

10/16/22 WORSHIP SERVICE

MORNING PRAYER – PASTOR LOIS

Thank you, God, for this beautiful autumn morning, for the opportunity to gather for worship, for fellowship, to be strengthened and encouraged in our faith. We thank you for special events in our lives – birthdays, anniversaries, days that remind us of the passage of time and of your faithfulness to us year upon year.

God, you have promised that you hear and honor our prayers – that you know the longings of our hearts before we speak them and yet you value the asking, the thanking, the acknowledgment of our relationship – that you are God and we are your people. And so we offer our prayers, humbly and boldly...

We ask for your care and keeping of Braxton and Amanda while they're in Boston, seeing the specialists and having the procedures. We ask for courage for both of them – Braxton as he undergoes surgeries and Amanda as she talks with the doctors, advocating for Braxton. We thank you for the care that he has already received and we pray for continued medical care that will allow him to live fully and freely.

God, we thank you for healing that has already come for Myron. We pray for patience as he continues to heal. Be with the doctors as they look for the best solutions and treatments for him.

We pray for Laura and Jared, for Eli, Logan and Cody as they continue to struggle with health concerns. Give them perseverance and plenty of patience, O Lord. Grant healing and health.

In these moments of silence now God, we bring to mind others we know who need your healing in body, mind or spirit... Lord, hear our prayers.

We pray for students who are busy with learning, playing, tending to their classes as well as many other activities and events. May they be safe and fulfilled, finding joy and gratitude in their involvements. Guard their hearts and minds as they juggle and balance so many things. We pray also for parents, teachers, coaches and the other adults who surround and guide our children.

Creator God, we pray for safety and wisdom for those who are sowing and harvesting, tilling the ground. We thank you for crops that have been produced, even as we acknowledge that the ground is dry... so dry. All growing things here need rain. The conditions are ripe for fire. And we thank you, God, for those who are trained and committed to working hard and serving well to keep us safe from those fires. We pray for their health and safety. And we lament, God that in some parts of the world the drought is much more severe than it is here – and in other parts of the world there is destruction and loss of life because of too much water, typhoons, hurricanes and floods. We lament the condition of this planet, the garden you created. We can

hear and see that the earth is suffering. We need courage and wisdom, God, to respond with honesty and compassion.

Thank you for hearing our prayers. For being our faithful, covenant God. Thank you for your Holy Spirit presence with us as we continue in this service of worship and in the days to come. Move in our hearts and minds to do justice, to love mercy and to walk humbly with you. In the name of Jesus who taught us. Amen.

PRAYER OF DEDICATION

Generous God,

Your abundance is revealed in the beauty of the earth and the splendor of creation. The colors of fall and the fruits of harvest. The parables of Jesus speak to your abundance – your ability to create a surprising spiritual harvest and growth from small seed.

Help us to let your abundance transform our mindset of scarcity – our fear that there is not enough, we don't have enough, we won't be enough. Let us boldly join your upside-down and surprising kingdom. May our gifts serve this kingdom. Amen.

LIVING WITH WEEDS

Matthew 13:24-43

Our yard has natural beauty as well as weeds. When we moved into our house, we inherited the previous owner's landscaping. We didn't make great changes, and have mostly tried to water and keep it from being overgrown with weeds. Much as they are a nuisance, sometimes weeding can be a calming activity.

My weed pulling doesn't extend to the lawn itself. Since reseeding and watering the lawn hasn't been high on our priority list, the grass (or what's left of it) hasn't done well. Shaded areas and areas with Bermuda grass have done a bit better. Then there is the crab grass and other weeds. In a year like this one, even they struggled, but they did succeed in gracing our lawn with hints of green.

All of us, especially farmers, can relate to the problem of weeds. The longer parable in our passage today deals with weeds.

This fall, we are looking at the Parables of Jesus, as we seek to understand the mystery of God's reign and how to perceive and participate in God's reign in the present. Last week, we looked at the Parable of the Sower who extravagantly sowed the seed of the gospel into different kinds of soils, and the good soil produced an incredible harvest. That was the first major parable of Jesus reported in Matthew, Mark, and Luke.

Our scripture reading today follows on the heels of the Parable of the Sower in the Gospel of Matthew. Jesus tells another parable that sounds similar to the first but with a twist.

In this parable, a farmer plants wheat, but by the time the wheat is forming heads, the farmer's servants come back and report that the field has weeds. The weed in question isn't just any

weed. It is probably darnel, a plant that is difficult to distinguish from wheat until it develops an ear.

Darnel was always a problem in traditional agriculture, and in fact it depended on infiltrating the wheat harvest in order to be replanted the next year. Modern agriculture has eliminated the problem, but it is still common in parts of Africa and Asia. In high enough quantities it can kill a person, or at least make a person intoxicated.

Shakespeare mentioned darnel, and one ancient Greek botanist theorized that wheat can turn into darnel – I can see that’s what it felt like when you discovered there’s something else that has infiltrated your crop.

