

SERMON
Time after Pentecost – Lectionary 16
July 20, 2008

Isaiah 44:6-8
Psalm 86:11-17
Romans 8:12-25
Matthew 13:24-30, 36-43

Brothers and sisters in Christ, grace to you and peace from God the Father, and from our Lord and Savior Jesus, who is the Christ. Amen.

A farmer purchased an old, run-down, abandoned farm with plans to turn it into a thriving business. The fields were grown over with weeds. The farmhouse was falling apart. And the fences were broken down.

During his first day of work, the town priest stops by to bless the man's work. He said, "May you and God work together to make this the farm of your dreams!"

A few months later, the priest stops by again to call on the farmer. Lo and behold, it's a completely different place. The farmhouse is completely rebuilt and in excellent condition. There are plenty of cattle and other livestock happily munching on feed in fenced-in pens. And the fields are filled with crops planted in neat rows.

"Amazing," the priest says. "Look what God and you have accomplished together!" "Yes reverend," says the farmer, "but remember what the farm looked like when God was working it alone!"

Today, again, Jesus tells his disciples a parable about farming. Remember last week, we heard about the seed falling on different types of ground. God was the sower, and we were the soil. The question was what kind of soil are we? Are we good soil that will produce fruit? Or are we soil that is not good, and will not produce fruit?

Well, in today's parable, we are not the soil, but rather we are the seeds. The field is the world. And the seeds are divided into two different kinds; good seeds, which are wheat, and bad seed, which are weeds. The good seed are the children of the kingdom sowed by the Son of Man. And the bad seed are the children of the evil one sowed by the devil.

Now it's interesting how Jesus told so many parables about farming. According to the Gospel accounts, Jesus was a city boy. There is no record of him being a farmer. We are told that he worked in the town of Nazareth as a carpenter. I always wondered why he never told any parables about woodworking. Well, back to the seeds.

So which one are we? Are we the good seed that produces grain? Or are we the bad seed that produces weeds? Well, the problem with this parable is that it's just too dang easy to identify with the good seed – the wheat. After all, we are the faithful. We are the ones who come and worship on Sunday. We are the ones who offer our time and money to support the ministry of our congregation.

So let's assume for now that we are the good seed that Jesus is talking about. So who then are the bad seed? Well, for centuries, it has been determined that the bad seed has been those who are not like us.

And what is the best way to get rid of the bad seed – the weeds that threaten our graininess? We pull them out. We eliminate them. We kill them with poison.

Let's go back in time a bit. The early church had a word for some of those weeds. They were called heretics. And they were eliminated. Most were excommunicated and many were even condemned to death.

But the church's "weed-pulling" didn't stop there. In Medieval times, people who certainly began with good intent, started pilgrimages to win the world for Christ, and thus began what we know as the Crusades. The church eliminated those weeds that would not conform to the ways of the church. The Crusades were a series of military campaigns of a religious character waged by much of Christian Europe against external and internal opponents.

Crusades were fought mainly against Muslims, though campaigns were also directed against pagan Slavs, Jews, Russian and Greek Orthodox Christians, Mongols, Cathars, Hussites, and political enemies of the popes. Crusaders took vows and were granted an indulgence for past sins.

The enduring legacy of those excursions remains as a stain upon Christianity, as many people were "slaughtered in the name of Christ."

During the time of the Reformation, there was the Spanish Inquisition and the horrible atrocities committed by people determined to prevent any dissension – any weeds from being established that might threaten the authority of the Roman Catholic Church.

All it took was the least bit of suspicion, and your very life could be in danger. At one point there was a contract out on Martin Luther's life.

Well, how are we feeling now? Are we still feeling like the good seed that got rid of those evil weeds throughout history? But realistically, what does that have to do with us?

Perhaps we might move forward a bit in time. In our own country there was something known as the Salem witch trials. One of the tests of a witch was to throw her in the water. If she floats, she's a witch and was put to death. If she drowns, she was innocent. All it took was the accusation. And if brought to trial, neither outcome was a very good prospect.

Now, I could go on and on about how we have tried to rid ourselves of what we believe to be weeds that sprout up among us.

Actually, we still do a lot of weed picking in our churches today. Who is it that some modern day churches seek to get rid of? Is it the drug addicts, the unwed mothers, the homosexuals, those that aren't part of a particular social or economic status?

What I am trying to say is that it does seem that throughout history, the church has taken it upon itself to deal with what we perceive as evil by pulling out those weeds. Again, that is assuming that we see ourselves as the "good seed."

So let's go back to our parable. Was it the slaves of the master, or in other words, the disciples of Jesus, who got rid of the weeds?

"NO! NO! Jesus said, for gathering the weeds you would uproot the wheat along with them. Let both of them grow together until the harvest; and at harvest time I will tell the reapers – the angels, to collect the weeds first and bind them in bundles to be burned at the end of the age, but for you, gather the wheat into my barn."

In fact, Jesus says that we are not capable of telling the difference between the wheat and the weeds.

Whoa! Do you mean that we have gotten it wrong all of these years? It seems that it is not our role to get rid of the bad seed, the evil, the weeds that live among us.

