



But what about the weeds?

The 4th in a series of 4 sermons for Ordinary Time

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Isaiah 44:6-8

Romans 8:12-25

Matthew 13:24-30, 36-43

God of life, may your Word grow in us and grow us. Amen.

Today is the fourth reflection in a series of four focusing on aspects of “Ordinary Time” – a stretch of time in our church year we are in now, from Pentecost to Advent. Today is also the day when we welcome Elizabeth as a new member of the body of Christ through baptism.

Following on from our earlier themes of “growing”, “greening; and “unfurling”, this morning’s Gospel passage invites us to explore a new dimension of growing. I’m calling today’s reflection: “But what about the weeds?”

So far all may have seemed pretty straightforward, as we have linked the green liturgical colour of Ordinary Time with the greenness of this land of Aotearoa New Zealand. In this season we’re invited to say: “Here I am, God. I offer myself in this place, to serve you here and now”. We’ve explored how spiritual growth can often occur unexpectedly through times of pain and challenge, and we’ve pondered God’s call to “greening”: to add a sense of vitality and freshness in our walk with God; to make time to be with Jesus in the “ever-greenness” of this land.

Last week, through the parable of the sower, we explored the generosity of God as the sower, who liberally flings the seeds of the kingdom upon all of creation. To be fertile soil for God’s seeds to grow, we are called to open and unfurl ourselves in God’s presence to receive the gift of Jesus Christ in our lives.

But today we have a new element – weeds, apparently unwanted weeds, weeds sown by the evil one, weeds that risk the goodness of the crop, weeds that are labelled as sinful, cast out, rejected.

So what are we to make of Jesus’s words?

As I explore this parable today, I am drawing heavily on the reflections of Barbara Brown Taylor, an Episcopal Priest, writer and preacher in the USA. Among her many books is one called *“The Seeds of Heaven”*.¹

Of all the Gospel writers, Matthew is the one who is most animated about the end of the world, the only one who mentions a furnace of fire where there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth. His is the only Gospel that contains the wise and foolish virgins, the division of the sheep from the goats, and today’s parable about the wheat and the weeds. Of all the Gospel writers, it is Matthew who most wants a clear-cut creation, in which things are black and white, good or bad, and people are faithful or wicked, blessed or cursed.

We need to remember that these parables were addressed to early Christians, who were quick to distinguish between insiders and outsiders, between those who had ears to hear and those who didn’t. To the insiders, the message is clear: never mind that there seem to be a lot of weeds in the world right now, hang in there, be patient. And when the last day comes the wheat will be blessed and the weeds will go up in smoke.

This may have been a comforting message at the time, but today it can have the opposite effect. Matthew may have been clear that there are only two kinds of people in the world – the wheat and the weeds – but it’s a clarity that may escape most of us. Last week when we heard the parable of the sower, I suggested that there is at any one time within each of us probably a mix of good soil and not-so-good soil, and to be wary of getting too caught up in the black-and-whiteness of that parable. Similarly here, a clear division of people as either wheat or weeds, as blessed or rejected, might not resonate with us today. There are both wheat and weeds within us, in our neighbours, and in the world. Most of the fields we live and work in are full of “mixed plantings”. If we examine our own lives closely, we may not find wheat *or* weeds. They may have grown together for so long that a hybrid might be more likely – a kind of mongrel seed that is neither one nor the other. So this business of gathering and burning the

¹ Barbara Brown Taylor, *The Seeds of Heaven: Sermons on the Gospel of Matthew*, Westminster John Knox Press, 2004.

weeds can make us a bit nervous – and the burning question is: Which am I? Wheat, or weeds? Blessed, or rejected?

Most often, parables rarely answer such questions – they leave the hearer or the reader to ponder them, teaching us something different every time we hear them, across great distances of time and place. But Jesus does explain this parable. He takes a smaller group aside - his disciples - and gives them the message quite clearly! He is the sower, the field is the world, the weeds belong to the evil one, and the wheat belongs to the kingdom of God. We don't know why Jesus chose to explain some of his parables: some scholars say Jesus spoke this way to avoid arrest; others say he was filtering out his listeners. Yet others claim that he never explained his parables, but that those who recorded his words couldn't stand the ambiguity and took the liberty of providing explanations.

The seed referred to here – darnel – was a very real problem for Palestinian farmers. They learned to deal with it early, uprooting it once or twice so they didn't have to separate the seeds by hand later. To let the wheat and weeds grow together was a risk – but one that this morning's sower seems willing to take. He is reluctant to let his workers gather the weeds, fearing that uprooting them will disturb the wheat. So he says, leave them alone, let the wheat and the weeds grow together. For the sower, it is the *growth* that is most important, rather than perfection.

With that in mind, I invite you to hear this parable of the wheat and the weeds:

One afternoon in the middle of spring, a bunch of farm workers decided to surprise their boss by weeding his favourite wheat field. No sooner had they started when they began to argue: first about which of the wheat-looking plants were weeds and then about the rest of the weeds. Did the Queen Anne's lace pose a threat to the wheat, or could it stay for decoration? And the blackberries? They would be ripe in just a week or two. And the honeysuckle smelt so sweet, it seemed a shame to pull it up just yet.

By this time, the boss turned up and ordered them out of his field. Back at the barn he took their machetes away, poured them a beer, and made them sit down where they could watch the way the light moved across the field. At first, all they could see were the weeds and what a messy field it was, but as the summer wore on they marvelled at the profusion of growth - tall wheat surrounded by Queen Anne's lace, blackberry, honeysuckle, even docks and

thistles. It was a mess, but a glorious mess, and when it had all bloomed and ripened and gone to seed the contract harvesters came.

Carefully, gently, expertly, they gathered the wheat, and made the rest into bricks for the oven where the bread was baked. And the fire that the weeds made was excellent, and the flour that the wheat made was excellent, and when the harvest was over the owner called them all together - the farmhands, the harvesters, and all the neighbours - and broke bread with them, bread that was the final distillation of that whole messy, mixed-up field. And they all agreed that it was like no bread any of them had ever tasted before and that it was very good. Let those who have ears to hear, hear.

How does that parable sit with you? Does it make you smile? I know for me, it “lands” right here, in my heart. It reminds me of the goodness, the patience, and the grace of God who works with us and within us just as we are – not labelled as wheat or weeds, but beloved and blessed, whatever state of brokenness or wholeness we feel we may be in.

And that’s the gift that God blesses us with today, and every day. It’s the gift that God through the Holy Spirit bestows on Elizabeth and her family as they come to take a step closer to God through Elizabeth’s baptism.

Last year, you might remember we celebrated with Reverend Ellie and Bishop Justin as several adults here were confirmed, renewed their confirmation vows, or were baptised. Whenever someone takes one of those steps, they take a step closer into the loving embrace of God. And God says: “Welcome”.

Today we echo that welcome to baby Elizabeth, Kate and Vaudin, as we gather for baptism and rejoice with you.

Amen.