

Sermon for the Fifth Sunday after Pentecost (Proper 11A)
 Delivered by the Rev. Margaret Bullitt-Jonas

July 17, 2011
 Grace Church, Amherst, MA

Isaiah 44:6-8
 Romans 8:12-25

Psalm 86:11-17
 Matthew 13:24-30, 36-43

Weeds among the wheat

Did you know that Americans spend tens of billions of dollars every year on lawn and garden care? For the last century or so, green grass has been the American dream -- sometimes, in fact, the American obsession. Grass is apparently the United States' biggest crop, and it sucks up a substantial percentage of the water consumed on the East Coast. Not only that: every year Americans hire gleaming tankers full of herbicides to cruise up and down our suburban streets, and we pay them to apply tons of expensive chemicals to our lawns. The enemy? Weeds. Crabgrass. Dandelions. Anything that interferes with that smooth expanse of lawn. Sure, chemical sprays clean out the weeds, all right, but they destroy a lot more than weeds. A few days ago we heard about a lawsuit filed against Dupont over a new herbicide that may inadvertently be killing spruce, pine, and other evergreen trees.¹ Our herbicidal effort to be rid of weeds comes at a heavy cost to the natural world. As columnist Chet Raymo once put it, "in dousing our landscape with chemicals we also rid ourselves of garden snakes, spring peepers, glowworms... ladybugs, toads, frogs... salamanders, bluebirds, [and] cicadas."²

"Time for a truce with dandelions." That is what Chet Raymo concluded, regarding the natural world, and that is what Jesus concluded, too, regarding the life of the spirit. In Matthew's parable of the weeds and the wheat, the householder's servants are eager to tear out the worthless weeds that the evil one has planted in the field. But the householder tells them, "No; for in gathering the weeds you would uproot the wheat along with them" (Matthew 13:29). It seems that the weeds -- possibly a local Middle Eastern variety known as darnel -- look very much like wheat when they are young. In fact, it is impossible to distinguish the two in their early stages. By the time the plants bear grain, it is easy to tell the one from the other, but by then their roots have become intertwined: you can't pull out the weeds

¹ "DuPont sued over herbicide suspected to kill trees," by Jonathan Stempel, <http://www.reuters.com/article/2011/07/15/dupont-impelis-lawsuit-idUSN1E76E0QT20110715> (viewed 7/15/11).

² Chet Raymo, *The Boston Globe*, July 12, 1993.

without uprooting the wheat at the same time. And so, says the householder, both weeds and wheat must be left to grow together until the time of the harvest.

I leave it to you to consider how you want to handle the weeds in whatever stretch of lawn or garden may be in your care. But I invite you to imagine that your life, your soul, is a garden and that all sorts of things are growing in it. As you gaze out over the landscape of your life, what do you see? Can you see any wheat -- qualities in yourself and aspects of your life that you like and value and want to keep? Can you see any weeds -- shortcomings, failings, behaviors that you don't much like?

As we take a look within, we may reach polar opposite conclusions. One assessment goes like this: I look inside and I say to myself, "Whoa! No weeds here! I *have* no weeds! My inner life contains nothing but wheat -- it's all good stuff, really, all sweet-smelling flowers. I'm a totally good person -- no flies on me. But *you*, on the other hand -- *you*, my unfortunate father or mother, you, my poor brother or sister, my less than perfect spouse or co-worker or friend -- *you* have some serious weeds to contend with, some serious flaws. And my job, in case you wondered, is to point out your weeds to you, and to help you, maybe even force you, to root them up." That's one way we can go, that place of pride and self-righteousness, when we stare at someone else's weeds and find fault, and judge, and criticize, or maybe get busy rolling up our sleeves and trying to yank those annoying weeds out.

Or maybe we go the other way: we survey the landscape of our life and we decide, "Yikes, when I look inside myself, all I see are weeds. I am pretty much nothing but weeds. When it comes to getting rid of them, I don't even know where to begin. They are everywhere I look. I must be a hopeless case, completely unworthy. You, on the other hand -- you are all flowers. Unlike me..."

Whether we take one position or the other, or fall somewhere in between, the point is that most of us feel even less affection for the weeds in our lives and in the lives of the people around us than we do for the weeds in our lawns. Both good and worthless seeds have been sown within us: the good seed by God, and the bad seed by some other force -- what this passage calls "the enemy" or "the evil one." Wherever that bad stuff comes from, we may spend a lot of energy trying to root it out, or at least wishing it weren't there. What's so intriguing about this parable is that Jesus tells us that at least some of the weeds within us will -- and *should!* -- remain where they are until the harvest time of death. The mysterious fact is that we must allow the weeds within us to grow until the harvest, "for in gathering the weeds [we] would uproot the wheat along with them" (Matthew 13:29).

