

Permission to Postpone the Weeding

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July 17, 2011

Psalm 139:1-12

Matthew 13:24-30, 36-43

I.

It helps to be a farmer to understand the teachings of Jesus, who, judging from his parables, had some experience in that area. If you aren't a farmer, it helps to be in the possession of a good biblical commentary written by someone who does know something about agriculture.

My limited farming experience climaxed in Aroostook County, Maine in 1981— it started with digging fencepost holes till my hands bled. Then my friend and employer, Glenn, homesteader and carpenter, said it was time to dig some more. We went and dug horse manure at a neighboring barn, for his latest idea. We laid that manure out nicely in a patch. Then we dug some more, to transplant his new crop. He wanted to cultivate the raspberries that were growing wild around the edges of his fields. So we dug up and transferred raspberry bushes... a thankless skin-ripping job in the short haul, if promising for the future!

But I am not here to talk about wild raspberries today. This is about weeds. In the front of your bulletin this morning is a rather romantic take on weeds from that beloved children's writer A.A. Milne. "Weeds are flowers too, once you get to know them".

Whether that is true in general or not, commentator Talitha Arnold has something more negative to say about the weeds in Jesus' story in Matthew. She writes: "*The bearded darnel is a devil of a weed. It defies Emerson's claim that a weed is "a plant whose virtues have yet to be discovered." ...Its roots surround the roots of good plants, sucking up precious nutrients and scarce water, making it impossible to root it out without damaging a good crop. Above ground, darnel looks identical to wheat, until it bears seed. Those seeds can cause everything from hallucinations to death.*" *

I checked out "darnel" online, unwilling to believe the pessimistic Ms. Arnold (I love wild things) —and learned instead that she is regrettably right. Darnel grows pretty much throughout Asia and Europe! Roman law actually prohibited sowing it in even an enemy's field, (indicating this probably happened and that Jesus' story was realistic) and darnel looks a WHOLE lot like wheat (I saw the pictures) until it goes to seed. Then wheat bows over, and darnel stands up straight. And guess what—despite being a close cousin to rye, the darnel seeds in fact cause hallucinations, and yes, sometimes death.

You get the picture. The story makes sense: you can't pull this stuff up too early, because you just can't tell and it holds on to the roots of your crop. And while this weed too may indeed be a flower, you better not use the seeds to make your bread: these aren't your ordinary weeds.

II.

So much for the farming background. What is the story in the gospel trying to say? Harsh as it is, it has a curiously gentle moral for Jesus' listeners. You have permission—no in fact you are instructed, it tells them—to hold off on the weeding!

The early church of Antioch, where the gospel writer may have committed these stories to parchment, was full of disagreements over doctrine and practice. It must have been tempting to start to purify the church, do a little practical weeding, root out the heretics, toss out the troublemakers. Only a couple of problems with that approach, says the story.

First. At this early stage, how are we to tell the true wheat from the cheat grass? And even if we do know, hypothetically, what is true and what is false, who is righteous and who is wicked, secondly, we know that the weeding is going to hurt the wheat more than the weeds.

Let it be, says Jesus. Time will tell. We *will* be able to tell, but not until the plants grow tall. And by then it won't be your concern. I'll send another crew to sort that mess out.

Throughout the history of Christianity, the self-appointed arbiters of truth and righteousness have wanted to make sure the crop is pure. The temptation to weed early and weed often, however well-intentioned, has resulted in events like the ejection of churches from denominations, in recent history. And over the long haul, things were much harsher. Our religious ancestors were great at weeding. They liked to kill each other. They liked wooden orthodoxy better than creative chaos. They liked to stereotype and demonize their long time rivals and even the folks from within who took a different approach to faith. *Now* what's the grain and what's the poison?

The tendency to religious purity and suspicion of others has continued to our day. Today in America we face the twin evils of anti-Semitism and a deep-seated prejudice of all things Muslim. Among Christians, the tendency to try to root out the weeds is widespread. By weeds we usually still mean each other.

