

6th Sunday after Pentecost, 2014
Gospel: Matthew 13:24-30, 36-43
Sermon: Saint and Sinner
Yvonne Steindal

I am a bad gardener. I cannot tell the difference between a weed and what will likely turn out to be a beautiful flower or a healthy tomato plant. It all looks the same to me. It began when I was a kid.

My mother planted a huge garden every year – full of all kinds of veggies. It was an important part of stretching our family’s grocery budget every month. I was about 8 years old when my mother sent me out to “weed” the garden. “How do I do that?” I asked. “Well,” my mother said with irritation, “You’ve seen me do it enough times. Just pull up everything that doesn’t belong there.” As I stood over the garden plot, the only thing I could identify were the raspberry bushes. Ok – so they stayed. But, everything else – looked green and healthy – and pretty much the same. I walked down each row and pulled every plant that looked ugly to me. I was pretty proud of myself when I called my mother out to see what a good job I had done.

I can still hear my mother screaming. “Yvonne! What have you done?! You have ruined the garden. All that is left are the weeds.” I was confused. “But, the raspberry bushes are good.” I pointed out. My mother burst into tears. She then went about replanting the garden.

Sometime later, wanting to correct my mistake – I offered to go out and “weed” the garden. My mother stopped me. “I don’t think so, Yvonne.” she said gently. “I think we will just let it all grow and then we’ll figure it out later.” And, that’s how we grew the garden after that. And, it worked – just fine.

Today’s gospel reading is very interesting to me. I think a lot of the time we read this parable of Jesus and focus on the “enemy” who came and sowed the weeds among the wheat. “Who is that enemy?” - we wonder. “Who would do something so sneaky – so despicable?” Or we think – “I know someone exactly like that. They go to my school, my church, live in my community.” We know this is the real culprit in this story – the mysterious “enemy” – and the enemy should surely be punished. And, we live in a society that is pretty quick to point out who the enemy is – to whom we can direct our anger. We are relieved when there are simple, clear-cut answers.

The problem is that life is way more complex than that. It's not as simple as pulling up all the weeds, throwing them away and being done with it. We face dozens of choices every day – some more difficult than others. And, many times there is uncertainty in the decisions we make.

- Should I be a stay at home parent or take this job? What is better for my family financially? Or is time with my children more important?
- Should I move closer to my aging parents or move them here? What would best respect my folks? What would be best for my family?
- Should I buy a house or rent? Or should we move to a different town?
- Should I go into the military, go to college or stay to work the family business? Where is my life going?
- Should I see another doctor or rely on the diagnosis I have received?
- Should I give in to my friends cuz it sucks to be left out or stand up for myself? Will I be all alone in my decision?

And on and on it goes. It's scary – because we might pull out the wheat when we mean to pull out the weeds. We could get it wrong. And, with all of the decisions we are faced with in our lifetimes, some of them will be wrong. We will discover we could have chosen better or differently. Guaranteed. God's guarantee is also in this parable. The promise is that God will sort it out. That doesn't mean that everything will be perfect. Despite what TV evangelists tell us, the Christian life does not guarantee success, or an easy carefree life. The promise is that no matter what our choices God's grace is abundant, God's love is unconditional, God's presence is everlasting.

What if the wheat and the weeds in Jesus' parable is actually in all of us? What if we are really both? The most recent quiz on Facebook is entitled "How Good/Evil Are You?" I took it. I come up 91% good and 9% evil. Yikes. I have weeds growing up in my wheat life. I am both the wheat and the weeds. And the truth is, we all are. We are both wheat and weeds in the same breath. Martin Luther said it in a different way; we are "simultaneously saint and sinner."

Today I am wearing my Old Lutheran "Saint Sinner" T-Shirt. I love this shirt. When you look at me – you can see that it reads "Saint" in Old English lettering right on the front of my shirt. But, when I look down to read those same letters – I read the word "Sinner". I am both – at the same time – saint and sinner, wheat and weeds. Thank God, there is hope because it is God who is the ultimate gardener. We do not have to rely on ourselves to distinguish between the wheat and the weeds in our lives or in the lives of others. We are simply called to be in the world.

It has been a tough week in Custer with the suicide of Hunter Lewis. Tons of people were here for the funeral on Thursday. Many of you were here as well. It was a jumble of emotions as we considered Hunter's life and death. We want there to be an enemy here. Something we can easily point out. Someone we can punish. Frankly, we are scared.

At the close of the service, Pastor Kent did an amazing thing. He talked about choices – Hunter's, ours – and he talked about guilt. Then he had us turn to the order of "Confession and Forgiveness" in our red hymnal. For some it was new words. For some of us it was familiar words. But somehow as the words were spoken together by the many people gathered on that day, a quiet calm descended – we often call that the Holy Spirit – and many of us felt comforted, and hope-filled once again.

And that is part of what this community we call the church is called to do and be. It is a place we can come home to each and every week, no matter what has happened to hear God's words of forgiveness and grace. All so we can go out to try to be the people of God once again.

I thought we could try a version of that today. I ask that we pause now for a period of silence as we reflect on the choices that we and those around us in this space are facing – you don't even have to know what those are. And, then I will close us with a prayer.

Silence.

With thanks to David Lose, President of Lutheran Theological Seminary in Philadelphia for this prayer....

Dear Lord, our lives are colored by ambiguity and we don't always know the right or best thing to do. But we do know that your love is guiding us and that you have called us to live as your people in the world. When we face hard choices, give us eyes to see the best path forward and the courage to follow. When we make mistakes, forgive us. When we are hurt by our choices, comfort us. When we hurt others, help us to reach out to them in love. And above and beyond all these decisions, remind us that you still love us and call us back to this place that we may be forgiven, renewed, called, and sent forth once more as your beloved children. In Jesus' name we pray. Amen.