EIGHTH SUNDAY AFTER PENTECOST

Nu’uanu Congregational Church

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*Tending to Our Job* Matthew 13:24-30, 36-43

When I worked at Church of the Crossroads, some thirty years ago, there was an older man who would come in once a week to dig weeds. His name was Toshio, and his children were all grown and gone, and he had lost his wife a few years earlier. Digging weeds in the church yard was a way to keep himself busy. It was a hobby.

After an hour or so of digging, he would come into the office and sit and talk to me. He said that coming over to the church got him out of the house, and it gave him pleasure to be doing something useful. It was a gentle, useful pastime.

In the story we just heard from Matthew, the weeds infecting the field of wheat were not like the weeds in the Crossroads church yard. They were not a hobbyist’s entertainment.

The weeds that Jesus was talking about were probably a plant called bearded darnel, which looks very much like wheat until it bears seed. And the seeds, if ingested, can cause anything and everything from hallucinations to death.

It is, therefore, no wonder that darnel has been described as a “devil of a weed” with absolutely no virtues. In Jesus’ day, they called darnel “tares,” and its roots surrounded the roots of the good plants, sucking up water and nutrients, and making itself difficult to eradicate without pulling up the good plants in the process.

It is also no wonder that the slaves in Jesus’ parable are in quite a state of dismay. Their keen eyes have spotted troublemakers among the wheat, and they want to do something about it—now!

Afterall, all the good work they have done was being undermined by those weeds. All of their toil, out in the fields in all kinds of weather—it was all being ruined by those enemy weeds. So, they are on the alert and ready to go out into the field and rip up every offending plant.

One of the important things to notice about this part of the parable is the effect the weeds have on the people who encounter them—in this case: the slaves. They are the ones who have been tending the fields. They are the ones who are seeing the day-to-day progress of the wheat.

When they see the tares coming up among the wheat, they immediately go back to the master. He is the one who actually spread the seed out in the field and up until now they had no reason to doubt his word or his work.

However, when they see the weeds, they find themselves doubting the master. They question his actions—‘Master, did you not sow good seed in your field? Where, then, did these weeds come from?’ [v.27].

In other words: are you *sure* you planted *good* seed? *Really*? Then where did all of these weeds come from, they ask?

One wonders how deep their doubt went. Also: how and in what other ways did these slaves, who were used to complying with every rule and order—how was their trust in the master damaged by those weeds.

This is yet another danger of the weeds we encounter in this story, and in life. Weeds, tares, devil plants—it does not take much for people to doubt and become fearful that even God cannot be trusted. This is why Jesus tells the disciples this story. It is because he knows that whenever something bad happens, humans immediately want to know “who did this?” We want to start ripping up *something, anything*—most of us know this feeling. We want to be active, even *pro*-active.

What Jesus’ farmer proposes to the slaves—that they wait until harvest time to get rid of the bad plants—this demonstrates a calm assurance that despite appearances, the growing and the harvest are still important to him. He knows that the good seed he planted will survive.

The master also promises that the “bad seeds” will be taken care of, and the implication is that there are still things for us to do before the harvest.

What Jesus says is that we should go about our business. In fact, in the world of this parable, Jesus seems to be saying that our role is to be a faithful, obedient slave (despite the negative connotations about the word “slave”) *and* we are also to be more like the wheat itself. As such, our job is to *be* the good wheat from the good seed the master planted. We are to remember and be faithful to the notion that we are *not* weeds.

We are also *not* called to be the farmer. Rooting up weeds is not part of our job description. When we would like God to rain down hellfire and brimstone, Jesus counsels us otherwise. Modern wheat farmers tell us that at harvest the dry weeds will just blow right through the combine—this is the way we are supposed to encounter the weedier parts of our lives, with the assurance that the weeds are not a secret. They are known to God. Our assurance is that the weeds are seen and known by God, and that God will not ignore the harm weeds do to God’s beloved people.

What the parable of the wheat and the weeds counsels us to do is to not to agonize and become depressed over the weeds. Neither are we to become overly aggressive toward other people. Rather, we are to bear witness to what is good and right, even in the face of the kind of destruction weeds can cause among us. Rather than becoming as destructive, we are to continue to hold up the light of Christ so that others may see what goodness can do in the world.

It does not mean that we are to be passive. Nor are we to turn a blind eye. Jesus does not intend the body of Christ to be a hothouse flower. Indeed, the church is meant to live in the world, among the weeds, learning how to survive in the presence of their negative impact and energy. Growing wheat, growing bread for the world, growing souls is the task of each Christian and each church.

In our own context: to be good wheat means seeking out ways in which we can provide space in the community for goodness and for humans to flourish. We can do that.

We can be a place where healthy activities for children are offered. We can be a place where people of all ages can come together for musical offerings, for presentations by visiting artists and scholars, for poetry readings, and exercise classes—for all kinds of events that build up the heart and spirit.

We can be a place where those without families can come and be surrounded by good company and good food. There are all kinds of ways and activities that we can support and offer to the community, to our neighbors.

We can be a place of light even amid darkness we see so often all around us.

Every church can be a place of community gathering and a place where people can find healing and friendship. *We* can be that church.

Sometimes that will mean welcoming people here in worship. Sometimes it will mean welcoming people in other ways. For example, as you may remember: the YMCA, which operates the preschool now, also wanted to host a *kupuna* luncheon here on our campus—we could still do that. Another example: a man from Community Church came to visit me this past Friday. He would like us to be a part of a multi-church blood drive in September. We can do that, too.

As for the weeds, our good news is that growth and maturity are probably the most effective forms of weed control. My friend, Toshio, whom I told you about a little while ago: he only came over to the church once a week—he only needed to come by once a week. The lawn in the church yard was pretty healthy, and healthy grass is extremely competitive and will crowd out most weeds all by itself.

In the end, it should be enough to know that we are “seeds” who have been planted by the “Son of Man,” and that we are part of a healthy harvest that will someday be reaped by the angels of God.

Until then, to grow in Christ’s light and under his care and being a harvest of compassion and caring, *this* is our job. So, let us be about the business of tending to it.

Let it be so. Amen.