

All Things Work Together for Good -- Second in a summer series on parables

Mt. 13:24-30

Preached at Edgewood UMC, Fargo ND

July 17, 2011

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What is a weed?

As the saying goes, “a weed is just a plant in the wrong place.”

Or, sometimes, the wrong time.

Or, as Richard Mabey says, “plants become weeds because people label them as such”

Ralph Waldo Emerson described a weed as:

“a plant whose virtues have not yet been discovered.” . . . or have been forgotten

Many plants we now condemn as weeds were once regarded as useful.

The Romans had such high regard for nettles as an herb, medicine and raw material that when they invaded Britain they brought their own varieties.

Now they’re considered a nuisance.

Kew Gardens send Joseph Hooker to the Himalayas in the 1840s to collect plants.

He brought back the seeds of 28 varieties of rhododendron.

Now they are loved by gardeners everywhere,

But they are a very invasive species

especially in Britain’s western woodlands.

A number of plants are both valued medicines and garden pests/weeds –

Think of yarrow, comfrey, burdock, heartsease.

Shepherdspurse was frequently used during the World War I to control bleeding. (Barry Tickles)

“After the Luftwaffe had [destroyed] much of east London during the blitz [of 1940-1941], the first living things to return to the bombsites were not people, but weeds.

By the time the BBC announced Hitler's suicide in May 1945,

bracken was marching up the aisle of St James's [in] Piccadilly,

thornapple was blooming through Cheapside cellars

and ragwort had scaled London Wall.” (Bathurst)

Rosebay willowherb

which had been a rare plant before the war

was spreading and blossoming so quickly through the rubble

that east Londoners began calling it “Fireweed” and “London Rocket”

Richard Mabey describes it this way:

“The plant that arrived to grace the ruins,

apparently in prodigious quantities,

was a modest member of the mustard family

with golden-yellow flowers in the shape of a tiny cross.”

The “weed” burdock and its burrs that stick to clothing and dogs’ fur

was the inspiration for velcro fastening.
A Swiss inventor, George de Mestral, walking his dog in the 1940s,
began to study the the burrs that stuck to his dog's coat with their flexible hooks.
His studies and experiments with nylon led to the development of Velcro in 1955

Here, in the United States,
in the 1980s, weeds began to take over a section of New York's abandoned High Line,
the old high-rise freight railroad line, 30' high in the air,
that operated from 1934 to 1980.

The High Line had carried meat to the meatpacking district,
agricultural goods to the factories and warehouses of the industrial West Side,
and mail to the Post Office.

As self-seeded grass, trees and other plants – “weeds” -- grew on the out-of-use rail tracks
the inhabitants of the Upper West Side were split
between those who wanted the High Line demolished
and those who liked looking out on the wild landscape
of irises, daffodils and rogue Christmas trees.

Friends of the High Line was founded in 1999 by two neighborhood residents
In 2003 an open ideas competition, "Designing the High Line," was held
720 design teams from 36 countries entered proposals.

The result: Manhattan's newest slice of urban parkland –
a mile-and-a-half-long elevated park that is a “green structure”
It offers open green space for picnicking, sunbathing, and people-watching
as well as gathering areas to be used for performances, art exhibitions
and educational programs.
and views of the Hudson River and the NYC skyline.

The public space includes plant life
 (“reminiscent of the quiet contemplative nature of the self-seeded landscape
 and wild plantings that once grew on the unused High Line”)
161 out of the 210 plant species in the park are native to New York.

Thanks to weeds,
the first section of this new park opened in 2009,
the second section opened six weeks ago in June, 2011

Inspired by these weeds in NYC,
Paris converted a similar railway into an elevated park called the Promenade Plantée.
And now other urban rail parks are in the planning stages in
St. Louis, Philadelphia, Jersey City, Chicago, and Rotterdam.
(Bathurst, also www.thehighline.org)

Now we just heard Jesus tell a parable about weeds (Mt. 13:24-30).
We're back out in the fields again.

Remember:
Parables are not morality stories like Aesops' Fables
with defined, instructive meanings.
Parables do not have verdicts –
no one is good or bad, right or wrong. (Bultmann)

Parables are designed to surprise us
and up-end our usual ways of thinking.
And they leave us with some kind of challenge that requires us to make a response –
They do not allow us to be neutral. (Osborne 339)

So we're back in the fields, and Jesus tells us:
"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."

