

Take our minds and think through them; take our mouths and speak through them; take our hearts and set them on fire.

We have a garden in the backyard of the rectory. Although we have harvested some lettuce and have a big fat zucchini that's almost ready, the initial picture that Jesus paints of a garden with wheat and weeds closely intermingled rings true. In today's Gospel from Matthew, Jesus tells a parable about a field mixed with both wheat and weeds, and how the owner would not let his workers uproot the weeds from the wheat until the final harvest. I should say, however, that no one has been preventing me from weeding.

Weeds among the wheat—an apt description of the fields of our workplaces, our families, our towns, our churches, the political landscape. In fact, it's a fitting portrait of the messy world we live in, and even maybe especially the interior landscapes of our own hearts and minds.

The plant generically translated as “weed” in this Gospel is called “zizanion” in the original Greek text. It's also translatable into English as “darnel” (or “tares” in the King James Version). Darnel is a grassy plant that resembles wheat and wraps its roots around and through the roots of the wheat plant, stealing water and nutrients. Though a darnel seed closely resembles a grain of wheat, in their substance they could not be more different; if enough darnel seeds are ingested, everything from hallucinations to death can result.

That's the image Jesus puts forward in this parable: wheat and weeds together, and deadly weeds at that. <https://biblehub.com/greek/2215.htm>; Talitha Arnold, *Feasting on the Word*, Vol 3A, p. 260)

This parable of the weeds shares some superficial similarities with last week's Parable of the Sower on which Karen Coleman preached. There, the emphasis was on the indiscriminate generosity of God.

Here, in the Parable of the Weeds, the emphasis is on the wisdom, restraint, and judgement of God, God's ability ultimately to make things right. Those tending to the field ask whether the owner would like them to remove the darnel from among the wheat. In those days before chemical herbicides, farmers dealt with weeds by painstakingly uprooting them by hand. This would be done early in the growing cycle, and repeated several times as necessary, making it easier to sort out the grain or seeds at harvest time. The workers want to do it now!

But in this parable, the landowner instructs his workers to hold off pulling the weeds until the final harvest, for fear that they will uproot the wheat as well. The landowner will separate out the wheat from the darnel when everything is gathered in.

Obviously, this approach makes for greater restraint and harder work. One can imagine the quizzical and doubtful expressions in the eyes of agricultural workers gathered around Jesus as he tells this story.

Even so, the landowner tolerates the mayhem these weeds cause to the crop because he is confident in his ability to sort out the mess in end.

How deeply and quickly we want to sort everything out! The intention is to sort out the wheat from the weeds, the “children of light” from the “children of darkness,” the mob from the masses, the riots from the protesters, the patriots from the haters, and on and on it goes.

The Landowner in Jesus’ parable has a different approach and there’s wisdom to be gleaned from it. Not only is it that wheat and darnel are hard to tell apart, and that darnel locks onto the root system of wheat like a vampire, but Matthew wants to make sure that we get it. As he often does, the writer of Matthew’s Gospel chooses to neatly allegorize the parable, assigning meaning to every part, rather than forcing the listener to grapple with a variety of meanings, as parables usually do. He casts the Son of Man as a righteous reaper, with legions of angels to bring a fearsome justice.

No doubt Jesus’ poor and marginalized first century listeners, under the heel of Rome, and those marginalized peoples of our own day, eager for justice, resonate with this telling. Jesus takes the power and insidiousness of evil seriously, the way that it does its work silently, seductively, seemingly hidden, and then can burst into the open with a vengeance.

And yet the parable clearly warns against a rush to judgment. It can require patience to see what the real fruits are. This says something of the Landowner’s concerns about both our inability to judge the wheat from the weeds, and about the vulnerability, the tenderness of the emerging wheat, amongst those in our fields of family, work, and in the wider world.

But this is no excuse for inaction or conflict avoidance. Later in Matthew (18.15-20), Jesus outlines how to deal with toxic behavior in the community. If the person does not change, they are to be cut out from the community like the weeds from the wheat at harvest time.

But justice does not preclude mercy and, in fact, makes mercy possible. As Frederick Buechner puts it, “the one who judges us most finally will be the one who loves us most fully...The justice and mercy of the judge are ultimately one.” (*Wishful Thinking: A Theological ABC* (London: Collins, 1973), p. 48).



Eighth Sunday after Pentecost A 7/19/20
God's Role, and Ours, in a Mixed-Up World
The Rev. Nick Morris-Kliment
Christ Church, Needham, MA

You didn't hear it from me, but I'm not sure Jesus' final judgment in the end is hellfire and brimstone, or "weeping and gnashing of teeth," even though the Gospel writer Matthew is rather taken with this vengeful image. Instead, perhaps the final judgment of Jesus is uttered from the Cross: "Father, forgive them for they know not what they do."

It is a rich paradox, the reality of God's justice for those who deserve it and mercy for those who don't. The work we are called to do is inter-generational and stretches beyond our own lifetimes. Hence God allows for a messy field, a mixed crop, whether we like it or not.

And yet God also demands that we labor in that mixed field—as individuals in the communities where we live, in our families, in the church, in the wider world—even if we don't see the fruits. God ultimately does take care of the fruits. As Martin Luther King once said, in a phrase that has encouraged countless laborers for justice and truth in the messy field of the world, "the moral arc of the universe is long, and it bends toward justice."

And then there is this: finally, if all we do is try to attack the weeds, we run the risk of turning into weeds ourselves, becoming full of thorns, bitterness, and poison. And as we know all too well, there are lots of good good haters in this world.

I'm thinking today of John Lewis, the Civil Rights icon who passed the other day. Certainly, John Lewis worked at pulling up weeds in the form of obstacles to voting rights and other forms of racism and inequality. And yet, as the tributes I read poured in, what struck me was how critical he was in nurturing the wheat, especially young activists who continue to work for justice and freedom. Of John Lewis' relationships with his constituents and young activists, it was said, "They didn't just love him, they knew him." (<https://www.nytimes.com/2020/07/18/us/John-Lewis-Atlanta.html?referringSource=articleShare>)

Our job as workers in the mixed fields of God's world is not to give ourselves over to the enemy by consuming ourselves with their destruction. Rather, it is to mind our business, which is tending to the wheat—to sow and nurture seeds of God's love, justice and healing. To use the words of my friend and colleague Gareth Evans, "it's about *seeding* more than *weeding*. As we toil in *mixed* ground, we may begin to find some new *common* ground in this divided country of ours, and some desperately needed *holy* ground."

Amen.