#  Genesis 28.10-19aMatthew 13.24-30, 36-43

**23rd July 2023**

## Don’t Do the Weeding

**Introduction to the Theme**Betty loved her garden, and every year made it look beautiful. There was never a weed in sight. Gordon, her husband once said to me that long after he’d gone to bed, most nights Betty would spend an hour outside, sometimes with touch in one hand, trowel in the other digging up weeds. So, whenever we see a garden with shrubs separated from each other by weed free brown earth, we say: *Ah, just like Betty’s Garden.*Now, I’m not like Betty and, in truth, I’m often hard pressed to spot the difference between a flower and a weed, and have been known to pull the wrong one out and leave the wrong one in.

Imagine, then, my joy at discovering in this week’s gospel that my way of gardening may actually have a biblical mandate when Jesus says in today’s parable: let the wheat and the darnel grass grow together until harvest. In other words: *Don’t do the weeding!*Of course, when it comes to religion, we’ve been rather keen on weeding for centuries, If, using picture language, we think of flowers as good, or even good beliefs and good people, and weeds as being the opposite, then most religions have a way of creating boundaries. Weeding people out. *Them* and *Us* boundaries, *In* and *Out* boundaries.

Churches can do this by rigid requirements that have to be met before a person is, say, welcomed as a member or allowed to receive Holy Communion. Such *boundaryfying* of faith perhaps makes us feel secure, even superior. It can certainly be the catalyst for prejudice.

Yet, you may say, doesn’t today’s parable warn us against bad seed and a harvest of darnel grass? And doesn’t it say that in due time we need to come to a judgement about what is good and bad in society and in our own lives?

Indeed, it does. There is a time for weeding, for making judgements – not just in the rather dramatic apocalyptic sense that Matthew means it here, but those thoughtful and responsible judgements that need to be part of any society or individual’s life. For example, we see the loving wisdom behind those precepts given to Moses in the Sinai story of the Jewish scriptures and we call them the Ten Commandments not the Ten Suggestions.

And in today’s parable, which is only recorded in Matthew’s gospel, Jesus uses that terminology of the Kingdom, and this Kingdom is characterised by the virtues of both love and justice.

And the focus in much of the extended teaching sections of his gospel is that there is a difference between the Kingdom of Caesar, which is often built on fear, suppression and superiority and the Kingdom of God which is a message of inclusivity, kindness and love. And Jesus asks us to come to a judgment about which one we choose, and ultimately to weed out the other.

So, in today’s sermon we’ll the thinking about wheat and darnel grass – if one is good and one is bad, at what stage do we know the difference, and if, for a time at least there comes the cry to ‘stop weeding’, how do we develop the patience to wait for both to grow without rushing into the shed to pick up the trowel too early?

**Sermon**

So, what do we make of the parable in today’s gospel?

Jesus, the storyteller, connects with his agricultural audience as he speaks of wheat and darnel grass growing up side by side. You can almost hear the appreciative murmurings being uttered: *Yes, I’ve had that problem in my field too…*

Not being a gardener I’m not too sure what today’s equivalents would be, but maybe Ground Elder would figure somewhere!

And maybe our reaction to this parable is so predictable it’s been replicated down the centuries by every section of the Church. For we seem to have an inbuilt tendency to classify people as either being in or out. We can’t stop weeding!

Yet, this parable also makes the obvious and unmistakable truth that our actions, our lives and our beliefs can be in deliberate opposition to the Kingdom of Love that Matthew speaks of so often. Some weeding is necessary.

I suspect the reason Jesus says in today’s parable that the wheat and the darnel grass should be given an opportunity to grow together, is the simple fact that when we, as opposed to God, make a judgement about whether or not a seed is good or bad, we often get it wrong.

The Church has regularly used the sacraments as boundary markers which try to keep the bad seed out. And yet our strictness has, at times, seemed a long way from Matthew’s Kingdom of Love.

In another place and at another time, I chaired a Church Meeting at which we discussed changing our constitution – always a challenging moment for any church! Up to now anyone standing for election as a deacon had to have been baptised as a believer. We were, after all a Baptist Church and our forebears, perhaps understandably thought this was an important marker, so boundaryfied the church leadership in this way.

Yet our church – this was many years ago, before I got to the Promise Land of serving in an ecumenical church here at AFC – was beginning to value the joy of welcoming all sorts of Christians from various traditions to our congregation: like Anglicans and URC Christians who had been baptised as babies and then confirmed, and some of these people showed excellent leadership qualities. We passed the resolution with a typical compromise, that the majority of the diaconate must have been baptised as believers, and I rejoiced it was now more ‘open’ than it used to be for we could now welcome some into leadership who had been baptised in a different tradition.

