

## **Sermon for July 26, 2020—“Gray Areas”**

Seventeenth Sunday of OT, Year A – Text: Matthew 13:10-17, 24-30, 36-43

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Most of us know how annoying weeds can be. They steal water and resources from the plants that we placed purposefully in our gardens. Weeding is probably one of the more joyless parts of landscaping or maintaining our plants and gardens. Pulling those prickly, finicky nuisances that seem to do anything they can to stay in the ground is not fun. Yet, at the same time it's also necessary. So we grab our weed whackers, our weed eaters, whatever tools you might have on hand and get to work. I'm thinking then that when we hear Jesus tell the Parable of the Wheat and Tares or the Wheat and the Weeds we can probably identify with the servant who wants to get the weeding done.

Yet, take a walk down any neighborhood streets and you'll quickly realize that not everyone has the same ideas about yard maintenance, particularly weeding. On the street on which Jane and I live in Sayler Park, and I bet where you all live too, the landscaping varies. Everyone does it differently with varying degrees of diligence and so the gardens, flower beds and lawns in our neighborhood vary wildly. There are some lawns and flower beds kept impeccably, hardly a blade of grass out of place, not a weed to be seen. And then there are others where the weeds and grass seem to be growing in harmony and growing tall, which probably describes it nicer than it actually appears. I mean let's face it most neighborhoods have at least one resident whose yards are just a hot mess! The contrast is most noticeable when there are next door neighbors with these two extremes of garden and lawn styles, a lawn that resembles a golf green next to a patch of wild grass and weeds (the aforementioned hot mess). Anyone have this experience? Let me ask, does anyone live next door to a neighbor who appears to care not one whit about the appearance of their lawn? Don't you hate that?!?!?

It's this tension that sits at the heart of the parable of the wheat and weeds. The crops have been planted; the wheat is growing but so are the weeds. And the servant and the master have very different approaches to deal with this tension. The servants want to get down to weeding. They want to get rid of unwanted weeds right away thereby resolving the tension. But the master wants to wait. Let the wheat and weeds grow together, the master says, because when you pull up one you destroy the other. Now, of course, when we stop and think about it we realize that this parable is not about wheat and weeds. Obviously.

Jesus isn't giving a how-to lesson in gardening. But I also think that the parable is about more than the explanation provides. I believe that the parable is about more than just weeds being like the evil ones of the world who will be thrown into the fire or about the good wheat being gathered into heavenly grain bins. Like so much in the bible in both the Old AND New Testaments there's more to things here than we might realize. And you probably know me well enough by now to know that I rarely pass up an opportunity to go deeper.

So, as I read this morning's text it occurred to me that the larger point Jesus is making is about the tension. Yep, the tension. And that this is today's lectionary reading makes me smile because of its timeliness. I say that because of what's been going on these last few months. Would you agree that we live in a time of extraordinary tension? Can I get an amen? Not just with what's been going on in the world but with what's been going on here at Westwood First these last few years that seems to have been magnified these last few months. Would you also agree that we're not good at living with tension? In my experience churches, by and large, are not good living with tension. I know I'm not. So, what can this parable teach us? Let's take a look.

We find there that the master says to leave the weeds be. But most of the time we're like the servants who want to get on with things and get down to weeding. We don't do well with tension because we'd rather cut to the chase and get straight to the resolution. It's why lots of TV shows tell a complete story each episode and why cliffhangers frustrate us so much. It's why most music is careful to end with resolving notes, a song that ends without sounding finished feels wrong. It's why we want to get the weeding done instead of letting the weeds grow with the garden. The tension bothers us, not to mention the aesthetics! But the tension extends far beyond gardens. It infiltrates our lives and work, our relationships, our churches, even our faith. We don't like it when things we perceive as good and bad, right and wrong exist at the same time in the same place. We don't like weedy things infecting our wheat.

As Matthew attempts to unpack this parable by telling us what it means. He puts it in terms of faith, or more specifically, faith communities. As faith communities we know that we need to welcome new people and try new ways of doing things. We know we need to be open to change to open ourselves up to new life and the places it could spring up among us. But let's admit it, new people can sometimes feel weedy to us, new ideas and new ways of being can feel like they're taking up our limited energy and resources. New life can feel like it is choking us. How often do we turn down new ideas because of it? It's probably a good thing no one's kept track. But I'm serious, think about it. How many times have what were probably good ideas been shot down because it seemed that they would have just taken energy/life from us like weeds? How often have we only been concerned about whether we'd get a fruitful return, a good crop of wheat as reward for our efforts? How often do we weed out potential new members because we believed that they'd be weeds instead of wheat? And what about us personally? How often do we remove the new growth in our lives refusing to sacrifice some of our own resources; time, our talent, our treasure, to allow new life take root among us mistakenly believing it to be weeds instead of wheat? What are some the things that we perceive to be harmful might actually be helpful?

Over the last month or so I've made a point of directly addressing the time in which we are now living. I've said that death and crisis have a way of pushing the really important things to the forefront. That King Solomon, renowned for his wisdom, said that there is more wisdom in the house of mourning than in the house of feasting.

That C.S. Lewis, a wise man in his own right, wrote that “God whispers to us in our prosperity and shouts to us in our pain.” I’ve said a number of times that pain teaches if only we had eyes to see and ears to hear. But more often than not we look for quick and easy ways to avoid it or something to relieve it, even if doing so is to our detriment. We encounter so many things that can teach us, so many people from whom we can learn. But in our discomfort forsaking wisdom, insight and courage we don’t see it for what it is or what it **can** be. We don’t see that it can be life-giving or life changing. Whether we’re ready or able to admit it or not we really do struggle living with the unfamiliar, the unwelcome, and the tension it brings. We struggle with tension. We struggle with living in the gray areas, those places where good and bad, right and wrong, are not black and white, those places where what’s beneficial isn’t readily apparent and the opportunities we’re presented aren’t easily identifiable as such. All we can feel is the pain. All that we feel is the tension. And yet the tension, the place in between good and bad, right and wrong, even life and death is where so much of our faith rests. It’s here in this tension, in these gray areas where grace abounds where God is so often found. Where God can always be found!

So much tension. So little patience. The master tells his servants to leave the weeds be, leave them because pulling them out will uproot the wheat as well. The master tells the servants to live in the tension because that’s where life can grow. The weeds will steal from the wheat, but **both** will grow. **We** will grow.

Thanks be to God.

Amen and amen.