

**Seventh Sunday after Pentecost, Year A – Matthew 13:24-30, 36-43 St  
Andrew’s Episcopal Church - Sedona, AZ**

**Growing in Kinship**

*“Explain to us the parable of the weeds of the field.”*

All this talk about weeds has got me thinking about...dandelions.

Growing up in the suburbs, we didn’t see many dandelions. And if we did, we didn’t see them for very long. Part of the expectations of suburban life in Michigan was that our lawns in the front yard and the back yard would be meticulously manicured during three of the four seasons. And in the suburbs there was nothing “dandy” about dandelions! I don’t think that my father was particularly concerned about “keeping up with the Joneses.” But he did enjoy gardening and having beautifully well-kept lawns. When we were little, my older sister and I enjoyed playing on the swing set and climbing the cherry tree in the back yard. Every once in a while after a rain shower we would find those cute little yellow dandelions and pick a handful of them for our mother. We knew that our mom liked flowers, because our dad had a rose garden and we would always have freshly cut roses on our dinner table during the summer. But the dandelions weren’t as pretty as the roses, and they didn’t last as long. At some point, I was invited to help my dad with yardwork and learned that dandelions weren’t for picking. If you picked a dandelion, the roots would remain. And more dandelions would grow and seemingly

multiply overnight. When I was old enough, my dad gave me a weeding tool. This was back in the day before weed whackers and leaf blowers, and the widespread use of chemical weed killers and insecticides. The tool I got to use for weeding was a foot-long thin metal rod. It kind of looked like a silver snake with a forked tongue, except for the blue rubber handle. I used this tool to dig up every weed in our yards, preferably with as much of the roots in tact as possible. Most of the time weeding was like a game – getting out ahead of the dandelions before they turned fluffy white and the wind carried their seeds into your neighbor’s yard – that is if you actually liked your neighbors! Fortunately, we did like our neighbors, so usually we wouldn’t see fluffy white dandelions until we went to summer camp. It was only then that we were we allowed to pick the fluffy white ones, make a wish, blow off the seeds, and watch them gently float off into the blue sky. God only knows where they would land. And when they did, the seeds didn’t grow into weeds. In the wilderness, they just became plants alongside other plants, and potential food for little critters in the wilderness. Certainly, weed-like plants are not as annoying in the wilderness as they are in the suburbs. And weeds in the suburbs are not as problematic as they are for farmers trying to grow crops to harvest into food.

The people listening to Jesus in today’s Gospel reading lived very close to the earth. As in last week’s parable of the sower, these followers of Jesus

were an agriculturally based community. They knew what it was like to toil in the hot sun, to pray for an appropriate amount of rain, and to rejoice in a plentiful harvest. And so Jesus continues to tell parables about people's connection with the land, and with each other, and with God. Current day listeners have come to know today's lesson as the parable of the wheat and the tares, or the wheat and the weeds. But when the disciples privately asked Jesus to explain the parable to them, they called it "the parable of the weeds." This is interesting for two reasons. First of all, if you have to ask for a definitive explanation of a parable, then you don't understand the true purpose of parables. One commentator related it to telling a joke. If you have to explain it, then it loses its meaning and effectiveness. Secondly, by only naming the weeds in the title of the parable, the disciples seem to be focused only on one aspect of God's kingdom. For now, I'd like to invite us to consider my two criticisms separately.

Explaining the parable. Once again, the lectionary puts an explanation alongside the telling of the parable, as if these details would actually enlighten the disciples' understanding of the kingdom of heaven. Parables are difficult to enter into; they invite participation, and are designed for the listener to wrestle with. They encourage exploration, reflection, and wonder, rather than decisiveness. And yet, Jesus apparently unpacks the parable for the disciples in a way that prompts certitude and dualistic thinking. Wheat vs. weeds. Good

vs. evil. Life vs. death. Heaven vs. Hell. Very quickly our fearful human minds draw us into self-righteous judgment, and tempt us to arrogantly separate ourselves from our neighbors, and other aspects of God's wonderfully diverse creation. We get caught up in dualistic thinking and looking outside of ourselves for answers to questions that only God is meant to answer. Our theology devolves into us vs. them with a focus on the end times and our privileged place in the so-called "Rapture."

