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SIXTH SUNDAY OF PENTECOST

July 20, 2014

“Botanical Bullies”

(Matthew 13:24-30, 36-43)

Rev. David K. Groth

“The servants of the master of the house came and said to him, ‘Master, did you not sow good seed in your field? How then does it have weeds?’ He said to them, ‘An enemy has done this.’ So the servants said to him, ‘Then do you want us to go and gather them?’ But he said, ‘No, lest in gathering the weeds you root up the wheat along with them. Let both grow together until the harvest, and at harvest time I will tell the reapers, Gather the weeds first and bind them in bundles to be burned, but gather the wheat into my barn’” (Mt. 13:27-35).

Collect of the Day

O God, so rule and govern our hearts and minds by Your Holy Spirit that, ever mindful of Your final judgment, we may be stirred up to holiness of living here and dwell with You in perfect joy hereafter; through Jesus Christ, Your Son, our Lord, who lives and reigns with You and the Holy Spirit, one God, now and forever. **Amen**

Three years ago my gardens at home were hit by an outbreak of weeds. I hadn't before seen this kind before. They had two waxy leaves and came up strong: in the vegetables, among the flowers, here and there in the grass, even in the hanging flower baskets, which didn't make a lot of sense. How did they get up there? Were they blown in by the wind? Why then weren't my neighbors inflicted with them? I thought maybe it had something to do with the compost bin because every year I mix the finished product into the garden and the flower pots. Were these volunteers seeds from the compost? But that didn't make sense either for how then did they get into the grass? It just wasn't adding up.

Finally, one Sunday morning, the riddle was solved. I was preaching on this text, and as I looked out, I noticed my family was doing some whispering and snickering during the sermon, which was annoying and distracting. I glared at them a bit and carried on as best I could. At home, after the service, I asked them what it was all about. Jon started laughing and Stephanie looked at Gail and said, "Can I tell him, Mom?" I should have known. It was my brother Paul. He bought a couple of packages of Zucchini seeds, and when I wasn't looking, planted the darn things in the flower beds and hanging baskets, into the grass, among the lettuce. He knows I don't like zucchini.

Something similar happened in today's Gospel lesson. It's a parable about a landowner who sows his field with good seed, but one night, when he was asleep his enemy came and sowed weeds among the wheat. Jesus said the kingdom of heaven is like that. That is, there is a dark

menace at work in the world, a mysterious power, a sworn enemy that prefers chaos over order. It's sad, but true. We know it to be true. There are no fields or gardens in this world where *only* grain or only flowers grow; the weeds are always there too. That is, in all areas of life, there will be the presence of evil. Consider science. It serves us in countless ways. There's nothing evil about science; it's a good field which yields much fruit. But the evil one also plants his weeds within it. Chemistry can be used to eradicate rootworm in the cornfield, but can also be used to eradicate whole villages in Syria. Who's mixed up in that kind of science? Not just President Assad; there are darker forces at work.

Any good gift from God can be twisted and used by the evil one. Wherever there are fields and gardens, there will be weeds. Every pleasure in its purest form is a gift from God. The factories of hell haven't been able to produce even one. But what the devil has done is encouraged us to enjoy the pleasures in ways God forbids. So the natural pleasure of a glass of wine is of God. There's nothing evil about wine. But being intoxicated or becoming an alcoholic, that's not God's will for us. That comes from someone else.

The natural pleasure of athletic competition is a gift from God. But taunting, jeering and prancing around, those are the devil's seeds thrown into the mix. The natural pleasure of humor is a gift from God, until it is used to tear down, mock or humiliate. God gives us medicines for healing and relief; the devil gives us drugs, and the slow form of suicide they often prove to be. God gives us music that can lift our spirits and our praise; the evil one gives us music that glorifies rape and violence and death. Wherever there is a good field, you can be sure the devil is out there too sowing his toxic seed into the furrows.

And it's always during the night. He does his work under the radar. We have no home videos catching him at it, yet how many homes has he

wrecked? How many families has he broken? How many wars has he started?

Of course, the devil's stench can be found in the church as well. Judas is in the midst of the apostles. Heretics are mixed among the orthodox, apostates among the obedient, sham saints among the genuine.

What to do? We can understand the angry reaction of the servants. It burns us to be part and parcel with rank hypocrisy. Country Clubs can expel misbehaving members. Why not the church? After all, it's hard to stand by as the weeds grow rampant and unchecked within the field of wheat. We want to charge in with hoe in hand. The master will not permit it. "Hands off" he says. "Let them both grow until the harvest." This is not your affair, says Jesus. God will take care of this in his own good time.