An eight-year old boy had several chores to do around the house. One of the chores was to pull the weeds out of the flowerbed once a week. Well, one Sunday in Sunday school class, the teacher discussed this parable. The little boy went home that day and said to his mom, "I'm not going to weed the flowerbed anymore."

"Well, what makes you think that you're not going to pull weeds anymore; that is one of your chores," responded his mom. "But mom, I learned today that Jesus said we are not supposed to pull weeds." To say the least, the following week, the boy was out pulling weeds again.

So why is it that we are to leave the weeds alone? For one, Jesus says that we would uproot the wheat also. You see, sometimes it is hard to tell the wheat from the weeds. It is only until they bear fruit that we can tell the difference. And this can speak to us today. For life is not always black and white. We cannot always divide up the evil from the good.

I remember when the movie, *Pirates of the Caribbean* came out. I watched it with my daughter, and she asked me, "Is Captain Jack Sparrow a good guy or a bad guy?" Don't you hate those kinds of questions where you can't answer with a definite "yes" or "no."

As Christians, we are called to resist evil. And the best weapon for us to use for that is not condemnation and judgment, but love. Jesus said, "Love your enemies." But unfortunately, it's not always as clear-cut as we would like. People don't usually wear signs identifying themselves as evildoers.

That person who looks like a weed, just might produce some beautiful flowers, if given enough time and attention. Someone said, "It would be nice if people wore nametags that said things like, 'HELLO, I am a terrorist.'"

If you have children, you know what I am talking about. Your child brings a new friend home from school and you wonder if this child is a bad seed or a good seed. Will this friend be an influence for good, or will the friend be an influence for doing bad?

Now sometimes, we have our intuition, but sometimes we just can't tell a weed from wheat, no matter how hard we try.

You see, none of us are purely good, and none of us are purely evil. We are both wheat and weeds – both sinner and saint. In other words, there are times in our lives when we produce good fruit. And there are times when we allow the weeds to overcome us.

But listen to this. The question that this parable is asking is NOT, "Are you wheat or are you a weed?" This story tells us that we, as servants – as disciples, do not have the discerning capacity to answer such a question. Nor is it our job to do so. Therefore, if we cannot discern between the wheat and the weeds, we have no right "weeding out" what we interpret to be bad seeds.

Rather, this story affirms the Lordship of the One who plants the good seed, while recognizing the presence of another who would attempt to ruin the harvest by planting bad seed.

Brothers and sisters, we are not the judges. To be part of the Kingdom of God is to participate in the struggle in love for the wellbeing of the community. The categories of "insiders and outsiders," of "pure and impure," of "acceptable and unacceptable," are swept away.

This is how Matthew's community was able to open the doors to its Gentile sisters and brothers as they faced their own questions about who they were. This same understanding challenges the Christian community today to welcome the stranger as brother or sister – to resist easy categorizations that demonizes and dehumanizes the "other."

For when we do that, we risk destroying the wheat as we rid ourselves of the weeds. In military terms, this would be seen as "collateral damage." Collateral damage is eliminating evil even though it will also kill the good. But again, Jesus says "NO."

You see, as Christians, it is not our job to destroy evil. We will leave that to Jesus when he comes again. Rather, it is our job to promote good. We are called to be witnesses to God's love and grace. We are to show mercy and compassion. We are to speak out on behalf of the poor, the sick, the downtrodden, and those who are oppressed.

To summarize, the challenge for us is to put our energy into being good, fruit-bearing wheat, instead of eliminating the weeds around us. For weeding the field isn't our job.

Rather than erecting walls, building boundaries, or trying to purify our community of faith from the impurities of the world around, our job is to grow up strong, with deep roots. Meanwhile we leave the judging and the weeding to Jesus.

If you think about it, growth and maturity are the most effective forms of weed control around. I am told, that if you nurture and care for your lawn, it will eventually crowd out most of the weeds.

Lately, my wife has been telling me that I focus on the negative a lot. She's right. It's nothing new. I have always been that way. I confess that I don't know why. And I know that that sometimes even affects my ministry.

I might get 10 positive comments on any given Sunday. But when I hear a negative comment, that's all I remember. I could have a garden full of beautiful fruit, but if there is but one weed, I feel that I have failed in some way.

Perhaps, it is true that I focus too much on the weeds, worrying that they are going to overcome the good seed. Instead of focusing on the many gifted and loving people in this congregation and helping them to grow deeper and stronger, I get obsessed with those who are weeds and perhaps pose a danger to the harvest.

I would like to offer a challenge for all of us today, including myself. God has blessed us so much. Over the years, Atascocita Lutheran Church has produced a bounty of good fruit. And that is indeed, what we are called to do.

So let's make an effort in the coming days, weeks, and months to focus on deepening our roots and growing stronger in the faith. Let's make a commitment to hold each other accountable for living as though God's grace is sufficient. Yes, weeds will be part of the world.

But when some of them see the life of the wheat, they too, might become one of the good plants. For with God, nothing is impossible. Amen.

May the peace that passes all understanding be with you now and for life everlasting. Amen.