**11th August 2013**

**Matthew 13.24-30, 36-40**

The father of the bride is getting stressed. It’s a couple of days before the wedding and he is worried about the state of the church lawn. His daughter is getting married in this cute church that sits back from the road with a long lawn. It's pretty enough to be on a postcard, and to be honest that was the picture the father of the bride was going off. However seeing the reality of the lawn in front of him was a bit of a shock. Expecting a nice carpet of grass to appear, the father of the bride could see everything but grass. Dandelions, thistles, thorns, weeds covered the front lawn.

"Emergency! Emergency!" he cried to the church caretaker. ‘I can’t have my daughter walking across that’.

"Calm down," said the veteran caretaker. "When we mow, no one will be able to tell the difference, whether it's weeds or grass out there. Cut close, it all just looks green."

One day Jesus told a story in which weeds were prominently featured. The story is what we call a parable, a short narrative that uses ordinary events and objects that are a part of daily life to show us something important about the kingdom of heaven. Last week we looked at the parable of the sower and the seed– an allegory of how the seed is the seed of faith in a person’s life and how some people come to faith and how some people lose their faith. I asked the question what kind of soil are we? We also looked at how to sow the seed of faith and I encouraged us to be generous sowers of the word of faith.

In today's parable, a weed is not a weed. It represents the sin, the evil doing, and everything else that works against the great purposes of God. The sower of the seed is not just a sower. He is the Son of God, the long-awaited Messiah, and the Saviour of the world.

What happens in the parable is this: The householder sows good seed in his field. That night, while everyone is sleeping, the enemy comes and sows weeds right in the same field where the wheat seed has been planted. No one realizes it until spring comes, and the weeds rise out of the ground right alongside the wheat. This scene was anything but postcard perfect. A mixed-up mess was what it was. You can't tell where the good stops and the bad begins.

The servants go to their master and ask, "Where did these weeds come from?"

The master answers, "The enemy planted them."

"Don't you want us to pull them up?"

"No," the master answers. If you do that, you might uproot the wheat along with the weeds. Let them grow until harvest time, and then I'll tell the reapers to collect the weeds first, tie them into bundles to be burned as fuel, and the wheat will be gathered into my barn."

Notice the master isn't worried in the least that the wheat will get choked out by the weeds. He knows that what he has planted will come to harvest. We know it, too. But sometimes we forget. Nothing can stop God's work in Christ. His kingdom is forever. Even when it's difficult to discern signs of the kingdom, the seeds of salvation are alive and well, growing, always growing in our midst.

One of the things I love most about this parable is that in the end the enemy who planted all the weeds gets them stuffed up his shirt. Not only did the weeds not have the effect the enemy hoped they would-which was to snuff out the life of the wheat -the weeds became free kindling for the householder. Perfect. In the arid, fuel-scarce region of Palestine, you couldn't ask for a better bonus. It seems that even the worst the evil one can do is to be transformed into energy to serve God's everlasting purposes. I really like that! Hold on to that promise.

What I struggle with is the master's instructions to the servants that they are not to get involved with separating the wheat from the weeds. The master goes so far as to say that if they even try to do it, they could end up damaging the wheat. Followers of Jesus could actually do harm to the new life Jesus is bringing into the world if we put on our garden gloves and head out with our bottles of Roundup aimed and ready, certain that we know what is useful to God and what is not.

Do you belong to a Christian denomination that is divided these days? It would be hard not to be. The church is embroiled in all kinds of wrangles over issues of biblical authority, human sexuality, ministry, who controls church property, and so on and so forth. Do you ever think your church would be better off without those other people who are so wrong-headed and argumentative and with whom you vigorously disagree about important matters?

On a vastly greater and more serious scale, there are extremists all over the world today who believe they have a mandate from their god literally to destroy those whom they deem to be enemies of God. Surely the Christian church in a world so polarized and filled with terror because of religious excess; surely Christ's people have a special responsibility to bear witness to a better way.

As Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. once put it: "God's purpose is not wrathful judgment. God's purpose is redemption, and the road to redemption is by way of reconciliation. Only in that way will the world finally be saved." Today's parable warns us against relying on our human capacity to know fully the mind of God. It also suggests that what might appear to be good and pure to us might not necessarily be either one.

