

Bearing with the Weeds in Order to Save

Based on Matthew 13: 24-30, 36-43, David Jahnke, 7/30/17

So I was blessed to go trail-biking with my sons, brother-in-law and nephews while on vacation last week. And after winding our way through trees on narrow paths, along a river's edge and up and down hills, we made our way out. It was a very special time in God's good world. And on our way back, my brother-in-law wisely said he would take the boys back along an easier path but I decided to head back into the woods and on my way up a steep hill, my wheels spun and then I lost my footing and I ended up falling into some itchweed. I was perturbed by the itch and rising hives and welts would not ruin the good time I had had; I poured some water on it and was off again.

Jesus tells us today that the Kingdom of heaven is kind of like this. God has planted human beings in the ground along good trails. But at some point, itchweed was planted by the devil. And now the good seed and the bad have roots in the same ground. We are all entangled. And as we strive to ride along paths of righteousness, we trip over all kinds of things and fall into the itchweed and its poison gets into us. But we best not let it ruin the joyful, good and fruitful life God intends.

So my first charge is: remember how good you are deep-down and that God has set you on a wonderful path. And that even though there are weeds that get under your skin, do not let that take away the joy and fruit-bearing God intends for you. And the weed-bearers-- you and others-- they are slow to repent and change. And much joylessness comes from holding judgments against yourself and others because of the slowness to change. Trust that God will judge and purify them and let the living waters of God's mercy bring joy back.

Another related parable for you...I did a lot of yard-work last spring and this reminded me that I'm not good at distinguishing good plants from bad weeds. There was one time in Corpus Christi where there seemed to be some vine-like crabgrass growing in our lawn. And I started pulling some of it up. There were long lines of it and as I pulled, more got caught up and before I knew it, I had pulled up about 5 square feet of my lawn. The vine-like crabgrass was my actual lawn! It was a form of grass I had never seen before.

So my second point is that it is impossible to tell the good plants from the weeds in this harvest field of God. And that is why we must not harshly judge others in ways that uproot them from the Love and Mercy which created them and nourishes them every day. Instead we do everything in our power to keep them grounded in God. Because God wants to save them all; not uproot and get rid of them. 1 Timothy makes this clear.

And this has profound ramifications. On a grand scale, it means we reject war-- the uprooting of people from life itself-- we reject it as an evil which can only be an absolute last resort. Interpersonally, it means we are for everyone because God is...; and we are particularly for anyone who lacks the salvation of God: the poor, hungry, sick, sinful and unbelieving. We trust that they are God's good seed and worthy of salvation.

We must be the opposite of the root of many of the world's problems-- believing that others out there are bad seeds; that they are of a bad genetic, religious, or cultural seed-- and so there is no changing them. That is when they and we live into the destruction that the enemy intends. Kids come to believe that they are bad so they make bad mistakes and then we put them in jail for too long because they are bad seeds who will not change. They usually learn the wrong things and come out of jail with little opportunity, help, hope, and they get caught up in terrible crimes and we go even further and put them to death. Young men have no choice but to be loyal to a tyrant and fight his wars and we fight wars against these quote-unquote bad guys and thousands of innocents end up dead.

I thank God, however, the entire us vs. them mentality is falling dissipating as history progresses. But remnants still linger. Earlier this week, I heard about three Jews, a Christian and a Muslim who were on an inter-faith peace mission to Israel but were barred from entering because of their positions critical of the Israeli government. One of them is the former moderator of our denomination and a very good guy-- Rick Ufford-Chase. To ban and exclude non-violent people due to religious or political beliefs is not the way forward for any democratic nation, especially not for one called to be a blessing to all the nations of the world.

And yes it would be easy to instead criticize Iran or Saudi Arabia but I have higher expectations for Israel. Just like I have higher expectations for our nation as well. What a circus we have in Washington and in the media these days. But not only our politicians but all of us must do better at bearing with people who seem to be weeds because they vehemently disagree with us. Only by peacefully and gracefully bearing with others will we find solutions that bless the most people and which bless those who need blessings the most.

All of our current divisions in our nation mean it is all the more important for us to be the body of Christ in whom there is no rich or poor, Jew or Gentile. I wonder if we might dare even say there is no sinner or righteous, no believer or unbeliever in his body? Do we have the kind of faith that knows that God created all through Jesus in his image? And that in his body, Jesus has redeemed all? That His Spirit sustains and enlivens all? Because again, it is only with this sort of faith that we are able to bear with all others and seek their health and well-being in mind, body and spirit.

This sort of language has led some to think I am a universalist when it comes to salvation. I am not. Jesus makes clear that the weeds and the flowers which are all in God's garden will be sorted out in the end. And I have no sadness that the wicked and unrepentant who persistently reject God's Ways will not inherit the Kingdom.

But our job here and now is to be a part of God's desire and plan to save all. And whether we perceive others as good or bad seeds largely determines whether God will use us instruments of salvation or the devil will use us for destruction.

So if you agree with the Bible that people, in general, are made in God's image and redeemed by Christ, help them know it through reaching out with smiles and honor and sincere interest in them and their traditions. If you believe it, then bear with and teach people who have had too many weeds around them. That is Matthew's great commission to us-- to teach people everything Jesus commanded. So we can not just gather together and lock away seeming weeds in preparation for their destruction. Instead we support prison ministries and criminal justice reform which bring them hope and truth to those who desperately need it.

Closer to home, we have to bear with and teach our sometimes difficult family members, neighbors and friends, especially any filled with judgmentalism and all of the darkness it brings. We promote forbearance privately yes but also publicly in the church and on Facebook as well. We remember and proclaim that God sends the sun and the rain upon the righteous and the unrighteous. And that with God, it's grace upon grace upon grace. Nothing is more needed in our desperately fallen world than grace. So open yourself daily to the constant outpouring of God's love and mercy and then shower them upon your worlds.

