

We All Have Some Weeds in Our Yard

Matthew 13:24-30, 36-43

Pentecost 5, Proper 11

July 17, 2011

In her memoir *Bossypants*, actor Tina Fey describes working for the YMCA in Chicago soon after graduating from college. This particular YMCA included, “a great mix of high-end yuppie fitness facilities, a wonderful community resource center for families, and an old-school residence for disenfranchised homeless men.” Fey shares a host of funny stories about working the front desk. One of the stories involved one of the men who lived there forgetting to take his meds, bumping into a young mom on her way to a workout session and saying something wildly inappropriate. Fey writes: “The young mother was beside herself. That’s the kind of trouble you get when diverse groups of people actually cross paths with one another. That’s why some of the worst things in the world happen outside of Starbucks bathrooms.”

We work awfully hard to avoid getting mixed up in the kind of situations that young mom found herself in that day. It feels weird to find ourselves in the company of strangers who don’t look or act or share the same values we do. One time just out of high school a friend and I took a rode trip across the country and ended up in the “wrong” part of St. Louis. We were running low on gas and it seemed like we were the only white kids within 10 miles. My defenses went up and I pretty much thought that everyone that looked at me was going to do something terrible to me and my friend. When a large black man approached my car at a stop light I thought I was doomed. He insisted that I roll down my window. I did. Just a crack. He yelled, “What are you doing in this neighborhood?” I told him we were looking for gas and got turned around. He said, “Well that’s obvious!” Then he gave me directions to the gas station back toward the interstate. I was so grateful...and ashamed. My defenses caused me to judge this guy simply because he was big and black...and I wasn’t.

We can’t always tell who is good and who is bad. We *want* to know. We *want* to be able to protect what is most important to us. We want to avoid things that may cause suffering. But in trying to seek good and avoid bad, we sometimes miss the chance to see the good in others who may not be like us. It’s easy to be our best self when we are in our most comfortable environment. But our lives are full of decisions, relationships, and social systems that are far more complex than that. Life is not simply good or bad, black or white. We live in a world of variable shades of gray.

Jesus invites us to embrace the complexity of our world. It’s a big wild place. It’s in this big diverse world where Jesus sows good seed. But his seed is not the only brand in town. Forces opposed to God have also sown seed that will work to crowd out God’s harvest. We might be tempted to think that we are good and others are bad. We might also be tempted to think that we know what good and bad looks like in all circumstances. But, doesn’t it seem that both of these seeds have been planted in our own lives as well as the world? Can’t we see the various shades of gray at work in our lives? As a parent you work hard to do what is best for your child, no matter what age. Yet, in a weak moment frustration turns to anger

when they do something you disapprove of and the relationship needs mending. Maybe you're at work and you see confidential information that you know is not meant for you, but no one is looking and you peer through the files just to see if you show up anywhere in it. Or you have felt neglected by a family member who lives far away and when they finally call your impulse is to give them the silent treatment or a guilt trip.

Martin Luther named this *simul justus et peccator* – we are simultaneously fully saint and fully sinner. The world is simultaneously sown with good and bad seed. Yet, God sends Jesus to take care of the whole field, weeds and all. In the end, it is Christ who brings forth the harvest and discards the weeds, eliminating the sin in our hearts and the world.

In light of this, maybe the best way to live our lives is to turn our focus to where the sower is sowing good seed in this messy mixed weedy world and plead with God to do something in us to bear fruit in the midst of it.

St. Francis, the 13th century peasant monk gave us this prayer:

Lord, make me an instrument of your peace.
Where there is hatred, let me sow love.
Where there is injury, pardon.
Where there is doubt, faith.
Where there is despair, hope.
Where there is darkness, light.
Where there is sadness, joy.
O Divine Master,
grant that I may not so much seek to be consoled, as to console;
to be understood, as to understand;
to be loved, as to love.
For it is in giving that we receive.
It is in pardoning that we are pardoned,
and it is in dying that we are born to Eternal Life.

Last Saturday the South Sudanese, including many of the Dinka people who worship here on Sunday afternoons celebrated their first Independence Day. After two civil wars spanning 50 years and blood shed that cost the lives of more than 2.5 million people, the South Sudanese finally were able to say they were free. I was moved by their act of grace when they invited a Sudanese Muslim to pray along side American and South Sudanese Christians. The Arab Muslim North insisted that the Christian majority in the south follow a fundamentalist interpretation of Islam's Sharia law. Yet in light of their new found freedom, they invited their former enemy to be a part of their celebration and to ask for their blessing on this new nation. God is bearing fruit among the Sudanese in the face of a history of war and oppression.

But good wheat does not just grow in historic times. God is in the field of our everyday lives working in us to produce a harvest as well. A Zumbro member told me this week that he is intentionally spending time with people he's had difficulty with over the years. Some of these people he's been hurt by in the past, others he just has a completely different political or

social view. He's going to uncomfortable places where he knows that they may see him as a weed and he might see them as a weed, but the only way to bear fruit in God's kingdom is to grow beyond labels, show grace and seek to understand the other. It's likely that Jesus will show up sow some good seed in these relationships in spite of the weeds that may still be present.

Jesus makes it clear that this field isn't always as we'd hope it would be. Sometimes we want to be the sower's slaves and offer to strip the field of any weeds. Sometimes we look at our lives and can't see the good seed growing up anywhere around us. When we reach the point where the weeds are encroaching on our lives, we come to God to tell the truth. The truth is that some days we lose our way and fail to trust God and bear fruit. Some days we look at the world around us and all we see are noxious, life-choking weeds and it seems that there is no hope for good grain to grow any where.

But...the sower keeps on sowing. God keeps showing up in the world. God keeps entering into the suffering we experience, into the broken and weedy places of our lives to reclaim us as God's precious own. And being held by the Lord of the Harvest, we can again live and grow into the very people God has made us to be. Even with those thorny weeds of sin and suffering, grief and struggle. St. Ignatius once said, "There are very few people who realize what God would make of them if they abandoned themselves into his hands, and let themselves be formed by his grace." Though we still may have weeds in our lives, let us be that precious few who realize what God is willing to make of us.

God has created us and redeemed us and sent us into the world to grow up to bear the fruit of grace and hope and love in the midst of a messy, weedy world. It isn't always easy and we won't always succeed, but this is who God has made us to be. And God has given us all we need to produce good for Christ's kingdom.