Understanding that the weed of the parable is probably darnel helps to illuminate the parable. The question of the servants seems kind of unnecessary: where did these weeds come from? But in the different world of the parable, the owner believes there has been sabotage. While they were all sleeping, an enemy came and sowed the weeds.

What to do? To pull out the weeds before harvest would be difficult and would risk uprooting the good plants. There’s nothing to do but wait, and at the harvest sort between the ears of wheat and the ears of darnel.

It sounds like that part is realistic to how it was actually done. The darnel is burned, which is surely also realistic, if the farmers didn’t want to risk it reseeding and proliferating.

One summer, I gathered up a bunch of a certain noxious weed proliferating in patches alongside a soybean field of my dad’s and then burned it in piles. It had not spread much into the field, and we wanted to avoid that.

EXPLANATION OF THE PARABLE

Jesus goes on to tell two other memorable short parables about the parable that we will come back to later.

All of these are parables of God’s kingdom. Remember that Jesus began by saying, “the kingdom of God is like or can be compared to...”

That doesn’t mean that there is one particular element of the Parable that represents God’s Kingdom, but that the storyline of the parable as a whole gives us important insight into how God’s reign unfolds.

In private, Jesus explained the parable of the weeds to the close circle of disciples. The explanation is what you call an allegory, where major elements of the parable correlate with a specific symbolic meaning.

The explanation says clearly that the one who sows wheat is the “Son of Man” – a special title Jesus used of himself meaning a human who serves as an agent of divine action.

The field represents the entire world – not simply the church. The wheat includes all those who join God’s reign of love, while the darnel symbolizes everyone and everything that thwarts God’s reign of love.

The enemy is the devil, and the harvest is the end of the age, when people in Jesus’ day expected God to finally put an end to evil and set things right. Most first-generation followers of Jesus seem to have thought this would happen within their generation.

The explanation has a similar language and theology to other passages in Matthew. Each gospel has its own preferred language, and Matthew seems to like speaking the language of impending judgment.

The phrase “weeping and gnashing of teeth” which refers to people either in despairing remorse or despairing rage, shows up 6 times in Matthew, once in Luke, and then nowhere else in the New Testament.

There is a whole genre of Scripture called “apocalyptic.” The most well-known example is the book of Revelation, but there are apocalyptic passages in the Old Testament as well as in the New. “Apocalyptic” means “revealing” or “unveiling.” These passages aim to give a window God’s ultimate justice and restoration at the end of time for our very broken world.

The Parable of the Weeds, for instance, connects with the book of Daniel on several points. Both the cosmic title of “Son of Man” (Daniel 4), as well as similar language of judgment and the righteous “shining like the sun” in Daniel 12.

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For some Christians today, this language feels strange and even uncomfortable. We’re not sure what to do with the violence, the fire imagery, or how literally to take it, especially if you view the world through the lens of modern science.

It sounds a little like the end of *The Lord of the Rings*, after the ring of power is destroyed; the volcano spews fire and, the ground opens up and swallows up the evil creatures.

In Fantasy literature, it is usually not at all difficult to distinguish the good people (who generally look like us) from evil creatures, and sometimes we wish the real world were like that, or that there was one villain to blame everything on. If only real life were like that.

Maybe a helpful way to think about “apocalyptic” language in the Bible is to remember that it is assuring us that God’s way of love will ultimately prevail, and that we can hope in God setting things right in the end without explaining that mystery.

The process of burning darnel is one of spiritual purification. The NIV says, “everything that causes sin” – literally every “stumbling block” – is removed, so that all creation is freed to live and function according to the way of love.

The lesson the Parable of the Weeds offers is that it is not our task to separate weed from wheat, much less exercise violence in doing so. Our task is to be faithful to God's reign as we see it unfolding.

Menno Simons, the sixteenth century Dutch Anabaptist leader, criticized the Anabaptists that violently took over the city of Munster in Germany. Menno looked to the Parable of the weeds to argue that it is dangerous for Christians to try to violently root out people we think are "weeds." We might just become weeds in the process. Think of "ethnic cleansing," or rooting out "heretics" or trying to reunite a perfect Russian empire.

"Let none think that we should now root up the tares, or that we should now separate the goats from the sheep," Menno said.¹

Eugene Boring put it like this: The parable is a *"realistic reminder that the servants do not finally have the ability to get rid of all the weeds and that sometimes attempts to pluck up weeds cause more harm than good... We live in an imperfect world, and no human effort can eradicate that fact. But that was never our job anyway. We are given the task of living as faithfully and as obediently as possible, confident that the harvest is sure."*²

MUSTARD SEED AND WHEAT

Jesus told two parables in between the initial telling and explanation of the Parable of the Weeds. Anytime you have a sandwich like this, I always assume the middle part of the sandwich is particularly important, and that the outside of the sandwich should be read in a way that is connected to the middle – and vice versa.

