

First Congregational United Church of Christ
The Eighth Sunday after Pentecost, July 23, 2023

Matthew 13:24-30, 36-43 from The Message Interpretation of the Bible.

²⁴⁻²⁶ Jesus (He) told another story. "God's kingdom is like a farmer who planted good seed in his field. That night, while his hired men were asleep, his enemy sowed thistles all through the wheat and slipped away before dawn. When the first green shoots appeared and the grain began to form, the thistles showed up, too. ²⁷ "The farmhands came to the farmer and said, 'Master, that was clean seed you planted, wasn't it? Where did these thistles come from?' ²⁸ "He answered, 'Some enemy did this.'

"The farmhands asked, 'Should we weed out the thistles?' ²⁹⁻³⁰ "He said, 'No, if you weed the thistles, you'll pull up the wheat, too. Let them grow together until harvest time. Then I'll instruct the harvesters to pull up the thistles and tie them in bundles for the fire, then gather the wheat and put it in the barn.'"

"The Curtain of History"

³⁶ Jesus dismissed the congregation and went into the house. His disciples came in and said, "Explain to us that story of the thistles in the field."

³⁷⁻³⁹ So he explained. "The farmer who sows the pure seed is the Son of Man. The field is the world, the pure seeds are subjects of the kingdom, the thistles are subjects of the Devil, and the enemy who sows them is the Devil. The harvest is the end of the age, the curtain of history. The harvest hands are angels.

⁴⁰⁻⁴³ "The picture of thistles pulled up and burned is a scene from the final act. The Son of Man will send his angels, weed out the thistles from his kingdom, pitch them in the trash, and be done with them.

They are going to complain to high heaven, but nobody is going to listen. At the same time, ripe, holy lives will mature and adorn the kingdom of their Father.

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SERMON: Pastor Mary Jo Laabs

The title of my message today is: "*Weeding 101*" I want you to know that this is about as close as I will ever get to preaching a "hell and brimstone sermon." 😊

Pray with me: Nurturing God, we trust that you are here...by faith, we believe that you are everywhere...although we are not sure how that is possible...we have tried it ourselves ... let us feel your nudging and tune in as you guide us, oh great God, Creator, Redeemer and Comforter. Let us be still and know that you are God and we are not! Amen.

Paul, in his letter to the Romans 12:2 (as Interpreted in The Message) wrote this to the young church in the first century: "Unlike the culture around you, always dragging you down to its level of immaturity, God brings the best out of you, develops well-formed maturity in you."

"Oh, if only this were true," writes Rev. Lillian Daniel in a daily devotional. She continues, "I would like to think that God is always bringing out the best in people, but sometimes it seems like people act their very worst around God."

Last week, we considered planting seeds and this week, it's about weeds. If you are a gardener, you know that the two go together. No matter how fertile the soil or how careful we are to prepare it, there will be weeds. **Weeds have a way of coming up, not only in the gardens and in the grass, but, even in the cracks of the sidewalks and driveways. Somehow, weeds get into flowerpots and window boxes. We try every which way we can think of to get rid of weeds.**

Has anyone been pulling weeds this week? I don't think that anyone actually likes pulling weeds, including God.

On first reading this parable, we may tend to think, "Well, I certainly am not one of the weeds." A fiery furnace is more than just a scary thought. "I am not one of those "who do evil."

Does it make you uncomfortable? Just WHO are the All "who do evil?" Where does God draw the proverbial line? Murderers? Rapists? Adulterers? Thieves? Does fibbing on your tax returns count? How about gossiping, particularly if it borders on bearing false witness? How about the sins of omission? Are the bullies and those who belittle their neighbors the evil ones? What about those who ignore the needs of the poor? Are they the worst ones?

What does the parable of the weeds bring to your mind? Maybe just the surface value of "picking actual weeds" reminds you that yours are outgrowing the flowers and vegetables in your garden, or the grass in your backyard. "Is this one a hybrid rose or a wild rose?" "Is this one a carrot, some lettuce or a weed?" Even after many years of gardening, some weeds just start to look like they belong there, don't they?

Those or you who are weeding our "community garden" might be thinking of how it is back-wrenching work. Did it ever occur to you to just whack down all the tall weeds and the plants and then just plant some **black plastic and rocks**?? It would be easier that way, wouldn't it? But then, we might accidentally cut down a vegetable or two. The occasional wildflower or self-starting dill wouldn't come up this year. And what would the bees and the butterflies do? Allowing the weeds to grow right along with the perennials and annual flowers, forms a lovely flowerbed, don't you think?

What else does this parable of the weeds and the wheat bring to your mind? If we look for a double meaning and see the weeds and the wheat *as people*, what do you think of? Before your mind wanders in all directions, this is what Michael Green, a British Theologian, says about the parables that Jesus tells. "Parables are signs of protest. Parables are not meant to pat us on the back, but to give us a kick in the pants. They are not intended to comfort us, but to challenge us and change us. Parables speak out against the status quo. Parables are demonstrators waving signs of protest, speaking out against our ways of thinking, our traditional ways of experiencing and obeying God, our spiritual institution."

