

Matthew 13:24-30, 36-43

“Weeds”

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In a book entitled *Purple and other Permutations*, Stanley Wiersma writes a poem called, “Excommunication”. The poem is about a man named Benny, who is a regular church-goer and an alcoholic. The priests at the church tried for three years to solve Benny’s problem. First they took a strong stand against alcoholism in their sermons, but Benny continued to drink, and he continued to come to church. After that the priests announced that alcoholism was a problem in the church, and called on members of the congregation to speak out against it. Benny continued to drink, and continued to come to church. The priests then publicly identified Benny by name as the offending alcoholic member of the church and denied him communion. Still, Benny continued to drink, and continued to come to church. Finally, after three years, the priests lost their patience for Benny’s struggle with the bottle and decided to excommunicate him. Benny attended his excommunication, and even stood up at the front of the congregation as the charges were leveled against him. An unrepentant sinner, the priests called him, with whom the church was to have no further association. After the excommunication, however, Benny continued to drink. And he

continued to come to church. In fact, Benny continued to come to church right up until the day he died of cirrhosis.

Wiersma saw Benny's persistence and continual attendance in church as a powerful thing. It was as though Benny was saying, **"I will not be cut off as though I do not exist. I am God's child, all right, God's bad and disobedient child, but still God's child: Benny."** Wiersma then wrote, "What of us who attended church regularly out of custom and superstition, without even questioning whether we had a right to be there? What of us who never wrestled like Benny? Though he did not intend it, by standing up to be excommunicated, was Benny excommunicating us? The church is gone now, the lumber used for a cattle shed, but in memory the place where Benny stood is forever Holy Ground. Was Benny excommunicating me?"

That story fits well with our gospel reading for this morning. Both suggest that there are times when our desire to level judgment against others and cleanse the world of sin really ends up hurting ourselves and others. It does more harm than good. Jesus tells the story of a field, sown with wheat and weeds. It sounds like your traditional story of good versus evil. It's the wheat against the weeds, and obviously the weeds are a dangerous threat to the growth and proliferation of the wheat. The workers in the field immediately want to go through and rip out all the weeds in order to protect

the wheat, to let the good crop grow. They're playing the part of the good guys, the heroes who have come in to save the day and ensure a happy ending. "Let us go rip out all of those evil weeds," they say to the Master. It's a reasonable request. If those weeds are allowed to grow and then drop seeds, it will result in an even bigger weed problem next year. As I read this parable, I personally identify most with these workers. I have been spotted from time to time in the checkout line at Lowe's with a shopping cart full of weed killer. I have also been spotted lamenting over dead flowers, dead grass, dead bushes... which I killed with that very same weed killer.

The Master of the field is concerned that his workers will do much the same thing that I did in my yard. In their attempt to rid the field of weeds, they will undoubtedly kill some of the wheat too. So he tells them, "No, for in gathering the weeds you would uproot the wheat along with them. Let both of them grow together until the harvest." That's a really puzzling thing to say. I know, you know, the people at the Lowe's checkout counter know, that you have to get rid of weeds as soon as you see them, or else they turn into even more weeds. The Master's instructions to let the weeds grow make no sense whatsoever from an agricultural point of view. However, it makes perfect sense from a Kingdom of God point of view.

It just so turns out that the Greek word used in this parable, *Zizania*, which we translate “weeds”, actually refers to a particular type of weed. It is a weed called *darnel*, and it is particularly difficult for farmers to get rid of because it looks nearly identical to wheat. This is why the Master doesn’t trust his workers to uproot the weeds: they cannot tell the difference. If they try to cleanse that field themselves, they will end up doing more harm than good. They will almost assuredly pull up just as much wheat as weeds. “So let them grow together until the harvest,” the Master says. Let them grow together.

