

While we are away ... reflections for the Pentecost season
July 19, 2020 – 7th Sunday after Pentecost

This is our third season of the Church Year under gathering restrictions. Pentecost began with two special Holy Days— Pentecost Sunday and Trinity Sunday. We are now immersed in the ‘green’ season of Pentecost. We will be following Jesus and his ministry as we think about the Spirit-led ministry of the Church. Here is Pastor Steve’s message for The Seventh Sunday after Pentecost. A copy of the bulletin will be available to supplement “in-house” worship.

Lessons for Pentecost 7

Psalm 100; Romans 8:12-25; Matthew 13:24-30, 36-43

Jesus has us back in the weeds this week. In the weeds of another parable about the Kingdom of God. Last week, the parable featured a sower, randomly, extravagantly sowing seeds wherever they might fall. Yes, we remember, some seeds did not make it. And, yes, we remember, some seeds did make it and did produce, extravagantly, 30 fold, 60 fold, 100 fold!

This week, Jesus introduces us to a more traditional planter of seeds – a householder who plants good seed *in his field*. But then, Jesus introduces a dramatic plot twist into this picture of farming: at night, while everyone is asleep, an enemy comes and plants weeds in the field – yes, weeds in the field where the good seeds were planted! The crime goes unnoticed until the plants in the field start growing. Then the servants can see that something is wrong and ask the householder: “Didn’t you sow good seed in the field, where did these weeds come from?” The answer: “An enemy has done this!” “An enemy has done this!”

The parable teaches all gardeners a valuable lesson – weeds come from enemies! Even if we have forgotten or were not aware of this basic Bible lesson, many of us have likely thought about the evil being who scattered the weed seeds in our carefully planted gardens. “An enemy has done this!” We might laugh as we tend to our gardens and understand that our fate as gardeners is to live forever with a weed problem. But Jesus’ goes on, with the parable and the explanation, and we learn this is no laughing matter. This is a parable of the Kingdom – not just an anecdote about this fall’s harvest!

The enemy is the devil – **the devil**. The last time we heard about the devil in Matthew’s Gospel was when the devil tried to untrack Jesus with temptations at the very outset of his ministry. The next time we will hear about the devil will be in Jesus’ account of the Son of Man coming at the end of time to judge the sheep and goats. The goats, who did not minister to Jesus by ministering to ‘the least of these’- who did not offer a drink to the thirsty, food to the hungry, clothing to the naked; – the goats will be cast into eternal fire along with the devil.

The devil is the enemy. This is serious stuff. This is a serious parable. Those weeds represent more than a nuisance, a blight in the field – those weeds represent the seeds sown by the enemy, the dreaded enemy, the devil!

“Do you want us to go and gather the weeds”, the servants asked. “Do you want us to go and yank them out- right now and get rid of them?” This is the instinct – pull them out, burn them, destroy them, obliterate them, now, stat, ASAP.

“No!”. “No”, says the householder. And this, for me, is the crux of the matter, the heart of the parable, the message of the kingdom. “No, for in gathering the weeds you would uproot the wheat along with them... let both of them grow together.” There are dire consequences ahead for those weeds: they will be picked at the harvest, the Son of Man will order them to be bundled and burned. The parable tells us they will be taken care of. Don’t worry about the

weeds, about evil, about the evil one; in this kingdom, they will be taken care of. Just not now. Not now. Now is still growing season. The wheat, the good seeds that were planted, need more time - to grow and to produce.

Jesus' parable today makes it clear: it is still growing season. Yes, the weeds are a problem, but the weeds in the field must not blind us to the goal of the field – to produce wheat, fruitful wheat – yes, 30 fold, 60 fold, 100 fold. This is all possible. The wheat can and will produce even with weeds growing among them.

It is still growing season and the good plants must be given a chance. They must not be harmed by moving too quickly to the harvest. They must not be uprooted in an effort to remove the weeds. The weeds will have their day, now are the days of growing.

Jesus' parable makes it clear that there is a householder in charge of the field, indeed, in charge of the planting and the harvesting. Let's call this householder God. God has a stake in this planting endeavor and God has a plan for this planting endeavor. At the moment, at these moments in which we are living, it is the time for growing. In the growing season, wheat and weeds grow together. The householder may not like the weeds, but the householder loves the wheat that is still growing – that wheat must not be damaged.

