

Proper 11A – July 19, 2020 St. Anne’s
Genesis 28: 10-19a; Romans 8:12-25; Matthew 13:24-30; 36-43

Early in our marriage, my husband Denis and I rented a large house on a double lot. It had roses, fruit trees, a raspberry patch, a vegetable garden and lots of flowerbeds. Now I admit I’m not a good ‘weeder’ at the best of times but since this was my very *first* garden, when plants started to come up in the spring I had no idea *which* were the weeds and which were the flowers. So, I mostly just left everything to grow so I could tell what was what. Our neighbour watched this policy with dismay and quickly tried to point out which ones were the weeds. I got dire warnings about pulling the weeds - no doubt fuelled by her desire not to have my weeds spread into her carefully tended garden. Well, I largely ignored her advice. I thought some of the things she wanted me to pull up were quite pretty. And they were. But I probably should have followed her gardening advice - I never did manage to get the weeds under control in that garden.

In today's gospel, Jesus tells a parable about a farmer who uses *my* weeding technique in his *wheat* field. Let them go and sort them out later. And just as it was in my garden, as a farming technique that would be a *disastrous* policy. Any farmer who followed that as practical advice would rapidly find themselves with an *uncontrollable* weed problem. But, of course, Jesus isn't *really* talking about farming or gardening - he’s telling a *parable*. Parables are little stories based on ordinary life, but with a ‘twist’ that’s meant to make us think. And, **Jesus’** parables are meant to disturb our *assumptions* about God and the world. So, the rule of thumb for parables is - if you think there’s nothing surprising or even shocking about a parable, it’s time to go back and read it *again*. While the *explanation* at the end of this parable makes it seem like this parable is about *judgement*, most scholars think the

interpretations were added at the end by the gospel's **author** (not Jesus) to address some particular situation in the community the gospel was originally written for. If we look at *just the parable*, we get quite a different picture. This little story is **not** about *judgement* – it's about God's *extravagant*, unexpected grace.

The story of Jacob is a good example of God's unexplainable grace. It isn't obvious from just today's reading but by any reasonable human standard, Jacob is a **weed** in the family garden. Jacob is the younger son of Isaac and he's a hustler and a *trickster*. At the start of today's reading Jacob is on the run from his family home in Beer-Sheba after having skilfully and *maliciously* manoeuvred his older brother Esau out of the birthright and blessing that were rightfully Esau's. Esau is so angry he's threatening to **kill** Jacob and so Jacob is *literally* fleeing for his life. At night he lays down to sleep in the middle of nowhere with a *rock* as his pillow. In the night he has a vision of the connection between heaven and earth, and then **God** appears to him and makes to **him** the same promises that God made to *Jacob's grandfather* Abraham. Now, by any reasonable standard, **Jacob** has **not** been faithful – he's more focused on what he can **get** than what he can do for anyone else. But, despite Jacob's *intentional* wrong-doing and scheming, God doesn't give Jacob a good talking to about his problems; God doesn't review his shameful past; he doesn't say 'thank-goodness you've finally been driven out because the family is better off without you'. No, instead God offers him an unexpected promise of a blessed future. A future of grace that at this point Jacob certainly **hasn't** earned and **doesn't** deserve. "All the families of the earth shall be blessed in you and in your offspring" says God.

Notwithstanding Jacob's unsavoury character, God promises to accompany the fugitive in order to ensure his safety and well-being. God obviously sees something in Jacob that the rest of us don't. It's difficult at this point to see how Jacob **could** be a blessing to **anybody**, much less all the nations of the earth. His only *demonstrated* talents to date are stealing, lying and self-preservation. Many years later, on his way home again with his wives, his (at that point) 11 sons and his abundant flocks, servants, camels and household goods, he again encounters God. He wrestles with God and earns a blessing. And God changes his name to *Israel*. In both cases God's compassionate intrusion into Jacob's sinful life brings **change**. To use the metaphor of today's parable, God's patience with him, God's unmerited **love** of him, allows Jacob the weed, to be *transformed* into Israel the fertile and life-giving wheat.

I think today's parable warns us against thinking **we** have it all figured out - that we know how to judge evil from good, moral from immoral, right from wrong, virtuous from unvirtuous. Because it's **very** easy to be judgemental about *other people's* shortcomings. We'd all like to imagine that **others** are the weeds and **we** are the good wheat. So, yes we want judgement and justice, but only for those weeds *out there*. But, in this parable Jesus warns us not to *assume* you can tell the weed and the wheat apart. We're warned not to be too *hasty* in trying to root out what look like **us** to be weeds -because we might actually be working *against* God by doing so.

I think a lot of us can identify with the servants in the parable. There is a very real problem and they want to *fix it*. This was supposed to be **good** seed, they say. Who is **responsible** for all these weeds?! Why aren't we doing something to *fix* this?

The Master's response to his servants is understated, but quietly revolutionary. "Let them grow together," he says. It's not your business, or even **my** business, to go around pulling up the plants.

Imagine how different our world would be — how different our **church** would be — if every time we thought someone was a *weed*, we took the *Master's* attitude rather than the servant's. And, in truth, the line between weed and wheat is much, *much* blurrier than we'd like to imagine. The definition of a weed is just a plant that **we** don't want. And just as it's **our** *attitude* that turns a plant into a weed, so too does it work the other way. **Love** transforms something that's a metaphorical 'weed' in some eyes, into something valuable. A dandelion might be considered a weed in *your* garden but when viewed differently, when *cultivated* and loved and utilized, it becomes a delicious salad green adorning plates at the fanciest restaurants in the world.

As Fred Craddock says there's always a tension between the urge to purge imperfection and the "obligation to accept, forgive, and restore." We want the world, or at the very least the *church*, to be a neat field of pure, superior wheat. But somehow there are *always* weeds – not only in our yards but also in our lives: difficult people who were not part of our plan, sucking up sunlight and water that we think should be better used. But this kind of attitude sets up an either/or, Us and Them situation, where some of us are labelled "good" and others are considered "bad". This parable reminds us that we really *can't* tell the difference, and if we presume to try to pull the 'weeds' we're going to destroy what's good too. Because *in truth* **we** are **all** weeds as well as good wheat. **None** of us is totally good, totally without failure. In fact, the most judgemental and unhappy

people are usually the ones with the most problems that they want to try to hide – from themselves as well as the rest of the world.

Despite the explanation of it we find in Matthew, this parable is **not** really about judgement. At least it's not about judgement of *others*. Because we are **all both** wheat **and** weed. Selfish **and** giving. Gentle **and** nasty. But as with Jacob, **God** sees the potential in each of us. And God is willing to be patient with us as we try to move *towards* our best self - and asks only that we be patient with each other. Through the transforming power of the Holy Spirit and God's grace, like Jacob we too can all learn to grow into the blessing for the world that God intends us to be.