The word used for enemy
is related to a verb that means to dispute or engage with someone in a hostile manner
And, at the time, it wasn't unusual for someone who wanted to avenge a wrong
to sow/scatter weed seeds in another's field
The particular type of weed – zivaney or "tares"
also survives in the ground from the prior harvest and grows up in the spring
it's almost impossible to eradicate them
And when these weeds grow,
their tendrils wind around the wheat so they can't be pulled out

Now the slaves are upset.
Like us, when we are uncomfortable,
they want to fix the situation – quickly.

Jesus tells us
"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?'"

Now the master knows how the ecology of his field works.
The weeds, if they are weeds, serve a purpose – their roots hold soil in place
Afterwards, when the wheat is gathered, any weeds can be separated out
And the master is the one who will decide
what is a weed and what is not --
the slaves will not make that decision.
Right now, these weeds are a necessary, healthy part of the ecosystem
They fit, as Richard Mabey says, in the "ecological scheme of things."

So Jesus continues:
But the master 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.”

It's a matter of perspective.

We call “evil” what we dislike and what makes us feel uncomfortable,
we call “good” what we like and makes us feel comfortable
Yet we often don't know what is truly good or evil except in hindsight
And even then, we may not know.

It takes a far longer and larger point of view than our own.

Often what people thought was “good”

For example, slavery or killing Native Americans
turns out not to be “good” after all

If everything comes from God,

Then everything,

EVERYTHING,

everything works together for good.

It may even be, as the Jews and early Christians believed,
that the very things that test us and challenge us,
that the things we call “bad” or “evil”

exist in order to keep us from being complacent --
they exist in order to push us to grow

So many times,

when I worked as a paralegal with persons who had been laid off or fired,
after a month or two they would come into the office and say

“You know, I thought being laid off was a disaster,
but it really was the best thing
that could have happened to me;
now I am doing something I love!”

So many times,

I've heard stories from people about how their first spouse left them
and it was the end of the world

but then they met the love of their life,
someone they never could have married
if they hadn't been free to do so!

It may be that there is a purpose for something “bad” or “evil”
that we cannot yet see.

The kingdom of God is a paradox . . .

A paradox that asks us to remember that God's possibilities
are beyond our limited imaginations

Too often, we imagine that God is like us
with the same set of grievances and judgments

We forget that God is an untameable, creating God
with a much bigger point of view than our limited perspectives.

When I forget this,

I am challenged by a question my friend, Jeanne asks:

“What will you do when you discover that Hitler is in heaven?”

Lest you or I think this is too far-fetched, even for God,
I want to share a prayer I was sent
by Gudrun Warren, the Librarian of Norwich Cathedral in England
when I was working on my dissertation on women and betrayal.

The prayer is housed in the Chapel of the Holy Innocents in Norwich Cathedral.
It was found, scrawled on a scrap of paper,
next to the body of a dead child in the Ravensbrück concentration camp,
at the end of World War II (Narin van Court, 2006).
Ravensbrück was the largest concentration camp for women and children in Nazi Germany.
It was also the primary training site for the women SS officers.
Of the more than 132,000 women prisoners from 47 countries
who passed through its gates,
less than 40,000 women survived the horrors
of starvation, slave labor, execution, and medical experimentation
(Binder, 2008; United States Holocaust Museum, 2008).

Here is the prayer:

O Lord, remember
not only the men and women of good will
but all those of ill will.
But do not remember
all the suffering they have inflicted upon us;
remember the fruits we have bought thanks to this suffering –
our comradeship, our loyalty, our humility,
the courage, the generosity,
the greatness of heart which has grown out of this;
and when they come to judgment,
let all the fruits we have borne
be their forgiveness.
(Gudrun Warren, Norwich Cathedral, personal communication, March 25, 2008).

If everything comes from God,
Then everything,
EVERYTHING,
everything works together for good. Amen.

Notes:

Bella Bathurst, *The Observer*, Oct 10, 2010 reviewing *Weeds* by Richard Mabey
Frederick Buechner, *Telling the truth: The gospel as tragedy, comedy & fairy tale*
Neil Douglas-Klotz, *The hidden gospel: Decoding the Aramaic Jesus*
George Lamsa, *Gospel Light*

Richard Mabey, *Weeds: How vagabond plants gatecrashed civilisation and changed the way we think about nature*

John Shelby Spong, *Liberating the gospels: Reading the bible with Jewish eyes*

Walter Wink, *Unmasking the powers: The invisible forces that determine human existence*

TEXT:

Matthew 13:24-30

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.'"