plants from reaching their full potential, which is to flower or produce fruit.

Often, it takes a trained eye to know if a plant is, or is not a weed. And as all gardeners know, occasionally, there appears a weed that is so close in appearance to a valued plant, that removing it causes us doubt. What if it is really a good plant? In our modern society, we are becoming more and more removed from the lessons of gardening. We may grow some flowers, and a few vegetables, but most of our food comes from large farms, that employ modern chemicals and equipment for weed control.

Sunday July 23rd, 2017

Proper 11

Today in gardening, the buzz word is organic, but we might forget that in Jesus' day, everything was organic. By this, I mean that there were no herbicides, and any weed control in a crop had to be done by hand. The closest thing to farm equipment people had, was perhaps an ox that pulled the plow, or harvest wagons. The story Jesus tells, would have grabbed his audience's attention. Every year, the process of hand weeding, and harvesting by hand, was a common sight, all through the Middle East.

Like in all agriculture, in Jesus' story, weeds appeared among the wheat crop. However, there is a twist in Jesus' story that grabs our attention. The source of the wheat crop is clear enough; the farmer planted good seed in the hopes of getting a good crop. Yet, when weeds appeared, the source of the weeds was not the result of random seeds blowing in by wind, or dropped by birds, or perhaps left from the previous year.

We know the situation was unusual because the servants seemed baffled by it. They expressed great concern. It made no sense to the servants. They knew from experience, the diligence of this particular farmer, to select and sow only good seed. The servants knew, as did Jesus' audience, that it was a frivolous waste of time not to select good seed to plant. Without good seed, yields would suffer, and profits would diminish.

The quantity, and particular kind of weed mentioned in the parable, also indicates that this was a deliberate act of sabotage. "An enemy has done it!" the farmer exclaims. Someone hated the farmer so much, and wanted to hurt him so bad, that he deliberately came, likely at night, and sowed weed seeds. Actually these were a specific kind of weed in the original Greek text, called "tares". Tares are, in the Middle East, a very common type of wild grass that looks very much like wheat, at least in the early stages of growth.

Often, wheat and tares look so similar, that only when the wheat develops grain heads, can you see the difference. This is what happened here. The wheat and tares grew together in the field, and only as the grain heads began to develop, was the extent of the infiltration obvious. The farmer's servants wanted to do, what many farmers would do in Jesus' day, and go in and pull out the weeds, giving the wheat a better opportunity.

The farmer says "No! Leave them be until the harvest, when the wheat and tares can be properly sorted out." The reasons for this are clear. This was no ordinary infestation of tares. The weeds were more plentiful than they would be naturally. Also, this is further along in the wheat's development, and by now the tares and wheat have roots that intertwine with each other. If you were to pull up the tares, you would also pull up the valuable wheat plants, damaging the field's yield.

It seems like a simple, yet elegant story; but something interesting now transpires. Jesus goes on to tell some other parables about the mustard seed and yeast. Then he says in verse 35, "I will speak to you in parables. I will explain mysteries hidden since the creation of the world." Then we read that Jesus leaves the crowd outside, and goes into a house. The setting is important, because we find ourselves, away from the crowds, where the disciples have opportunity to express their frustration at Jesus' teaching.

Sunday July 23rd, 2017

Proper 11

They heard the parable of the wheat and tares, and now call on the promise of Jesus to explain the mystery. "Please explain the story of the weeds in the field." Without having read the verses that follow, I might say, "Yes, please! Explain this parable to me." Now I must confess, that the explanation that follows, is devastating. I have heard sermons, and read articles on this passage, that seem to link it with the parable of the sower.

I am, of course, talking about the famous parable, about how the sower goes out and sows seed, representing the word of God. The seed falls on different soils resulting in different outcomes for the seeds. It is an expected connection between these two parables, because of the common elements in both parables of: sowing, seed, and farmers, but the parables actually stand alone. Only the fact that both parables speak about the Kingdom of God, is there really any connection.

The parable before us today, is not about spreading the Word of God. It is actually a warning, about the impending judgment coming against this world, and more specifically to those of us who claim to be a part of the Kingdom of God. In Jesus' parable, he is the farmer who sows the good seed; meaning those who have decided and are committed to following him. The good seed, therefore, are the redeemed of the Lord.

Stating the obvious then; followers of Christ, the good seed, live in the world. The enemy is the devil, who plants people who belong to him, among the good seed. The harvest is the end of the world, and the harvesters are the angels. The good seed that became fruitful, and thus valuable, will be collected and brought into God's house. The bad seed, that became weeds, will face eternal punishment.

So, that's the parable. The Kingdom of God is among us, and in us, but the enemy seeks to harm us and foil our productivity; namely producing fruit. It really is straight forward, although it is also quite frightening, at least to the weeds. Having unpacked this parable for us; Jesus really only leaves one question left to answer, but it is the most significant question. Are you good seed or bad seed? Are you wheat or tares?