Each of these, as the folks at Bible study observed, have to do with something small and imperceptible growing large or having a big effect.

Mustard seeds were proverbially tiny and could sometimes grow into a significantly sized annual plant – 6 ft or even more.

Jesus calls it the greatest of "garden plants." They are not trees, by the way, though "tree" was a common image for a kingdom or empire. The point might be two-fold. Not only is the mustard plant large compared to the seed, but the kingdom of God has an earthiness and humility to it – so the greatest of garden plants becomes the comparison rather than a giant oak tree.

The comparison with yeast has a similar quality of something imperceptible having large effect. The large quantity of flour (60 pounds!) might be an exaggeration like the exaggerated harvests in the parable of the sower. Or maybe it reminds Jesus's listener of the story of Sarah baking that much bread for the divine visitors who stayed with her and Abraham.

The woman "hides" the yeast within the flour. So the kingdom of God is hidden for those who don't have eyes to see, yet has a transformative effect.

¹ Simons, Menno. *The Complete Writings of Menno Simons*. Ed. J. C. Wenger. Herald Press, 1956; p. 38

² Boring, Eugene. "Matthew," *The New Interpreter's® Bible Commentary Volume VII*. Abingdon Press, 2015

LIVING WITH WEEDS

What do these smaller parables mean for how we hear the parable of the weeds?

Maybe it means there's no need to despair at the examples of brokenness we see in the world, including collective evils of racism, and the way our way of life is disrupting the global climate. That is not an excuse to do nothing, but the freedom to focus on the practical things we can do in the present to be faithful, setting the bar a little higher than where it is presently at.

Part of the richness of Parables is that they have layers of meaning. There is not just one objectively right way to take meaning from them, and hear God's truth for our lives.

I've found it helpful to embrace the fact that life is almost always a mixture of things. A mixture of wheat and weeds, if you want to call it that.

We all can relate to feeling like a good day is spoiled by one major thing that goes wrong. Or when you have a "terrible, horrible, no good, very bad day," you almost don't want anything good to happen, because then that would deprive you of the right to complain and spread your misery.

Good and bad, joy and grief are intertwined, sometimes two faces of the same coin. We can be honest about each and do not have to subsume one within the other.

This is true of ourselves. We all are imperfect. We all have our own "weeds" within us. Sometimes we even need to work on weeding out of our minds thoughts that are unhelpful for loving others or becoming the people we strive to be.

There may be a distinction to be made between personal shortcomings that aren't sin, and those that are. But whatever distinction you make doesn't change the fact that none of us is complete in our own journeys. We may be more complicit in the bigger evils of the world than we realize.

That's not to say we live in anxiety and worry about whether we are wheat or weeds. This is where we humbly stand on the grace and love of God.

At the same time, there is also a danger in presuming that we are the "wheat" and "those other people" are the weeds. Remembering that wheat and darnel initially look much the same, we have to be careful about making simple judgments of another person or group's character.

We rarely can put people or things into the neat categories of "wheat" and "weed." And the Parable with its stark language, actually releases us from that obligation. Those judgments can be left to God.

Maybe a better way to think about it is that in our common humanity, we all have our own "weeds." We must accept that we are both wheat and weeds, learn to identify each within us, and invite the transformation of the indwelling Spirit of God.

We cannot transform what we deny or refuse to see. We also cannot transform what we hate ourselves for.

Only when we are secure in the knowledge of being loved by God can we learn to see ourselves as we really are – with our imperfection, our flaws, sin, complicity, as well as our gifts, our worth, and our belovedness.

When we learn to see ourselves as we really are, with our flaws, sin, and complicity, and when we have compassion for ourselves, as we receive God's compassion, then we will have compassion for others. And that is the beginning of the Kingdom of God.

This seeing ourselves as we really are, with complete honesty, is the task of spiritual growth.

It is probably more important to see ourselves in this way while receiving God's love than it is to improve yourself in some specific area (not that that's a bad thing) just to feel you are doing better in the realm of score-keeping.

Various forms of prayer are the way to know ourselves as loved, invite God's spirit to dwell in us, ask for the grace of seeing the world differently, and asking to participate in God's redemptive work.

Whenever anyone does this, God's "kingdom" grows like the mustard plant. It leavens like a bit of yeast added to a mass of dough.

This kingdom that is not about domination, power-over, retribution, competition, or keeping score.

May God help us grow in seeing another way to live our lives, find freedom, and find small ways to resist the evils of the world while we wait for the yeast of God's reign to continue to work its magic. While we wait for that mustard plant to grow and for God to do more abundantly than we can ask or imagine.

BENEDICTION

May you be rooted and grounded in love and comprehend the breadth, length, height, and depth of the love of Christ beyond all knowledge
so that you may be filled with all the fullness of God who is able to do far more abundantly than all we can ask or imagine according to the power at work within us!