Perhaps you have known a person who presented him or herself as a saint; and, then, something happened that revealed another side. I think of an incident at a traffic light. A man was stopped, waiting for the light to turn green. When the light changed, he was distracted and he didn't budge. The woman in the car behind him honked her horn. He still didn't move. She honked again. By this time, she was pounding on the steering wheel and blowing her horn non-stop. Finally, just as the light turned yellow, the fellow in the first car woke up and drove through the light. The woman in the second car was beside herself. Still mid-rant, she heard a tap on her car window. She looked up to see the face of a police officer. "Lady, you're under arrest," he said. "Get out of the car. Put your hands up." He took her to the police station, had her finger printed, photographed, and then put her in a holding cell. Hours passed. The officer returned and unlocked the cell door. He escorted her back to the booking desk. "Sorry for the mistake, Lady," he said. "But I pulled up behind you as you were blowing your horn and cursing out the fellow in front of you. I noticed the stickers on your bumper. One read "Follow me to Sunday School." The other, "What Would Jesus Do?" So, naturally, I assumed you had stolen the car.

It might be a good thing for all of us to remember not to wear our piety on our sleeves or our bumpers. Besides, according to today's parable, those who present their righteousness for the world to see and feel superior to everyone else just might end up as pieces of kindling when all is said and done. Only God knows who and what are useful in the kingdom of Christ. Corporately and individually churches and their members sometimes act in a manner contrary to ‘what Jesus would do’. We are a mixed bunch and a mixed up bunch.

When I was a student at Nottingham University I helped out a number of times at soup kitchens for the homeless in the city. The Macedon Project was set up by some former university students who were committed Christians and wanted to help the vulnerable. They offered food and shelter to the homeless. The leaders were a real inspiration in the work they did. But as |I got to know them I found that they cursed and swore and smoked and drank and slept around and had children with different partners and I remember being appalled that they were not fine upstanding squeaky clean Christian leaders. However I admired their care and compassion.

It's often hard to tell who is wheat and who is weed. I don't know about you, but sometime I am wheat and sometimes I am weed, and I usually don't know when I'm being either. Some of the things I do that appear to me to be so good and holy turned out to be more about me than about Christ, and the things I am not even aware that I'm doing end up making a difference. It's hard to tell. It's hard to tell about the things that happen to us and over which we have no control.

Sometimes our lives resemble the farmer’s field infested with weeds amongst the wheat, intertwined within our souls and our hearts. From our baptism and confirmation – our public confession of faith and promises we have made a decision to follow Christ, to be adopted into the family of God. We have consciously stepped over into Gods team. People are fundamentally of one type: a child of God or a child of Satan, a disciple of Christ or a disciple of the evil one. As Bob Dylan sang – you’ve got to serve somebody – it’s a fundamental orientation in life. Do you choose for God or not?

However, we also live in a post Freudian world where we can no longer divide people so neatly between the children of God and the children of the evil one. We see mixed motivations, the noble and the base in each person. We are a complexity. Wheat and weed, holy and unholy, of potentially fruitful and potentially destructive.

The apostle Paul certainly knew this: ‘I do not do the thing I want, but I do the very thing I hate. All have sinned and fallen short of the glory of God – yet there is no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus’

I have been reading a book this week called Addiction and Grace. The author, a Christian neuro-psychiatrist Gerald May, makes the point that we are all addicted to something – it’s just that those who are addicted to gambling, to drugs and to alcohol have more obvious addictions and arguably more destructive addictions. He believes we are all created with a fundamental desire. A desire to love and be loved but that the right channelling of that desire is towards God. Hence the first and greatest commandment ‘love the Lord your God with all your heart, soul and mind’. Our addictions happen when we go looking for love in the wrong places as substitutes for the real thing. Those attachments to things that can give us pleasure and love can be damaging and destructive. Members of Alcoholics Anonymous as part of the 12 step programme start off by confessing ‘we are powerless over alcohol and our lives have become unmanageable’. The fourth step is to do a ‘fearless moral inventory’ sorting out the wheat from the weeds within. Gerald May believed that grace is the difference that turns people round – when they realised they are unconditionally loved. Which is why coming to church is important – because whilst you have to face yourself and God’s word each Sunday morning, in other words you undertake that weekly moral inventory, that word to you is one of Grace. The sacraments are sacraments of grace. That’s why church is important because we can kid ourselves that we can manage OK on our won.

