

The Reverend Renee L. Fenner
St. Barnabas' Episcopal Church
7th Sunday after Pentecost/Proper 11/Year A
July 23, 2017
Text: Matthew 13:24-3, 36-43

Just before I graduated from then Webster College, a friend and fellow dancer and I were invited to join the staff of the Thompson School of Dunham Technique and Allied Arts in Springfield, IL. Neither Alma or I had any money to speak of but we were willing to set out into the unknown. The dance studio situated downtown was very much in its infancy stage. The director was still in the process of gathering students, paying students that is so during those first few months there was no steady income. To say we were on a tight budget is an understatement and we found ourselves counted among many other starving artists in town, content to suffer for the sake of our art.

Long days and evenings kept us busy in the studio and each night we arrived home famished and ready to devour the leftover vegetable soup that we learned to stretch over many days. One Saturday morning, Alma announced that she had a taste for a good soul food meal- greens, sliced tomatoes, chicken, and cornbread. Well, we had ingredients for the cornbread, some vegetables and very little money for anything else. Grocery shopping that day was not an option. Alma, determined to have her dinner, announced that she was going out into the backyard of the apartment building and pull some greens. 'Greens? What greens? There aren't any greens in the backyard. What are you talking about?' She began to tell me about the greens her grandmother would sometimes place on the table. Not spinach or turnip greens or mustard greens or collards but what her grandmother called poke greens! I had never heard of poke greens in my life. 'Look out the window,' she said. And all I saw among the tall blades of grass were weeds. 'Are you really going to fix weeds for dinner?' I asked. She laughed but I was not at all amused. I watched as she went outside and pulled handfuls of what she called greens. I remember thinking to myself, 'We are both going to have to get real jobs and soon. This girl's going to have me eating weeds!' Later that evening I sat down to a beautiful spread of sliced tomatoes, corn, cucumbers, cornbread, and Alma's greens. Who knew that weeds could be so delicious?!

In our Gospel today, Jesus tells the parable of the wheat and the weeds. "The kingdom of heaven may be compared to someone who sowed good seed in his field; but while everybody was asleep, an enemy came and sowed weeds

among the wheat.” The workers want to go pull up the weeds lest they choke out the wheat, but the master of the house said no because he knew the distinction between a weed to pull and the wheat to keep could be tricky. The servants would likely have uprooted the wheat with the weeds if they tried. The master instead told them better to wait and let the wheat and the weeds grow together and sort it out during the harvest.

Now Jesus is far from giving farming advice. He is telling yet another parable and in this parable he is speaking about the way we as his followers should treat others. His point is clear: neither his disciples nor we the disciples of today are to go try and weed God’s garden as if the kingdom of heaven were acres of perfect weed-free land. We are to avoid going out armed with our garden gloves and our gallon containers of Roundup. Better to do as the master in the story requested and allow the weeds and the wheat to grow and let them be sorted out in the end.

But the truth of the matter is, we have never done a good job of heeding this parable. No sooner did God create the first man and woman when the bumping of heads and the pointing of fingers began: ‘she’s is the weed, she gave me the apple to eat, no, it’s his fault; he is the weed, not me.’

Over the last couple of Sundays we’ve heard the story of two brothers, Esau and Jacob. Though they were twins, they couldn’t have been more different. Last week we heard how Jacob tricked Esau out of Esau’s birthright. And that was not the end of the story. If you’ve ever heard the story of Jacob and Esau you know that Jacob also tricked their father into giving Jacob Esau’s blessing! Of course, Jacob is left to flee for his life for the wrong he did but God still blessed him. In a dream he heard the voice of God saying, *“I am the LORD, the God of Abraham your father and the God of Isaac; the land on which you lie I will give to you and to your offspring; and your offspring shall be like the dust of the earth, and you shall spread abroad to the west and to the east and to the north and to the south; and all the families of the earth shall be blessed in you and in your offspring. Know that I am with you and will keep you wherever you go, and will bring you back to this land; for I will not leave you until I have done what I have promised you.”*

So we see the weed of sin and the wheat of divine blessing grow side by side over and over again throughout both the Old and the New Testaments; throughout the stories of the early church down to the present day church. We see weeds and wheat growing together in our political, economic, and social systems. It is hard to find any place where there is no conflict and division. We’ve got the pointing of

fingers and labeling and judging and excluding others down pat. We live with the assumption: 'I am right and you are wrong. We belong and others don't. I am wheat and you are weed'. As one preacher put it: 'our lives and world are filled with great moral urgency and great moral ambiguity.' In the midst of all of this, it is sometimes hard to know the distinction between the weeds that need pulling and the wheat that needs to be kept.

The truth is that most of us have both wheat and weed in us. We are sometimes like Jacob who deceived his kin and like the scribes and the Pharisees, righteous but also full of ourselves. One minister tells this story.

*There was an incident at a traffic light. A man was stopped, waiting for the light to turn green. When the light changed, he was distracted and he didn't budge. The woman in the car behind him honked her horn. He still didn't move. She honked again. By this time, she was pounding on the steering wheel and blowing her horn non-stop. Finally, just as the light turned yellow, the fellow in the first car woke up and drove through the light. The woman in the second car was beside herself. Still mid-rant, she heard a tap on her car window. She looked up to see the face of a police officer. "Lady, you're under arrest," he said. "Get out of the car. Put your hands up." He took her to the police station, had her finger printed and photographed, and then put her in a holding cell. Hours passed. The officer returned and unlocked the cell door. He escorted her back to the booking desk. "Sorry for the mistake, Lady," he said. "But I pulled up behind you as you were blowing your horn and cursing out the fellow in front of you. I noticed the stickers on your bumper. One read "Follow me to Sunday School." The other, "What Would Jesus Do?" So, naturally, I assumed you had stolen the car.**

Yes, we are both saint and sinner and like any saint and sinner ever born-we make poor choices, we fall short yet our God continues to love us and bless us so that we may love and bless others.

We are like poke greens-wild but delicious.

We are like the hedges in my sister's front yard that were finally cut and shaped two weeks ago. From afar they look great but upon a closer look you can see where overgrown vines and weeds are intertwined in the bushes. The risk is destroying the beautifully shaped bushes trying to getting rid of the vines.

And we are like the garden that the Spirit, Sarayu, showed Mack in the movie 'The Shack.' Remember the scene where Mack looks around and sees a

luscious yet overpopulated garden which he is quick to call a mess. But Sarayu looks at Mack and says: “Yes, the garden is a mess. It’s wild and wonderful and perfectly in process. This mess is YOU.”

If we really want to see the kingdom of heaven, we have to stop weeding the field. We are not in charge of the harvest. God is. Weeds are going to be among us. Weeds are going to be in us.

Look around. Go ahead, look around. Look around and see people of different sizes and shapes, ages and cultural backgrounds, political views, and at different places in our faith journeys. In some places of the world this will never happen. Years ago, this kind of gathering would not have been thought possible. But here we are. Sunday after Sunday we come together to praise and thank God, to hear God’s Word and to receive the Body and Blood of Christ at God’s holy Table. We are but a part of the luscious, wild, and wonderfully messy garden that is the kingdom of God. There is plenty for the people of God to do. We can help cultivate and nurture the work God has started. Just leave the picking and separating to him.

Let those who have ears, hear.

Amen.

*excerpt taken from “Why Can’t We Pull Up the Weeds?” a sermon for the Seventh Sunday after Epiphany-Year B, 2006 by The Rev. Dr. Joanna Adams