In the 1640's, Roger Williams, briefly a Baptist and founder of the First Baptist Church in America, founded a small colony, Rhode Island, on the principle of religious liberty. In part he argued that to force conscience did violence to the integrity of the persons being forced. In part he made the case that we simply do not yet know what is true and right—who is to decide, in matters of faith, who has the darnel and who has the wheat?

The imagery of the biblical story is harsh, with its predicted ending: weeds gathered for a fire. But the moral in the story is gentle. It isn't up to you or me to decide for God who has got it right. We have to trust, like field-hands of that farmer, that someone will be around later to deal with the question of truth and falsehood, spiritual right and left. Whether or not we believe that *ultimately* God is going to come in and burn the weeds, or we believe that we will in the long haul find out that God's character isn't like that at all, that God operates by other means, and is able to claim all of humanity, all of creation, even the bearded darnel, in a new reality—whichever we believe, the upshot is the same. For us as people of faith right now, our work is tending, nurturing and caring. Even if we ourselves have been treated like poisonous, noxious bearded darnel, our calling is not to visit the same on others! It is to be faithful to the one who calls us to seed, to plant, to water, and to wait.

III.

A precious part of our religious heritage in a Baptist church is religious liberty and freedom of conscience! Far from the rush to judge, to eject, to rule folk out of order, that so many have experienced on the receiving end, the legacy of folks like Roger Williams is to insist that we don't jump to premature weeding. There is, in the words of my old Texas colleague Dale Lock, quoting his old Texas preacher, there is "room for you and there is room for me."

The hard part is that it is just so natural to be sure! We just *know* what's right. And this sense of "blessed assurance, Jesus is mine" is not limited to those of a most conservative persuasion. We are all prone to it. It is the darnel in us, the tares in our souls. We have all been tempted, to want to be part of a community where we all agree, we all know what's truth and what is poison, what is grain and what is weeds. It would just be so lovely to suck up all those spiritual nutrients for ourselves.

Even two thousand years after the first planting, the crop isn't ready to come in yet. The truth hasn't been made clear yet. And the M.O. of people who are the field-hands of the crop of sacred love and justice is still to take it easy, not to jump in, not to claim to be God's reapers—it is ours to sow, and ours to tend, not ours to reap and not ours to burn.

IV.

What is true for us in the world of faith and practice is just as true in our personal lives, and in the life of our larger world. Our witness as Christians is to practice a seemingly refusal to render final judgment. It is always to hold the door open to the possibility of reconciliation; to keep it open to the goodness that may be found, even in our enemies. Does that mean we go looking to be abused? No. We aren't called-to self-hatred or abnegation. And it also means we refuse to abuse.

In short, we are called to nonviolence of speech and action. We are called to humility in examining our own motives, and charity in handling the motives of our neighbors. We are invited to practice loving care as the plain presumption in dealing with every human being, every tender fragile shoot springing up from the soil of God, even acknowledging just how dangerous humanity is.

I don't know what the best image is for God's new creation: sometimes it seems like it wheat in the midst of weeds, and sometimes it seems like the tearing daring sweet task of transplanting wild berries. Plenty of challenges either way, and a long wait for the harvest. And yet this we confess: Christ calls us to daring, Christ calls us to gentleness, Christ calls us to revolutionary patience as we tend the fields for a future we cannot yet see. Christ has given us permission to trust God to settle things someday, and meanwhile we deal creatively and kindly with an unsettled world.

This is why we will greet cruelty with compassion, and answer suspicion with an open hand! We live by the law of love, and not retaliation. We offer hospitality and not a cold shoulder. It is our calling. We wait, we work, we pray, we live actively, and reach forward gently, in hope.

***Talitha J. Arnold, "Pastoral Perspective," on Matthew 13:24-30, 36-43, in *Feasting on the Word, Year A*, Volume 3, p. 263. Westminster John Knox, 2011.**