That phrase from the mouth of the Master contains the most remarkable word in the whole parable: In Greek it is *aphiemi*, which is translated “Let”. The Master says, “Let them grow together.” We read that phrase in our English translations today and move right along, unaware of the significance of that word. *Aphiemi*. It can mean to let something go, or to leave something alone. However, when applied to sinfulness, or debts, or trespasses, *aphiemi* means “to forgive”. It is a word that would have rung a huge bell in the minds of those greek-speaking Christians in the early church. Those early Christians would have been accustomed to saying that same word in the Lord’s prayer: *Aphiemi*, Forgive us our debts, as we *aphiemi*, forgive our debtors. Hearing the Master of the field say, *aphiemi*,

“Let them be,” would have conjured images of forgiveness in their minds. “Forgive those weeds!” the Master is saying. “Forgive them, and let them grow together with the wheat.”

That may be a difficult message for us regular church-goers to hear, and it's made even more difficult, I think, upon hearing it so close to the anniversary of the events of September 11th. We need not look very far to find examples of people we might never forgive, people who we'd rather uproot from the face of the earth and cast into the fire. Memories of terrorists who take innocent lives in the name of religion are still fresh in our minds, so Jesus' words are perhaps a little unsettling to us today. I know they are for me. And yet, at the same time we are also called to take our cue from Jesus and be loving, and accepting, and forgiving of all people, even those whom we call enemies. Biblical scholar Walter Bruggeman once said that scripture calls us to live in tension between loving someone and whacking them, and that's really what the parable of the weeds and the wheat is all about. Those workers who were so ready to go whack those evil weeds and preserve the goodness of the wheat field were instead told to forgive, to let them grow. They were invited to live in the tension between love and judgment. And by letting the weeds and wheat grow together, they leave the judgment part of the equation up to God. That doesn't mean that

they stop acknowledging the presence of the evil in their midst. Forgiving doesn't mean forgetting. It's possible to forgive and still recognize the horrors of evil and injustice.

This weekend, as our country remembers the horrific events of September 11th, I wrestle with Jesus' call to forgiveness. Forgiving those who take innocent lives through acts of terror seems like a step that's just too big for me to make. Maybe you feel that way too. I doubt many people feel very forgiving when they hear the words "Al Qaeda" or "World Trade Center". Forgiveness may just be an unrealistic goal in times like this. But for all who follow Jesus, it should always be something that you work for, even if it's a step you don't think you can make. And we must always be sure that our inability to forgive doesn't result in a hateful response toward others with whom we are called to love and serve. Christians make a very serious mistake when we perceive all Muslims as practitioners of terrorism, or when our desire to uproot the terrorists leads us to harm Muslims who work toward the goal of peace. We must be careful not to let our desire to destroy the weeds destroy the wheat as well.

Of course, we are all imperfect people. We will even find ourselves looking around the church and seeing Benny's all over the place – people that we're sure the church would be better off without. There will be times

when we spend our time and energy on figuring out who's a weed and who's a wheat. We will continue to see sin and evil in our world, some of which is so bad that we will think of no way to respond other than, "Rip it out! Destroy it!"

But then we are reminded... We follow Jesus, who with his last breaths from the cross did not lash out against the evil that put him there. Instead, he cried out, *aphiemi*, "Forgive them."

For the Kingdom of God is not like the workers who went into the field, ripping weeds out by the handful, and ended up destroying most of the wheat too. The Kingdom of God is not like the man who came home from Lowe's with gallons of weed killer for the weeds, and ended up killing his lawn. No...

The Kingdom of God is like someone who sowed good seed in his field; but while everybody was asleep, an enemy came and sowed darnel – weeds - among the wheat, and then went away. So when the plants came up and bore grain, then the weeds appeared as well. And the workers of the field came to the Master and said, "Did you not sow good seed in your field? Where then, did the weeds come from?" He answered, "An enemy has done this." The workers said to him, "Then do you want us to go and gather

them?" But he replied, "No, for in gathering the weeds you would uproot the wheat along with it."

"What then are we to do about the weeds?" the workers asked.

"Forgive them," the Master replied. "and let them grow together."

So may it be. Thanks be to God.