What's up with that? Why should we learn to tolerate the weeds in our lives? Well, for starters, some of our personal weeds may serve a useful function in the

ecology of our soul. I think, for instance, of a woman I knew years ago who wondered why God hadn't answered her prayers and taken away her anger about the abuse that she had suffered from her former husband. Both of us knew that her anger was causing her to suffer, and both of us knew that in the long run, anger could be corrosive to her soul, and to her relationships with other people. Yet as we talked it over, it became clear to both of us that for now, at least, the woman's anger was helping her to maintain clear boundaries and was protecting her from being abused again. God, it seemed, was not willing to uproot the weed of her fury if in so doing, the wheat of her survival was put in jeopardy.

Again, if we look closely at what we condemn within ourselves as a weed, we may discover that this supposed weed is in fact another strain of wheat. So many people judge themselves harshly! For instance, some of us feel sad and instantly condemn ourselves for self-pity. Some of us turn down a request to do something and instantly accuse ourselves of being selfish, when in fact what we're doing is respecting the limits of our energy and time. Some of us find it all too easy to lash out at ourselves, like some desperate gardener who, seeing nothing but weeds, decides to tear everything out and to pave it all over with asphalt.

But that is not how God treats us, nor how God longs for us to treat each other and ourselves. The parable of the weeds and the wheat asks that we learn to accept ourselves and to value spiritual biodiversity. We must learn to live with our weeds, for their roots are often intertwined with our wheat. Think, for a moment, about the parts of yourself that you really don't like. Isn't it possible that if you trace that aspect of yourself down to its roots, it connects with something good and essential? Take bitterness, for instance, or cynicism. Most of us would agree that these qualities are weeds -- they don't feed anyone; they don't contribute to building life. But if you trace bitterness down to its roots, what you may find is nothing bad but something neutral, or even good, like grief -- the sorrow of someone who has felt a loss that has never been fully expressed or released. Isn't it possible that the roots of bitterness or cynicism may be intertwined with a person's unmet longing to love and be loved? That unfinished business may be showing up in a twisted or harmful way in the person's life -- it may be expressing itself as a terrible weed -- but at its source, its root, it is something good. The more closely we come to know ourselves, and our inner landscape, the more we can sort out these strands of ourselves. Through the power of being understood and accepted, some of our inner weeds will disappear, so that we no longer find ourselves so plagued by bitterness or cynicism, by fear or anger or self-doubt, or by whatever other weed has been causing mayhem in our lives.

Still, some inner weeds will never go away, and, if nothing else, these persistent weeds can serve as a powerful reminder of our dependence on God. As

Jesuit writer Thomas Green says in his lovely book, *Weeds Among Wheat*, God leaves weeds within us in order “to keep us humble, to make us realize how totally we depend on [God] and how helpless we are to do good without [God's] grace and [God's] power. The wheat of our virtues -- trust, humility, gratitude, zeal -- could not come to full maturity, it seems, without the weeds” of our faults and failings.³ When we see the weeds within us with the eyes of discerning love -- when the weeds within us remind us of our dependence on God, and God alone -- then our weeds become “the instrument of our deepening trust and humility. They purify us.”⁴

So, just think for a moment of whatever it is about yourself that you like least. Whatever the weeds in your particular wheat field, what would happen if you allowed those parts of yourself to remind you of your dependence on God? What if, day in and day out, you let those “weeds” become your teacher, teaching you to depend entirely on God's forgiveness and mercy? Isn't it possible that one day you would come to understand that one of the most precious plants in your soul's garden was the weed, which taught you to surrender yourself to God?

At the end of time, all our weeds will indeed be rooted out. That's what the parable tells us with a dramatic flourish in its imagery of angel-reapers gathering up the weeds and throwing them into a furnace of fire (Matthew 13:41). We can thank God for the time when everything will be sorted out at last, the good from the bad, and God's cleansing, purifying, liberating power will burn away everything in us that is less than love! But in the meantime, here we are, invited by God to notice, to investigate, and, if necessary, to accept the weeds in our lives.

I will close by telling a story from the Sufi tradition about a character named Nasrudin. In this story, Nasrudin decides to start a flower garden. He prepares the soil carefully, and plants the seeds. But when his flowers come up, they are overrun by dandelions. After trying every method he can think of to eliminate the weeds, he finally walks to the capital to speak to the royal gardener. The wise old man suggests a number of remedies to eradicate the dandelions, but Nasrudin has tried them all already. They sit in silence for a time, pondering dandelions, until at last the royal gardener looks at Nasrudin and says, “Well, I suggest you learn to love them.”

That's the message I hear in today's parable. And by the way -- if you want to take a good look at weeds, step into the garth, for the place is a riot of weeds, some of them waist high. In the next week or two, those weeds will be mowed

³ Thomas H. Green, S.J., *Weeds among the Wheat*, Notre Dame, Indiana: Ave Maria Press, p. 145.

⁴ *Ibid.*, p.146.

down, dug up, or otherwise removed, and some hard-working folks will install in their place a lovely, curved stone wall, a patio, some groundcover and shrubs -- something, in short, that appeals to our sense of harmony, order, and beauty. But don't be surprised -- some weeds will come back, and there may even be a space in the garth deliberately set aside for wildflowers. They will have their own wild beauty to contribute, and I hope that their presence will keep us humble, and remind us of the gentleness with which God cares for our wild and weedy souls.