

# Worship Service “Weeding”

Pentecost 8, Sunday, Year A

23<sup>rd</sup> July 2023

Romans 8:12-25 NRSV / Matthew 13:24-30, 36-43 NRSV

## Prelude

Opening Music (Lyric Video)

[Good Soil](#) (Lyric Video) St James in the City

(Lyric video for 'Good Soil', an original song from Building Bricks - St James in the City's all age worship album. (2016) )

## Welcome/Announcements

### Pass the Peace

Opening Hymn

*Blessed Assurance*

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### Call to Worship

We seek to welcome all of God's children to join us in bearing witness to the radically transforming power of God's love.

We gather this morning in all our diversity and needs. We come to celebrate God's blessings to us.

We come to open ourselves to God's guidance and love. We come to see more clearly  
Let us join in worship together.

### Invocation

Holy One, you know us already. Help us to know you better. Let us see you all around us. Fill our worship with your Spirit so that we may learn to recognize your presence in all places. **Amen.**

**Our epistle reading this morning from Paul's letter to the Romans highlights our relationship with the Spirit and Creation. Let's think about how the Spirit influences our walk with Christ and what we can learn from God's created order to guide that walk as we hear these words of Paul.**

**Epistle Reading      Romans 8:12-25 NRSV**

So then, brothers and sisters, we are debtors, not to the flesh, to live according to the flesh—

for if you live according to the flesh, you will die; but if by the Spirit you put to death the deeds of the body, you will live.

For all who are led by the Spirit of God are children of God.

For you did not receive a spirit of slavery to fall back into fear, but you have received a spirit of adoption. When we cry, 'Abba! Father!'

it is that very Spirit bearing witness with our spirit that we are children of God, and if children, then heirs, heirs of God and joint heirs with Christ—if, in fact, we suffer with him so that we may also be glorified with him.

I consider that the sufferings of this present time are not worth comparing with the glory about to be revealed to us.

For the creation waits with eager longing for the revealing of the children of God; for the creation was subjected to futility, not of its own will but by the will of the one who subjected it, in hope

that the creation itself will be set free from its bondage to decay and will obtain the freedom of the glory of the children of God.

We know that the whole creation has been groaning in labour pains until now; and not only the creation, but we ourselves, who have the first fruits of the Spirit, groan inwardly while we wait for adoption, the redemption of our bodies.

For in hope we were saved. Now hope that is seen is not hope. For who hopes for what is seen?

But if we hope for what we do not see, we wait for it with patience.

## **A Time of Prayer**

### **Joys and Concerns**

#### **Pastoral Prayer**

Circle us, God. Circle us with the light of your presence within this dark world. Enable us to be overcomers of fear and temptation, Enable us to be victors over sin and despair. Enable us to become that which you would desire. God of creation, Lord of Salvation, Circle us with the light of your presence

Circle us, God Circle our human and faith families within the shelter of your outstretched arms Protect them in each moment of their daily lives. Protect them in the decisions that they face Protect their homes and relationships. Circle our families with the light of your presence.

Circle us, God, Circle this world with the joy of your Salvation. Where there is sickness and disease bring healing; Where there is hunger and despair bring hope; Where there is torture and oppression bring release God of creation, Lord of Salvation Circle this world with the light of your presence, Amen

**Hymn     *In the Bulb There is a Flower*     614**

**Jesus tells a parable in this morning's gospel reading about the threat weeds can pose to a healthy field. As we hear these words from Matthew, let's think not only about how weeds can not only affect the growth of the church, but our own personal journeys as well.**

**Gospel Reading     Matthew 13:24-30, 36-43 NRSV**

He put before them another parable: 'The kingdom of heaven may be compared to someone who sowed good seed in his field;

but while everybody was asleep, an enemy came and sowed weeds among the wheat, and then went away.

So when the plants came up and bore grain, then the weeds appeared as well.

And the slaves of the householder came and said to him, "Master, did you not sow good seed in your field? Where, then, did these weeds come from?"

He answered, "An enemy has done this." The slaves said to him, "Then do you want us to go and gather them?"

But he replied, "No; for in gathering the weeds you would uproot the wheat along with them.

Let both of them grow together until the harvest; and at harvest time I will tell the reapers, Collect the weeds first and bind them in bundles to be burned, but gather the wheat into my barn."

Then he left the crowds and went into the house. And his disciples approached him, saying, 'Explain to us the parable of the weeds of the field.'

