

## SEVENTH SUNDAY AFTER PENTECOST, July 19, 2020

“Wheat or Weed?” *(Matthew 13:24-30)*

I was out in the vegetable garden. Down on my hands and knees, weeding the little patch my Dad had entrusted to my care. With pride, I looked at the pile of dying weeds and the tidy rows of lettuce, spinach, peas and beans. I decided to help my father by weeding one of his rows which appeared particularly neglected. I was almost to the end when I realized that by the time I pulled out all the plants I was sure didn't belong, there was really nothing left. “That's strange,” I thought. It was at that point, my Dad appeared. “Why are you tearing out all of my parsnips?” “Ah, oh.” I had mistaken parsnips for weeds. My only comfort was that: (a) my Dad was a very patient man, slow to anger and quick to appreciate the good intentions if not the actions of his youngest child, and (b) I never have liked parsnips.

Wheat or weed? Jesus tells a parable about weeds growing in a field of wheat. The farm labourers are people after my own heart: they are all for ripping out those weeds right away to create a pristine field. The owner, however, urges caution: the wheat may be pulled out along with the weeds. Better to let them grow up side by side and separate them at the time of harvest. Like all of Jesus' parables, it appears to be a simple story, but it leaves us to wrestle with its meaning. Jesus is certainly not some first century Ed Lawrence offering gardening tips - be careful with those weeds - so what might he be saying to his listeners?

The author of the gospel of Matthew thinks he has found the key. He interprets it as an allegory: the sower is the Son of Man; the good seed are the children of the kingdom of God; the weeds are the children of the evil one; the enemy who scatters them is the devil; the harvest is the end of the age when evil doers will be thrown into

the furnace of fire while the righteous will shine like the sun. This author is very fond of such scenes and appears to relish the thought of the condemned weeping and gnashing their teeth. I recognize that this concept of the last judgement has given rise to some great paintings, but personally, I don't find such focus on the end of time inspiring or helpful for living in the here and the now.

So as James did last Sunday, let's just set this interpretation aside and consider the story itself. According to some Biblical scholars, the weeds, sometimes referred to as darnel, look a great deal like wheat in their early stages. And yet, the farm workers seem confident they can tell them apart - this is wheat; that's weed. At times do we human beings speak and act as we can differentiate between good things and bad? Think of something as basic as food. When I was taking Home Economics in Grades 7, 8 and 9, the 1961 Canada's Food Guide was the Bible: for optimal health, we knew we needed to eat a set number of servings each day from the five food groups - vegetables, fruit, bread and cereals, milk, meat and fish. Well, the 2019 guide has eliminated the dairy category, and instead of recommending the number of servings offers advice on what to eat regularly, and what to avoid. Are you willing to bet the next guide will be different again? Or how about technology? I still write my sermons with fountain pen, but have come to recognize the usefulness of computers. When I was settled in Emerson Manitoba in 1984, I had only my own books to consult - there was no internet and the nearest library was an hour and a half away in Winnipeg. Imagine my frustration when I could only half remember an event or a hymn or a quotation. Now, I just google. Before the pandemic, I was highly critical of the amount of time some people like my great nephew, Evan, spend on their electronic devices. Now, I'm on my

screen to attend or lead worship, to take part in workshops and meetings, to keep in touch with people. I have even come to acknowledge that sometimes, screens may be better than in person. At Sharon-Hope United Church, more people came to Bible Study and participated more fully on Zoom than when we gathered at the church. Go figure!

At times, do we human beings speak and act as if we can tell good people from bad? Did you hear any of President Trump's speech on July 4th? He certainly sounds as if he can identify the weeds in the United States: it is "the leftwing fascist mob trying to end America by erasing the nation's history and indoctrinating its children." He acts as if he would cheerfully tear out "the radical left, the Marxists, the anarchists, the agitators, the looters" from the fabric of the United States in order to allow good, God fearing citizens to flourish. Now, I acknowledge that Trump is an extreme example, but isn't there always a temptation for politicians to point the finger at another party or group or nation and identify them as the problem, as the source of any difficulties? All to take the focus off themselves, all to stop any sort of critical reflection on their own words, their own actions.

Have you been following the Black Lives Matter protests and listening to the stories of the black men and women who have been killed? Time after time, it has been because someone regarded that individual as suspicious and informed the police as with Tami Rice, a 12 year old with a toy gun, or took action themselves as with Ahmaud Arbery, an unarmed jogger, and Trayvon Martin, a teenager in a hoody on his way back from a variety store. In this time of global pandemic, have you caught yourself in some indoor space, glowering at the individual who is not wearing a mask or has it perched below their nose or wondering whether you should speak to the group in the park who

are not social distancing or point out to that customer in the drug store or the supermarket that they are going the wrong way down the aisle? We may not be ready like the person in New Brunswick to yell at a neighbour visiting from Quebec - "go home" - but we too may act as if we can pick out the people who are endangering our safety.

When I took a course on Conflict Management, the instructor, John Savage, asked us to think of someone who was causing us difficulties, someone we might call our enemy. Immediately, a face came into my mind. He invited us to describe that individual, noting any and all characteristics that irritated us. With satisfaction, I penned my list. Only then did he announce: "You have just described yourself. Not the aspects of your personality you delight in, but those you would disown and deny." It is much more comfortable, isn't it, to project our faults, our less than joyous personality traits onto others than to own them ourselves.

Wheat or weed? At times, do we human beings speak and act as if we can differentiate between our own good and bad actions? I am really fortunate to be the educational supervisor for Joanne Scofield at Penticton United Church. This gives me wonderful opportunities to reflect on ministry in general and preaching in particular. We agree that despite careful preparation, there are sermons that just don't fly. That's hard on the ego, but time and again, it is those very sermons that God uses to touch someone's heart or move someone to action. So who are we to judge what is wheat and what is weed? It seems to me that when we human beings are most sure we are doing good, we are in the greatest danger of wandering far from the way of Jesus. Just look at the history of the church with the Crusades to free the Holy Land from the infidel,

the Inquisition to purify the church from heretics and apostates, Indian Residential Schools to bring Christianity and modern education to First Nations children.

Wheat or weed? Like the agricultural workers, we may think we can pick out the weeds as we look around at things and people or consider our own words and actions. The reality is we tend to uproot far too much wheat with the weeds. So why not leave the judging to God who actually knows us human beings completely? Why not hold more loosely to what we think we know, and open ourselves more fully to God's love and leading as we care for the entire field of this world?