Perhaps you've heard of the popular book by Presbyterian pastor Mark Davis, "Left Behind and Loving it." I've only read reviews of the book, but it's supposed to be a humorous perspective on the apocalyptic portions of Holy Scripture. The title implies that life here on earth is to be enjoyed. That God invites us to share in each other's joys and sorrows.

If the disciples were paying closer attention to Jesus' teaching they might notice that Jesus does not encourage a "holier-than-thou attitude." In fact, much of his ministry points out how religious leaders can be just as hypocritical as every other person on God's blessed earth.

This observation refers back to my second point about the disciples focusing only on the weeds. It prompts listeners to imagine which of their family members, or friends, or neighbors might be categorized as "weeds." Focusing only on the weeds creates a culture of suspicion, fear, and angst. And pointing fingers at others conveniently directs attention away from ourselves

- and leads us to put ourselves in the judgment seat; as if we know God's mind and heart for judging who will be welcomed through those imaginary pearly gates. As if we buy into fear-based dogma that our God is an angry God who seeks revenge rather than reconciliation. That our God is a God who desires punishment rather than amendment of life. That our God is a God who offers retaliation rather than grace.

As angry as Matthew's Gospel may get at times, we need to remember that our God is still the One who offers abundant mercy and grace. Matthew may seem to get a bit cranky sometimes as he rushes to tell the Good News. But if we only focus on the angry and judgmental portions of our sacred stories, we tend to forget that one of Jesus' key teachings was his Sermon on the Mount; his sermon about the beauty of the Beatitudes, the goldenness of The Golden Rule, the prayerfulness of The Lord's Prayer. Through Jesus' teaching, God invites our humbleness, our thankfulness, and yes, our repentance and amendment of life.

As good as God made us, we are also inclined to wander off the path that God intends for us. We are not wheat. And we are not weeds. We are human beings wonderfully made in the image of God. Our occasional waywardness implies that we are both wheat and weeds. That our complex lives are produce animosity as well as altruism. And that our desire for certitude, control, answers, and solutions leads us into the temptation of trying to place

ourselves in the judgment seat of God. Like the snake in the Garden of Eden, we tempt ourselves and each other to believe that we can be without sin; that we can be like God. And again we are lured into thinking that certain people will be forever banished from God's love.

Is this really who we imagine the God of love and light to be for us? Is this truly how we understand God's judgment? If judgment is partially about reconciling people to themselves, and their neighbors, and our God, then judgment might be perceived as a gift. Judgment might be experienced as mercy. Judgment might be received as a blessing; a blessing that leads us to see our relationships in a new light – a light that calls for loving kindness, forgiveness and compassion. A light that invites our participation in manifesting the kingdom of heaven. There is a terminology that some of my African-American friends use when speaking about the kingdom of God, or the kingdom of heaven. This terminology is a play on words that sparks our hearts into newness of life. In referring to the hierarchical king-dom of heaven, this term is reshaped to reflect the broader mutual ministry of all the baptized. The kingdom of God in our midst is about our kin-ship with each other. We are called into the kingdom of God by recognizing and celebrating the KIN-ship or the KIN-dom of all God's people and all God's creation. KIN-dom invites us to respect the interconnectedness of our lives with God, and with each other and all that God creates. The wheat and the weeds grow alongside each other in

the KIN-dom of God, for we are all saints and sinners; we are all called to acknowledge and repent of “the evil we have done and the evil done on our behalf” – whether intentionally or unintentionally. It is uncomfortable and painful to acknowledge that our words have harmed others; that our actions have damaged relationships; that our thoughts can poison our very being.

But as awful, and cranky, and arrogant, and spiteful as humans can be - God always calls us back into right relationship for the benefit of our common KIN-ship; our common KIN-ship with Jesus who invites us to hear the parable of the weeds alongside his Sermon on the Mount; to understand his teachings as intimately intertwined with the passion narrative of his life, death, and resurrection; to receive the sacraments of Baptism and the Eucharist as gifts that remind us that our lives are intimately connected with each other's through Christ; our lives are intimately connected through the mystery of God's boundless grace. For we are intimately connected with the goodness within us and around us through God's perfect love; the Divine One who continually inspires unending wonder, love, and praise!

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