Our personal experience of the enemy’s sowing can be subtle like that. The countless distractions can derail us. I’ve been thinking about getting a Smartphones but I am fearful it might stop me from being present to others and to myself because I’ve seen people get obsessed and distracted by stroking their little electronic pet. The other idols of our age, material possessions, status, religiosity – there are numerous addictions out there we can get hooked on – that have some power over us that we find difficult to be free from because they are tied up with giving us some affirmation, some love - when the ultimate love, the real love we need to build our lives on is the love of God.

Sometimes our jobs can feel weed infested. Like the farmers in the parable we can be faced with the challenge of sorting out the weeds from the wheat. Maybe in management you are glad for your company’s profits but you are not quite sure about the book keeping behind them. Maybe you are being asked to turn the other way for ‘the good of the firm’. Jesus was confronting evil every day. Just before he tells this parable the Pharisees, leaders of his own faith – try to trick him and begin their plot to destroy him. They look like true leaders but they are as false and deadly as any weeds.

At the same time the parable cautions against harsh or rash judgement. We cannot always tell what is initially a good plant and what is not. We can’t always distinguish what is good from bad, loyal opposition from heresy, healthy conflict from destructive antagonism.

Such patience is not an excuse for inaction or conflict avoidance. Later in Matthew gospel, chapter 18 Jesus outlines how to deal with poisonous behaviours in the faith community. He well knows the wiles of the evil one. He knows that failure to deal with evil allows it to spread, just as weeds will do unless they are checked.

Dealing with weeds in the church, in your own lives. First thing is to realise that they are there and they always will be there. There is no such thing as a perfect church. No such thing as a perfect person. What do you do about this? Don’t get over neurotic about trying to get rid of the weeds. But neither become complacent and collude with them. There is always the need for on-going fearless moral inventory. In the end - relax – the parable affirms that there is One who is stronger and smarter than the weed growing enemy. God will sort it out in the end.

It may sound harsh in our tolerant enlightened ears, but this harvesting judgement is the ultimate good news, be it for the person facing corruption in their workplace or those living in times of oppressions and injustice. In a world where the seeds of hatred and prejudice are sown daily, the parable affirms unequivocally that God is still in charge. Though the wrong often seems to win: God still rules.

"Just leave the weeds alone," Jesus said. God knows what's good and what isn't.

Considered to be weeds, the needy, the afflicted, the outcasts, and the alien, the other. What do you think? Do you think that weeds can become wheat? The Bible thinks so.

"Anyone who is in Christ is a new creation," the Bible says. "The old life is gone. The new life has begun."

Could it be that turning weeds into wheat is exactly the reason Christ came into the world?

When I was out in Georgia in the United Sates a few years ago I heard how a state representative made a speech before the legislature imploring his colleagues to pass a bill that would impose extra penalties for hate crimes committed against racial minorities and gay people. He told the legislature that all his ancestors in the 19th century had owned slaves. His great-great grandfather had fought in the Civil War. His third-grade classmates had clapped when President John F. Kennedy was shot and the news was passed along in the classroom. His college fraternity had ostracized six of its members because they were gay. He told of the African-American woman who had raised him, changed his nappies, and taught him more than anyone else the difference between right and wrong. He told them how one day when he was a boy leaving for school; she had leaned over to kiss him on the cheek. And he had averted his head because he assumed that such a thing was not supposed to happen. An African-American woman kissing a white boy. He spoke of the regret he had carried ever since. "On the day that we buried that magnificent woman, I pledged to myself that never again would I look in the mirror and know that I had let prejudice or hate or indifference negatively impact another person's life. Then he said, "I have finally figured out that the only way we are ever going to make progress is when someone steps up and takes a stand. I urge the House to pass this hate-crimes bill." And so they did.

And there it is. Weed to wheat.

Thanks be to God, who does this kind of thing all the time. May the Lord of the harvest be in charge of our lives and make us fruitful for the kingdom. Amen

With material from a sermon by The Rev. Dr. Joanna Adams who is a retired Presbyterian Church (USA) pastor serving as Interim Pastor of First Presbyterian Church in Atlanta, GA.