He answered, 'The one who sows the good seed is the Son of Man;

the field is the world, and the good seed are the children of the kingdom; the weeds are the children of the evil one,

and the enemy who sowed them is the devil; the harvest is the end of the age, and the reapers are angels.

Just as the weeds are collected and burned up with fire, so will it be at the end of the age.

The Son of Man will send his angels, and they will collect out of his kingdom all causes of sin and all evildoers,

and they will throw them into the furnace of fire, where there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth.

Then the righteous will shine like the sun in the kingdom of their Father. Let anyone with ears listen!

## **Message – *Weeding***

The bearded darnel, is a devil of a weed. Known in biblical terms as “tares,” bearded darnel has no virtues. Its roots surround the roots of good plants, such as wheat, sucking up precious nutrients and scarce water, making it impossible to root it out without damaging the good crop. Above ground, darnel looks very similar to wheat, until it bears seed. Those seeds can cause everything from hallucinations to death. No wonder Jesus uses this noxious “cheat wheat” to illustrate evil incarnate. Bearded darnel, also known as false wheat, is the botanical equivalent of the “ravenous wolves...in sheep's clothing” of which he has already warned earlier in Matthew's gospel. Jesus' audience would have known exactly what he was talking about. This weed was the bane of the Palestinian farmers of his day. Not only was it difficult to tell the weeds from the crops until they went to seed, it was virtually impossible to remove them without harming the good plants they infested. It's a good analogy for our interactions with other people in our lives. It can be difficult to tell the good crops from the bad, to tell from outward appearances.

Former President Ronald Reagan liked to tell a story, which he said was true, about a newspaper photographer out in Los Angeles who was called in by his editor, and told of a fire that was raging out in Palos Verdes. That's a hilly area south of Los Angeles. His assignment was to rush down to a small airport, board a waiting plane, get some pictures of the fire, and be back in time for the afternoon edition. Breathlessly, he raced to the airport and drove his car to the end of the runway. Sure enough, there was a plane waiting with all the engines all revved up, ready to go. He got aboard, and at about five thousand feet, he began getting his camera out of the bag. He told the fellow flying the plane to get him over the fire so he could take his pictures and get back to the paper. From the other side of the cockpit there was a deafening silence. Then he heard these unsettling words: "Aren't you the instructor?" Amusing as it may be, it highlights the assumptions we can often make about others that aren't accurate. Just because they look a certain way, or fit a certain stereotype we have, we can make our own assessments of who they are which may not be correct.

This Gospel passage can easily be applied to disagreements within the church when there is debate over theology or doctrine, but there is a personal aspect to it as well. Likely written in the context of the early church at Antioch, Matthew's gospel reflects the struggles of that young congregation.

Founded by people of Jewish descent living in Gentile Asia Minor near present day Turkey, the early founders of the church had similar backgrounds and core beliefs. But with the upheaval caused by the Jewish revolt and war, and subsequent diaspora, the area was flooded with refugees of every ilk, with differing ideas of what was “right” belief and doctrine. So this parable was well-suited for an audience struggling with discord and conflict within the body. But there is a personal component to this comparison as well. Sometimes our own lives resemble a farmer's infested field, with weeds and wheat intertwined in our souls, hearts, and minds.

The apostle Paul certainly knew that struggle. He repeatedly speaks of the “thorn in his side” and in Romans 7 comments that “I do not do what I want, but I do the very thing I hate.” Members of AA or Al-Anon do too. The First Step confesses, “We are powerless over alcohol and our lives have become unmanageable.” The Fourth Step is to do a “fearless moral inventory,” sorting out the wheat from the weeds within.

Our personal experience of our internal adversary's sowing may be more subtle, as in the countless distractions we let derail us. Emails, phone calls, and endless meetings can make it look as if we are working on the realm of God, but they may be symptoms of our own divided souls. Often our employment can feel weed infested as well. Like the servants of the parable, many face the challenge of separating the weeds from the wheat in their workplaces. Maybe it is the middle manager who is glad about her company's big profits, but unsure about the bookkeeping behind them. Perhaps it is the lawyer who is asked to look the other way for the “good of the firm.” Or maybe it is something as simple as lacking compassion and taking a tough stance, because it's “just the way business works.”

We all confront the challenges and temptation of weeds in our lives every day. Which only highlights the difficulty of trying to pull the weeds in our own communities of faith. When we all struggle with our own internal infestations, how can we decide who is truly worthy or not, to be tended in our field? Yet the problem is a real one.