But a member of the congregation harangued me afterwards for watering down my Baptist principles, he waged his finger at me and raised his voice saying how I had sold out to a wishy-washy theology, and he wouldn’t do the same.

Well, a few years passed, and my finger waging friend still sent us Christmas cards, even when we’d moved away. So, it was with a wry smile that I read one in which he said he’s moved church and was now gloriously happy worshipping in a wonderful Anglican congregation!

I’d like to think that, just maybe, that uncomfortable Church Meeting might have started a process in his thinking, a process used by God, that gave him a broader view and a greater love and respect for fellow pilgrims on the journey of faith. Because, in a way, something very positive has happened in my friend’s life, he’s de-boundaryfied a part of his faith practice and maybe what he thought of a darnel grass he now sees as good wheat.

And isn’t that the example of Jesus that’s so often found in the Gospels?

The religious hierarchy of his day had many strict codes of conduct that touched on every aspect of life from who you ate with to what you could or couldn’t do on the Sabbath. Laws, originally intended to provide justice and equality, to give society a common sense of security and well-being, became increasingly discriminatory and burdensome. Perhaps too much weeding was taking place and Jesus was having none of it and he becomes the boundary-crosser.

He ate with so called ‘sinners’, he held the hand of those with leprosy, he talked with those who lived in the shadows for fear of criticism, and he failed to keep the letter of the law on the Sabbath.

Jesus lived with blurred edges. Love has edges that are blurred too, and perhaps the reason St Paul spoke of a love that is patient is because God shaped love offers us the gift of time. Time for us to change our minds, mend our ways and take a different road. God’s gift to us of grace and time which meant that, in the opinion of many, Jesus spent too much time with weeds!

And maybe this is why it’s good to have Jacob’s story this morning from the Jewish Scriptures.

As we mentioned last week, this last Patriarch is an unusual hero of faith. He’s a schemer and a dreamer. He might well have valued the birthright more highly than his brother, and that in a way, complicates his story because in valuing it he honoured God. Yet he deceived his father in obtaining it, and process always matters. It’s never just about the ends because the means count. And that makes Jacob, as it probably makes most of us, a conflicted individual. Is he wheat? Or is he darnel grass? Because that’s often the question when we look at the seeds, we actually don’t know how they’ll turn out.

In the end Jacob finds an honoured place in the story and the nation is named after him. He grows and matures, yet it takes time and what we might have mistaken as darnel grass eventually flourishes as good wheat.

Let them grow together, says Jesus. Be patient, stand back, watch and pray, and see what happens. Because we often get surprises in both our own lives and in the lives of others.

On my way to church a few weeks ago I passed a young man just pulling in with his motor bike by the Sorting Office on Hill Avenue. He smiled and I smiled back and then as I walked on by, he called me back.

He asked, because I was wearing a clerical collar, if we might have a short conversation about God. Well, this doesn’t happen to me very often, so I was delighted. And so, he asked me why I had faith, because he said he couldn’t find any himself. I told him that although I’ve been going to church since I was six years old, I find that everyday I try to make a conscious decision to believe. He then said that at the moment he hated God because his father, who he called his best friend, had died and God hadn’t prevented this. He said none of this with any anger towards me, he just genuinely wanted to talk about his journey. I replied that I didn’t think God had taken his father away and that God doesn’t seem to directly intervene to stop bad things happening, otherwise Auschwitz wouldn’t have happened. And then I shared with him that for me the name God and the notion of love are interchangeable and that I sense God most of all in the love I receive from other people, especially at the tough moments of life.

I have to tell you it was the most precious part of my day that Sunday. What a privilege to spend three minutes talking about faith with a stranger who reached out to me because I was dressed like a priest.

I suspect if I was dressed differently as a Census taker and had knocked on his door and we’d got to that question about Belief and whether or not he was a Christian, he would have told me not to tick that box.

But does that mean you’d put him down as darnel grass rather than good seed? Because although he said he had no faith, he was thinking about faith, talking about faith and trying to make sense of faith. He was a Seeker after Truth, and although he felt deep pain and confusion he was doing so with such courtesy and good grace.

Today, as I hear Jesus say – let them grow together, I give thanks that we don’t believe in a box ticking God.

All of us, the minister on his way to church or the young motorcyclist mourning the loss of his best friend Father and thinking about the meaning of life as he parked up on Hill Avenue, all of us are a work in progress.

We don’t need to judge anyone else’s spiritual journey. We don’t need to do the weeding.

We need to have the patience to let both grow together and the humility to wait for God’s surprises.

In the name of Jesus, the master gardener. Amen

*Ian Green, Amersham, 21st July* *2023*