Why is the Lord so cautious here? There are a number of reasons. First, in our zeal to yank the weeds, we would do great damage to the wheat. A few years back, I decided to go after the dandelions in my yard. Looking at the shelf in the garage, I had only a spray bottle of Round-Up. The instructions suggested that I paint the leaves of dandelions with Round-Up. I really couldn't see myself doing that. I figured that if I aimed carefully, it would all be okay. You know what happened. I had yellow spots in my lawn the size dinner plates. My neighbor marveled at the toxicity of our dog. I said, "Yeah, he's something else, isn't he?"

Similarly, in going after the weeds, we would be damaging the wheat. That collateral damage is intolerable to the Lord. Remember how for the sake of just a few righteous ones, God refused to bring down his wrath on the rebellious city of Sodom? And remember how Jonah wanted God to wipe out the city of Nineveh. God would have none of it. He was more interested in their salvation than he was in their destruction. And how that Samaritan village rejected Jesus and his disciples (Lk. 9:52ff)? James and John asked, "Lord do you want us to call fire down from

heaven to consume them?” Maybe they thought they could pull it off. Maybe they thought Jesus would laugh. In either case, he wasn’t amused. He turned and rebuked them, for he didn’t come to condemn the world but to save the world (Jn. 3:17).

We also want to be careful lest in fighting the dragon we become the dragon (Nietsche). That is, we can become so dour and disapproving, so grim and judgmental that our witness to Jesus is effectively undermined. Instead of a witness that is winsome, it is repulsive. Instead of sending up a pleasing fragrance to the Lord, we become odious, smelling of herbicide. Our focus should be on grace rather than power. Our calling is not to impose Christian morality on an unwilling nation. Our calling is to “live such good lives among the pagans that, they may see your good deeds and glorify God” (1 Pet. 2:12). So our lives in Christ should be marked by joy rather than judgmentalism, by love rather than condemnation. “By this all men will know that you are my disciples” said Jesus, “if you love one another” (Jn. 13:35).

This parable teaches our job is not to judge between weeds and wheat. That’s God’s job. This doesn’t mean we turn a blind eye to sin and evil. That would be a misapplication of this text. Jesus taught us to address sin head on, not with the goal of expelling the errant brother or sister, but with the goal of winning him back, and with the goal of protecting others from being misled. So this text does not council us to ignore sin and evil; it councils caution and restraint and patience. 2 Timothy 2, “The Lord’s servant must not be quarrelsome but kind to everyone . . . patiently enduring evil, correcting his opponents with gentleness. Who knows, God may grant them repentance leading to a knowledge of the truth” (v. 24ff).

Finally, consider the example of Jesus. He didn’t uproot evil; he rubbed elbows with it in order to save. He was so patient. 2 Peter 3:9, “The Lord is not

slow to fulfill his promise, but is patient, not wanting anyone to perish, but everyone to come to repentance.” Jesus doesn’t pull sinners and hypocrites out of the church. He goes to the cross to die for them, for us, and transforms us, changes us from one thing to another by his grace.

In baptism he transforms a little weed into a sprig of wheat; a child of the world becomes a child of God. In the Lord’s Supper, he makes clean that which is filthy. I don’t come to the Lord’s Supper because I’m feeling worthy and holy. I come to the Supper when I’m feeling like a sinner in need of his forgiveness.

Knowing what you know about fellow members of this congregation, you might be tempted to think unkind things when you see them kneeling for communion. They look so pious, but you know better, right? But you can’t read the heart, nor can I. However, my work does sometimes give me privileged insights into the private lives of our members. What to you might look like just another unrepentant hypocrite, smug in his sin, to me looks like an addict who has lost everything but his faith, and is trying for all his worth to hold on to that. “The body of Christ for you.” Or the returning college student, a prodigal daughter bearing a heavy weight of guilt on the inside, and an assortment of tattoos and piercings on the outside. “The blood of Christ for you.” Or maybe it’s just you, with your assortment of mostly hidden transgressions, mostly banal and harmless you think . . . but in truth they are just as dangerous, just as lethal. “He was pierced for your transgressions, he was crushed for your iniquities; the punishment that brought you peace was upon him, and by his wounds you are healed” (Is. 53:5).

Don’t fret about the weeds or the one who sows them. Not your job. That’s God’s job, and he has already done the major share of it. Christ has died. Christ has risen. Christ will come again. And on that Last Day, he will finish the work he began and bring it to completion with his righteous judgment. Until then,

there is always hope . . . even for the weeds. After all, the one who turned water into wine can just as easily turn weeds into wheat. Amen.

