“ARE YOU GROWING GRASS OR KILLING WEEDS?”

Matthew 13:24-30; 36-43

June 21, 2020

Minneapolis pastor Leith Anderson tells of calling ChemLawn to take care of his suburban weed-infested lawn, only to have them reject his lawn as a client because it was so bad. One member of his church volunteered to totally remove his old lawn and start a new one, an offer he was almost ready to accept, when a former farmer gave him some advice: Don’t worry so much about getting rid of the weeds. Just grow the grass and the *grass* will take care of the *weeds*.

The Andersons took his prescription and did all they could to grow “the good stuff.” After a couple of years, the lawn looked just as good as everyone else’s.

The Andersons had to ask themselves what would be their primary focus—growing grass or killing weeds? Like the householder from this morning’s Gospel parable, the Andersons decided to concentrate on the positive—on growth—instead of pouring their time, energy, and resources into killing off weeds.

Taking this tack not only concentrates our energies on the positive, it safeguards us from bad judgment calls. Sometimes what we would quickly suppose to be weeds turns out to be unexpected flowers in our midst. In Jesus’ parable, God intentionally takes responsibility for “reaping,” for gathering and bundling together true weeds [takes that task] out of human hands, and makes this a task for divinely directed angels. Differentiating between weeds and beneficial plants is not a human responsibility.

And I think I’ve said, in some grouping or other around here, that one of my college sins I regret most is sitting in our rooms at night, trying to figure out if this professor or that was or was not a Christian. And this in a non-sectarian liberal arts college. They had no necessary reason to be Christians, but we assumed that the best people and the best teachers were, of course, Christian in a way we would recognize and identify. What a sinful, judgmental waste of time! Differentiating between weeds and beneficial plants is not a human responsibility.

It’s not a good thing to be quick in our judgments. If the reapers in the parable had their way, they would have tried to tear out the weeds, and they would have torn out the wheat as well. Judgment had to wait until the harvest came. A person in the end will be judged, not by any single act or stage in their life, but by the whole life. Judgment doesn’t, and can’t, come until the end. A person may make a great mistake, and then redeem themselves, and, by the grace of God, atone for it by making the rest of their life near unto holy. Or, a person might live an honorable life, and then in the end wreck it all by a sudden collapse into sin. No one who sees only part of a thing can judge the whole; and no one who knows only part of a person’s life can judge that person.

It used to be that when individuals suffered from sinus infections, allergies, asthma, T.B., or other lung or nose infections, their physicians sent them out to the arid Southwest. But transplants from the North or Midwest began to miss their old environments. Fed up with front yards of weedy, scraggly sagebrush, junipers, and cactus, people began ripping up and rooting out the native vegetation and sowing great swaths of bluegrass, clover, and other pretty green garden and lawn things.

These regionally unsuited plants required huge amounts of water (making formerly desert places like Palm Springs quite humid, believe it or not.) Most ironically, however, these plants brought with them their familiar loads of pollen and other airborne goodies that soon had all the Southwest sinus refugees sneezing, coughing, and wheezing as though they had never left home. By getting rid of the “weeds,’ they created an environmental disaster.

Now, without a doubt, there are honest-to-goodness, downright worthless weeds out there—growing within the ranks of our city governments, our police forces, our local schools, our elected officials, the brown and black residents of our inner cities, and even our congregations. They get elected or appointed or promoted by pretending to be good seeds, anxious to contribute to the welfare of others. But they soon reveal their true weed-like nature, selfishly producing nothing but thorns and chaff.

The parable of the wheat and the weeds counsels us not to waste our time and energies on these profitless and energy-sapping people. “Don’t let the turkeys get you down” might be another way of offering similar advice. Addressing every negative comment they throw out, dodging every nasty barb intentionally zinged into the discussion, fighting for space to root positive plans and observations, makes for an exhausting encounter that tests one’s stamina, sanity, and sanctity.

However . . . Jesus does not intend the Body of Christ to be a flower growing in a pristine garden . . . read ‘congregation.’ It is to live IN the world, among the weeds, learning how to survive in the presence of their negative impact and energy. Pulling the weeds is not the church’s business. Growing wheat, growing bread for the world, growing souls, making more good happen than bad . . . making good happen OUT OF THE BAD is the task of those who are Christ’s.

PBS did a special a few years ago on Isaac Bashevis Singer, a documentary about this Polish-born writer who went on to be nominated for an Oscar. The footage included an interview with Singer in his Manhattan apartment. As Singer stepped over books and papers in one very disheveled room, he explained, “If I clean up this room, it would lose its character. Before God said, ‘Let there be light’ there was chaos. So chaos is even older than the light.” So Isaac Bashevis Singer of the environment that helped him be creative.

What chaos is there in our lives that just may be giving birth to new bursts of creativity and insight? Discussions and disagreements and wrestling with each other over the problems—and the insights—about what to Revitalize and make our ministry better and how to do it? Certain family situations that may be the spur to further growth and understanding and love? Sin, which we want to turn away from and give to God so we can go on? I think so.

But we Christians do need to create big things, nurture great growth, and get beyond, shut out the memory of things that choke us or get us down. Phan Boi Chau, a nationalist revolutionary in Vietnam before World War 1, wrote from prison about the tragic nature of his struggle against the French colonists: “I tried to patch up the sky and fill in the ocean.” Don’t some struggles feel like that, like patching up the sky, like filling in the ocean?

But there ARE great dreams, dreams that pull us into the active, ongoing life of God. And some are easier to realize than we might think.

Richard Allen Farmer is a professor at Gordon College and a much sought-after motivational speaker. He tells this story:

When I was a youngster, probably 9 or 10 years old, my grandparents bought us a small plastic cartoon projector as a Christmas present. Bringing in a couple of reels of black and white cartoon, Pop-pop taught me how to thread the projector. He patiently demonstrated how to bend the film around the sprockets and thread it onto the take-up reel. After one demonstration, Pop-pop said, “Now you try it.” I threaded the projector correctly and I will never forget his words: “I have the smartest grandson in the world!”

Years later, I asked Pop-pop if he remembered that incident. He didn’t, but I did! I have thought I was bright, skillful, teachable, and quick to catch on. I would probably also have remembered if Pop-pop had said, “I have the dumbest grandson in the world.” And my life might have demonstrated my grief.

When it comes to our treatment of other people, there are no weeds, only wheat, only “angels unawares.” I don’t normally watch *Undercover Boss*, don’t even know whether it’s still on, but while we were on vacation one time, it came on the TV in the motel one night. Now, again, I can’t say if this was always the case, but in this episode, the boss was apprenticed to three different people in his company, and each of the three was a loser.

One wanted to go out and smoke some pot with him, another had different ideas than the company policy, and was always criticizing company orders, and the third was an in-your-face reformer on a skateboard. He’d skateboard through the store and make the boss do push-ups at his (the employee’s) whim.

Well, the boss found good things, company-improving things, that each of these employees did, or that was consistent with the gem of character in each one, and rewarded them even though in a lot of ways they were slackards and losers. He saw the potential, for them and for the company.

So . . . what’s our watchword, then? Grow good things. Let people know they are loved. Nurture people who love Jesus Christ and each other. Shake the dust of the negative ones off your feet, and go on to make a kingdom of our God.

Amen.