It occurred to me that the *human* Jesus, not wanting to actually come out and say that his disciples and the others who were listening to him tell the story that day...*were getting a little "weedy and thistly,"* instead wanted them to figure it out themselves...

This parable brought back a memory: When I was a young child, my mother would tell me that I couldn't play with those children who lived across the street." I often wondered if it really was about the danger of crossing *the street* or if it had to do with who those people WERE...but I dared not ask. Was my mom weeding out the people she thought I shouldn't associate with? I think so.

Let's face it, we, as human beings, are quite preoccupied with who's "in" and who's "out." Forming relationships is a lifelong, time-consuming, sometimes heart-wrenching work. If we had no friends, no spouses, no partners or no work colleagues, something of great value would be missing.

So, let's take a mental inventory of the people we have known, and label them "weeds" and "wheat." If you hadn't known the "weedy" ones, the journey of your life may have been different, true...but, those

not so good experiences have made you more resilient. That bad temper made yours more compassionate. That unscrupulous one made you the honest person that you are. That mistreatment, that hurt, that discomfort at learning truths too late...worked itself out for good. Is this how God brings out the best in us? Haven't you noticed that when weeds get big enough that anybody can recognize them, they sometimes **blend into** the garden? They appear as though they belong...

So, let me ask you this? If we were to sort out those who we considered the weeds and the wheat among us, *the people now*...not the plants, what kind of a mess would that be? Is this our mode of operation in a place where we say that "all are welcome here?" I hope not.

Do you know anyone who you would turn away? Think of someone who has betrayed you, someone who has lied to you, or someone you wish you would never have met...someone you just couldn't get along with. If we lived in a fairy tale and could snap our fingers and could make that person disappear from our lives, who would it be? Truth is...this is no fairy tale, but it sometimes sounds like we might be living in the parable that Jesus told in today's scripture. Those people are welcome here, too.

One of the TV ads in the UCC's ad campaign a few years ago, placed a large, muscular man...a bouncer-type man...standing at the top of the front steps of an older brick church, he was saying "nope you can't come in". as he blocked their way through the doors...**to some**, he stepped aside to allow them to enter.

There as a second add that was recorded from the ceiling of the sanctuary...where people were sitting in ejector seats...a gay couple, an elderly person, someone of color, and were being "popped" up and out of the congregation. (These two ads are posted on our Facebook page.)

The point of it that ad was that Jesus **does not reject anyone and neither do we** in the United Church of Christ. Wherever you are on your life's journey, wherever you have been, wherever you are going, you are welcome here.

Knowing that we are all welcome in God's kingdom, and that God loves every one of us, I suggest that we each take today's parable and consider ourselves "challenged" to remove *the weeds in our own lives*. Ask God to grant us the grace of forgiveness for the times we have been judgmental and have narrowed our extravagant welcome...knowingly and also without knowing it. Look deep in the cracks of our lives for the weeds that have entangled our thinking and have succeeded in outgrowing the good that is in us. And throw **those** weeds out!

After hearing today's parable, you might think that Jesus sounds eager to destroy us when we do wrong. If that is what you hear, listen again: That is the last thing Jesus intends to do. Instead, Jesus is making us mindful of the weeds growing in our lives and is right here right now, nudging us to be un-tangled from them.

There is a scene in a book by author, James Michener, that refers to the concept of "the *recording* angel." In the doctrine of some churches, this is the angel that writes down all the bad things you and I do in order that God can one day properly punish us. It is a disturbing doctrine.

Michener's novel, "The Fires of Spring," tells about a couple who are burdened with a load of guilt from their past. They wander into a Quaker meeting. An elderly man stands up and speaks. He says, "The most misleading concept in religion is that of the recording angel. I cannot believe that God remembers or cares to remember a single incident of our lives.

[Rather] **I am the recording angel**. My spirit and my body are the record. My good deeds show in me and my wrong deeds can never be hidden. My spirit either grows to fullness or declines to nothing. **God has no**

need of recording devices. We must not think of [God] as a vengeful or shop keeping recorder. [God] has created a better instrument. **[God] has made me.** [God] needs only to look at me, and all is recorded.”

The old man goes on to conclude that with God’s permission we have the privilege of erasing our past mistakes. God offers us redemption, the opportunity to start fresh and make our lives useful by forgiving our past sin and by opening our lives to wisdom.

The parable today shows us that God’s infinite patience and grace enables us to move on with the crucial business of loving one another. We shouldn’t spend another sleepless night coming up with an answer to who is “in” and who is “out.”

Oh, and I would say that Jesus not so kindly is telling us to make sure that we’re not the weeds.

Let’s take this as a challenge: **Do not act your worst around God.**

So, let’s try to be our brightest and best today and every day.

Let no thistles and weeds choke out the love in our hearts!

Pray with me: Merciful God, you love every creature, every plant and weed that grows upon this earth, every planet, sun, moon and star. We often get the idea that we are the best; that people who look like us and think like us are the best. Forgive our narrowmindedness and our tendency to separate the wheat from the weeds. Instead, guide us to learn from Jesus how to treat everyone as equals, to spend less time judging our neighbors and more time loving them.

THAT, my friends, is “Weeding 101”...Amen.

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