

Mark Twain said he spent a lot of money tracing his family tree, then twice as much trying to keep it a secret! Which reminds me of the family that wanted its history written, so they hired a professional biographer to help them out. However, they were worried about Uncle George, the 'black' sheep of the family, who had been executed in the electric chair for murder. "That's not a problem," said the biographer. When the family got the biography back, they looked up what was written about Uncle George. They read: "George occupied a chair of applied electronics at an important government institution. He was attached to his position by the strongest of ties, and his death came as a real shock." (DYNAMIC PREACHING, July-Sept 2006) But if you ever start feeling like you have the goofiest, craziest, most dysfunctional family in the world, all you have to do is go to the state fair. Because 5 minutes at the fair, and you'll be going, "You know, we're alright. Not all that bad. In fact, we're dang near royalty!" (Jeff Foxworthy) Of course the current crop of British royalty has often been referred to as 'the royally dysfunctional family.'

OK, first a little background on this gospel. The parable of the weeds among the wheat is unique to the Gospel of Matthew. Now all of the parables of this chapter of Matthew draw special attention to the mystery of the kingdom of heaven, one of the main themes of this gospel. The word used for 'weeds' comes from a Greek word known as darnel. It referred to a poisonous weed that could "resemble wheat in its early stages of growth" and was not only difficult to distinguish from it but could also intertwine its roots with the wheat crop, making it difficult to remove without destroying the wheat as well. Now as for an enemy actually sowing darnel in another's field? This happened -- there were actually Roman laws pertaining to agriculture that "specifically forbade the sabotaging of crops by planting darnel." So while a lot of this sounds rather strange to us, this was all very familiar to Jesus' hearers.

The steadiness of the master -- with his knowledge of the enemy's work in sowing the darnel -- is contrasted with the hasty reaction of the servants. The master's exhortation is to act with patient tolerance in the present. This rests upon the conviction that ultimately GOD is the just Judge of all things and that He will provide a just judgment in the end times. The Lord of the field and of the harvest can see beyond the confused present state of things. Now remember, a parable is "a cryptic statement intended to stimulate thought," but it also "invites listeners to enter the story and make judgments about the events and people in it and challenges us to draw conclusions about our own lives." Now I have to be fair -- all of this background was given to me by one very smart kid! Our very own Deacon Steven DiMassimo, who works hard on his homilies -- and those of you who have heard him I'm sure agree. He does a great job -- and he's just getting started! All of this work was in a paper he submitted at the seminary -- and I think the professor was a bit harsh -- Steven said he 'only' got a 92!

OK, so what do weeds and wheat and weeding things out have to do with us? Actually, a lot! Second point. One of the biggest temptations we have as religious people is to divide our world into binary realities -- wheat and weeds, good and evil, virtue and sin. Of course we all presume that we are the good guys, the wheat, the virtuous, and so we volunteer to take care of the problem: "Let me pull them up, I'll clean up this mess." But the Master has another plan: "Let them be -- the wheat and the weeds -- let them grow together until the harvest." You mean we are supposed to ignore evil in our midst? Just let it go? Did we hear Jesus correctly?

Jesus, don't you get it? The weeds are growing even as we sit here doing nothing! We need to get going! And we don't like His answer. We want results. We want answers. We want action. We want a world

without weeds where wrongs are righted, cancers and Covid are cured, evil evicted, goodness guaranteed. Confused by our seeming righteousness, we think that being dutiful servants of Jesus charges us with weed control, ferreting out wrong, censuring sin, cleaning up the dirt of our world, which of course always means the dirt of OTHERS.

But from somewhere behind our stunned silence, maybe even behind our self-righteous anger, comes the good news. Here is unexpected good news that invites us to nurture the gospel rather than correct the wrong. Times are, every fiber in our souls rallies to weed control where we see the wrong, we call the shots, we march off to strains of ONWARD CHRISTIAN SOLDIERS. Do not misunderstand me. There are many wrongs to be righted, evils to be faced, and sins to be named.

But there is also a gospel to be grown. When Jesus said, "Love your enemies," He did not underestimate how devious an enemy could be. He knew well what is in the human heart. But He wants us to know that loving the enemy grows the gospel. And love is the gospel way.

Yes, we can spend our lives managing weeds, trying to correct, fix, control. But as Dr. Phil would ask: "And how's that working out for you?" Many churchgoers spend their lives trying to fix everyone else. And study after study points out that as Christians we are thought of as judgmental, obsessed with sexual sins, and over the top about homosexuality and abortion. And it's not working out very well for us, not working out very well for the church. History tells us from the bloody centuries of the Crusades to the meanness in every stripe of fundamentalism that weed control destroys more wheat than weeds. Jesus said, "If someone strikes you on the right cheek, turn the other also." That part of the gospel we tend to skip right over. Why should we turn the other cheek? Are we to believe that Christians like being slapped around? No. Simply put, more gospel, more grace, more of Christ grows on a turned cheek than a clenched fist; always has, always will.

Times are, like Paul, we pray, staring at the weeds, "with groans that words cannot express." We long for answers, we want God to give us the green light, if not to 'ROUND-UP' the weeds, at least to mow them down. Such is not the work God places in our too easily confused hands. In fact, the parable clearly teaches that, at the end of time, GOD will deal with the weeds, not us.

We would like to take up the cause of weed control because it's always a lot more fun to point our fingers at someone else than to deal with our own issues! But too many followers of Christ today spend so much of their lives being angry, bitter and disappointed. I know. I've been there myself. Dumb way to live. Angry and bitter. Jesus offers us a better way to deal with weeds. His better way is a much holier calling, and it leads not to anger, but to joy. The better way is to spend our lives nurturing the gospel. Love those whose lives seem choked by weeds; comfort the confused; sit patiently with the grieving; surprise the cynic with unexpected flowers. Send gospel flowers. Even let them grow inside our own lives and watch the weeds shrivel until that day when God takes them all away. (adapted from GRACEWORKS, 19 July 2020, p. 16)

Third, this parable is about the end – and about now. The kingdom of heaven is not some place new or separate or different. It is where we are now. It is who we are now. The kingdom of heaven is among us, upon us. It is us. But because it is us, it is simply forever disordered. All the elements are already here, but we just can't seem to get it quite right. We are in the kingdom of heaven, but it's not the complete kingdom of heaven.

But note how this gospel passage ends when Jesus explains it a bit further. The righteous are going to shine like the sun in the kingdom of the Father. But that's not just at the end – we're supposed to be light shining in our world NOW.

We might want to reflect a bit this week about when we have felt like we were shining like the sun. Where were we? What were we doing? Think about where we are wanted and needed, where our presence and our gifts are important and necessary. And then consider the things that get in the way of our shining like the sun. Are they weeds? Or, are they, like all of us, also trying to shine like the sun but don't have the right environment or resources?

The American Trappist monk, theologian and mystic, Thomas Merton, once described his experience of an epiphany of the human condition this way: "In Louisville, on the corner of Fourth and Walnut, in the center of the shopping district, I was suddenly overwhelmed with the realization that I loved all these people, that they were mine and I was theirs, that we could not be alien to one another even though we were total strangers....I have the immense joy of being human, a member of the race in which God Himself became incarnate. As if the sorrows and stupidities of the human condition could overwhelm me, now that I realize what we all are. If only everybody could realize this! But it cannot be explained. There is no way of telling people that they are all walking around – shining like the sun!" (CONJECTURES OF A GUILTY BYSTANDER, p. 155)

When we realize we are shining like the sun, my friends – and help others to shine like the sun – we are growing the gospel, and the kingdom of heaven is born among us. Amen.