Jesus is well aware of the threat and disruption antagonists can cause within the body. Just before he tells this parable, the Pharisees, leaders of his own faith, try to trick him and begin their plot to destroy him. They look like true leaders, but they are as false and deadly as any bearded darnel. Jesus and the author of Matthew also know that these weeds can cause powerful infestations.

Elsewhere in the Gospel, Jesus warns against “false messiahs and false prophets,” those who cry “Lord, Lord,” and seem faithful and caring, but who lead people astray and harm the community. There is plenty of this to be seen in the greater church today. Those who use their voice to proclaim truths that are at odds with the teachings of Jesus, those who support policies and leaders which embody the antithesis of the Sermon on the Mount. That very visible and public embodiment of what Jesus defines as evil is often easy for many of us to spot. But among the individuals within our own communities, is it always so easy? Like the

early church in Antioch, we are a diverse mixture of people from different backgrounds with different ideas of what proper theology and doctrine is. The truth I may consider clear as day, another may see quite a different reality, both based on sound discernment from different perspectives. Which is why Jesus in his parable clearly cautions against a rush to judgment.

Talitha Arnold, a UCC pastor in New Mexico, tells the story of her grandmother's struggle with discernment. A master gardener, her grandmother once transplanted some flowers from her garden into her daughter's front yard. Two days later, she was back, frantically digging up the same plants. "I made a mistake," she said, sweat dripping from her eighty-year-old face. "These are weeds, not the flowers I had intended! Quick, give me a hand before your mother gets home!" Although her beloved grandmother is scarcely the evil one of Jesus' parable, her story underscores the challenge of distinguishing good from bad, wheat from weeds, loyal opposition from heresy, healthy conflict from destructive antagonism.

So what do we do? How do we deal with the potential weeds among us? Well, we start with ourselves. The weeds within our own souls can lead us from discerning the real threat without. If we water down the teachings of Christ to suit our own situations, if we allow ourselves to be convinced that those who differ from our understanding deserve exclusion, then our ability to see the true weeds among us is compromised. But we still have the troubling question of how to deal with those true weeds among us.

Jesus gives some pretty clear direction there as well. We need to wait to see the fruit they bear. While we are not the arbiters of their final judgment, like the bearded darnel, we can see their true identity by what they produce. Do they promote division and exclusion or radical welcome? As Jesus points out, we cannot judge a new plant by outward appearances. Does the path offered lead to compassion and justice, or callous injustice? Are their teachings in line with the teachings of Jesus in the Gospels or do they try to water those down to suit the ways of this world?

Too often we let ourselves be caught up in debates of doctrine, theology, and scriptural interpretation that we lose sight of what the actual fruits a particular view produces. Unfortunately, intellectual debate often has real world consequences. We see that in our own denomination's never ending debate of scriptural interpretation, particularly around issues of human sexuality and gender.

Jesus makes clear that the ultimate pruning of who is truly in and who is truly out is beyond us, as we do not have windows into the souls of each other. But we can let the real fruits we produce be our guide in our interactions with one another. How do they impact others, and are they furthering the radical kin-dom of compassion and justice at work here and now, or are they furthering something quite different? We are not called to pass judgment. But we are called to follow the example Jesus set: to offer radical welcome, and to be real with our sisters and brothers in Christ when their fruits do not reflect the gospel they claim to follow.

Having frank interactions with others is never easy, but it is part of this calling we've accepted, how we hold each other accountable. I hope and pray that we work to rid our own lives of the weeds that threaten to choke our own faith, and that we seek to work together to ensure the fruit we produce is reflective of the wholesome, life giving and affirming seeds planted in each of us by the Master Gardener. Amen.

## **Call to Serve**

What we have received comes from seed sown in us by Jesus Christ. Having received the blessings of the harvest begun in us, let us return to God fruits of the blessings we have received.

**As we listen to the following song, Good Soil, let's think about how we can be the good soil that encourages God's good crops to grow and flourish in our own journeys of faith and our life together.**

## **A Time for Reflection**

### **The Prayer of Thanksgiving**

Loving God, we offer back to you what we have been given: our treasure, our time, and our lives. Bless our gifts and multiply them for your purposes. **Amen.**

**Hymn     *A Charge to Keep I Have*     393**

## **Benediction**

God has a plan that is always moving and in motion. We all have our part in that plan.

May we constantly seek to find God at work around us, and do our part to help that work grow.

Seeing the beauty that growth brings, regardless of our place in its planting.

Amen.

## **Postlude**

### **A Time of Sharing**