We are the wheat growing in God's kingdom field. We cannot help but notice the weeds that share this field, the field that we call life. And, as we confess each week, those weeds threaten to uproot us and untrack us in our growing, take our mind off the goal of the field – to produce good fruits. We are fragile, we are tempted. We forget what we are - the plants of the good seed planted in the field. We forget whose we are – the beloved wheat of the householder.

Yes, it can be a challenge to live in the growing season, growing in the field alongside weeds. How long do we have to coexist with these weeds? The householder is not ready to harvest. The householder is patient in the growing season – even when we are so ready for the weeds to be yanked up.

Our Tuesday morning Bible study concluded this season's Bible Study by looking at 2 Peter. It was written to Christians who were living in hostile times, facing slander, mistreatment, sometimes persecution. One of the ways their pagan neighbors mocked them was to question their belief in the 2nd Coming of Jesus. Many early Christians believed that Jesus would be coming back very soon, a matter of years. Now decades had passed and there was no 2nd coming. The author of 2nd Peter encouraged these Christians, reminding them what the Psalmist wrote: 'with the Lord, one day is like a 1000 years' and then added this: *The Lord is not slow about his promise, as some think of slowness, but is patient **with you**, not wanting any to perish, but all to come to repentance.* God's patience is **for us**, giving us time to grow, giving us time to repent – to turn to God, the householder, the lord of the harvest.

It is still the growing season, good news for us. But, these weeds – these weeds bring us constant reminders of the bad and the bad news around us.

I find Paul's words to the Romans helpful for us as we live in this growing season. Paul understands that for the children of God there is also the **groaning season**. The season when we can be overwhelmed by our present circumstances – the weeds all around us. Paul describes times when we are on the verge of falling back into fear, of becoming slaves to fear. We are living in fearful and anxious times. An invisible virus makes its way around our world, our country, our cities, our gatherings. We get warnings; we get advice. We get masks; we get bottles of sanitizer. We get resentful; we get judgmental. We get frustrated, we get isolated. We miss

hugs and hand shakes, we miss visits and conversations that just happen. We get fearful and anxious.

And as the invisible virus circulates, our country has seen visible signs of the racial unrest and injustice that is all around us. The weeds of our past, which many of us had been able to overlook, are now there to be seen in plain sight. It is not pretty. The weeds of racism threaten the growth of our society. We cannot wait. We must find a way to uproot these weeds, but in the process, tenderly caring for all who have been denied a place to safely grow.

Yes, we, the children of God, are in a groaning season. Paul understands this. “The whole creation has been groaning in labor pains”, he says, “we ourselves groan inwardly.” We are groaning because it is still the growing season, because the weeds are still among us, because there is still bondage to decay, because the full freedom of the glory of God’s children is yet to be. Paul says, just so, we have the Spirit, we have the first fruits of God’s Spirit. We have the Spirit of God, that helps us cry out to God, “Abba Father”. We speak this together each time we recite the Lord’s Prayer – ‘Abba, our Father’. Yes, it is God’s Spirit who is with us in our groaning, in our fearful and anxious moments of despair to help us cling to God, to help us cling to our hope. Yes, Paul says, hope is not seen, but in hope we are saved. “We hope for what we do not see and we wait for it with patience.”

Today, Jesus’ parable features weeds and wheat growing together with the householder’s blessing. A striking parable, a striking picture. Jesus will end his life showing us another striking picture – a cross – his Cross, planted between two other crosses, the crosses of thieves -- you might say weeds, all done with the householder’s blessing. It is striking. The Son of Man, the figure in the parable who sows and reaps wheat with such control, who pulls up and burns the weeds with such authority, now dies on a Cross. It is a striking picture ... but look closely and you will see a striking picture of hope and divine patience. Yes, look closely, for there is a harvest to be seen: one of the thieves turns to Jesus as his life is running out and finds life. Listen closely, for there is a harvest at the foot of the Cross: one of the soldiers attending this execution looks up at the man on the Cross and says: “*Surely this man was God’s Son.*” There it is, God’s patience in harvesting bearing fruit – God’s patience with the thief, patience with the centurion gives us a striking picture of grace!

We are in the growing season. Yes, Paul says, it sometimes means groaning as we long for what is coming. But in our groaning, in our growing, we know the householder has a plan for all seasons, yes, patiently God has a plan for us. So we can pray with hope, with joy and thanksgiving: Abba Father.

Amen