How do we know? Well, Jesus helps us there, when he says in verse 41, "I, the Son of Man, will send my angels, and they will remove from my kingdom everything that causes sin and all who do evil." It would seem then, that weeds are people who cause sin and do evil. Jesus is not saying everyone who sins, because we all sin and he forgives us. What he is saying, is that bad seed, are people who create situations that generate sin or evil.

Everyone knows there is evil in this world. It is quite obvious to us. I came across something interesting in Scott Peck's book, *People of the Lie* (p.41). Dr. Peck writes, "It is a strange thing. Dozens of times I have been asked by patients or acquaintances: 'Dr. Peck, why is there evil in the world?' Yet no one has ever asked me in all these years: 'Why is there good in the world?' It is as if we automatically assume this is a naturally good world that has somehow been contaminated by evil."

We know Jesus' parable to be true. The enemy has spread bad seed around. Evil is all about opposing life. It is, in fact, about killing.

Sunday July 23rd, 2017

Proper 11

It is about the deliberate, and yet unnecessary, destroying of someone's life or the life of a group of persons; and not just physical life, but our psychological and spiritual lives as well. The bad seed is all around us, just like crab grass in the spring. They are everywhere. Jesus is suggesting, by implication, that the bad seed is in: our neighbourhoods, our places of work, our schools, our homes, and yes even the church.

The scary part about evil is how subtle it is. Yes, there are overt acts of evil, but for the most part, evil works its death in quiet, unassuming ways. That is why Jesus describes people who do evil as weeds. Weeds look like the good wheat. Weeds sound good, look right, and are in the right places, like churches. Looking at a weed, you might never know their true nature; that is until the fruit of the wheat begins to appear.

As the good seed begins to make a positive difference in the world, the bad seed rises up to choke out the life. As I said, the tools of evil are often very subtle but never the less, quite devastating. Weeds often demand all the benefits of the good seed, without returning anything of value. Weeds care only about what makes the situation better for them, or more comfortable for them. Weeds criticize others and ministries, not to make things better, but to tear people down.

Weeds drain life from other people, often causing us, like the servants in the story, to seek ways to remove them from our: neighbourhoods, places of work and even from churches. Weeds are also very good at recruiting, even good people, into their life destroying plans; claiming a moral imperative, or to be seeking the best for all involved. Weeds like to control, manipulate and generally make people miserable.

The weeds will be among us for our whole lives. They will not advertise themselves as such, nor will they make clear their true motives. They may not even be clear themselves about why they do what they do. The next question is; what we do in response. We already know we are not permitted to rid ourselves of the weeds by ripping them out. To do so, might harm us, or others, who are good seed.

We are perhaps, also adverse to judge the weeds, because Jesus told us in Matthew 7, not to judge lest we be judged. However, Jesus was not implying that you can never judge. There are clearly times when some sort of judgment is justified. What, I believe he was saying is we just have to be very careful about it. We cannot afford to flounder around as individuals or as a community, while the weeds threaten all that is good.

J. R. R. Tolkien wrote in *The Return of the Kings*, "It is not our part to master all the tides of the world, but to do what is in us for the succor of those years wherein we are set, uprooting the evil in the fields we know, so that those that live after may have clean earth to till. What weather they shall have is not ours to rule" (p.190). Ours is to be a careful work, identifying by God's wisdom, the dangers the weeds present to us.

We have all: met, and known weeds, sometimes even quite intimately. We have all succumbed to their charm on occasion, and been swayed by their words. Some of us have experienced the life destroying activities of weeds.

Sunday July 23rd, 2017

Proper 11

Weeds have hurt us with their words and plans. It can be such a drain, but that is why we need to be good seed for each other. We need to build each other up, and strengthen each other. As good seed, we let our roots, so to speak, entwine with one another, so we can withstand the hostility and invasion of the weeds.

That's the first part of the really good news. Jesus has planted good seeds, plural. No one, plants just one kernel of wheat; they plant hundreds, if not thousands. Seed is purchased, by a farmer, by weight, not by the grains. We are not alone. We are planted in community to create fruit together.

Yet, there is also, I believe, good news for the weeds too. I firmly believe, by the grace of Christ Jesus, a weed can become wheat. If Jesus can turn water into wine, he can turn bad seed into good. The potential for redemption is always there and always made available freely to everyone, weeds and all. One response we should entertain, towards those we know are weeds, is for us to pray for them.

As the angels hold off their reaping, we can seek by prayer and love, to change a weed into fruit bearing wheat stock. It won't be easy. They will certainly resist, but it happens, and frankly, we are proof of that transformation ourselves. It is time to confront our need to stop growing like a weed, and endeavor with God's help to grow like a valuable, healthy stock of wheat.

As Jesus said, "Anyone who is willing to hear should listen and understand!" Do you get it? Do you understand what is at stake? I hope so.

BENEDICTION: Today, O God, we have turned to you in search of direction for our lives, and you did not turn us away. You have opened our ears to your word, our eyes to your purpose and our hearts to your presence. Now send us forth as people who hear with their ears, see with their eyes, and understand with their hearts, that your word might bear fruit within us and through us. Amen.