

Weeds?

I am not a gardener. My thumb is as brown as they come. But many of you in this church do have the gift of growing beautiful plants and spend a good bit of time working in your yard, where you may occasionally encounter weeds.

Living in this corner of the world, you have probably come across an insidious little perennial known as dollar weed. Dollar weed gets its name from its small round leaves about the size of a silver dollar. And it grows all over the place, even on the property of at least one of these churches in the Folly Beach/St. John's Charge. I have heard church members encouraging one another to pull up some dollar weeds whenever they walk across the church grounds.

According to one member of a local garden club, she was advised that if she decided to give up the battle against dollar weed, she could let it continue to grow and plant nasturtiums among it. Because the two plants resemble one another, the dollar weed would blend in with the flowering plants to the extent that no one would be able to tell where the dollar weed left off and the nasturtiums began.

Now in today's Gospel reading, Jesus tells of a situation a little bit like that of the dollar weed and the nasturtiums. Except that in Jesus' parable, it's the other way around. The good seed has already been

planted when somebody sneaks in under cover of darkness and sows a bunch of weed seed in and among the grains of wheat. But the result is the same: as the plants grow, they intermingle and become indistinguishable from one another. Nobody can tell where the wheat leaves off and the weeds begin. Someone might inadvertently pull up wheat in attempting to pull up weeds.

It's a funny thing about uprooting weeds. Years ago, a novice gardener and her husband purchased a home in another part of the country. The house wasn't professionally landscaped. So after they moved in, she set to work creating a beautiful yard and industriously began pulling up strange-looking weeds. The only thing was, she missed a few of them. Imagine her surprise when those "weeds" she missed grew into lovely flowering plants!

A knowledgeable gardener tells me that all cultivated plants were once weeds: plants that grow wild. These plants were native to a particular geographic area. They had adjusted to the climate of that specific locality: to the temperature, to the amounts of sunlight and rainfall. They had become accustomed to the nature of the soil—whether it was mostly loam, clay, or sand—and to its nutrients and chemical composition.

Because they have adapted to certain environmental conditions, plants, whether the desirable or undesirable kind, don't always do well when they're uprooted and relocated. In one neighborhood, a stunning

rosebush grew wild in a vacant lot. It bloomed profusely, its color exquisite, its petals and leaves perfectly shaped. A resident of the neighborhood admired it for months. Finally, she could stand it no longer. She dug it up and transplanted it in her own garden, where it promptly withered and died.

It doesn't sound like uprooting plants is such a great idea, does it? In Jesus' parable, the householder commands his servants to let both weeds and wheat grow until the harvest. It's nearly impossible, he insists, to determine whether or not a particular plant is a weed.

And surely that's true. When I was a kid, my dad often invited me to take a walk with him through the woods near our home, following Turkey Run down to where it flows into the Potomac River. Under a soaring canopy of trees, all kinds of plants lined the path: May apple and jack-in-the-pulpit, Queen Anne's lace, trillium and bleeding heart. On a woodland trail, two people might encounter the same plant. One person sees only a weed. Yet another experiences the delicate tracery of a wildflower. How do you discern one from the other? Is it all about perception and perspective? And is it the same when, instead of plants, we consider people?

Do you know someone who appears to be a weed? A person who's self-centered and stubborn, crotchety and cantankerous, demanding and driven by greed? A person who many years ago turned away from God and from the community of faith? A person who's difficult to be

around? If you do, then you know that this person may be very hard to love. And even though this person is the one who *needs* our love the most, we may have already made up our minds. Such a person, we decide, is not wheat, but a weed.

Some weeds cause great suffering. According to the householder in Jesus' parable, weeds have been surreptitiously sown by the enemy. Evil exists in the world.

Throughout human history, people have struggled to understand the presence of evil in God's good creation. It's very hard for us to comprehend how God, who is good, can allow the innocent to suffer terribly as a result of human avarice and aggression. We don't like to see good people being oppressed, exploited, and starved, hurt, and even killed. "It's not fair!" we cry. Our indignation at injustice cranks into high gear.

So, like the servants in Jesus' story, we servants of God want to get rid of those weeds immediately. We want to jump right in and fix the problem. We want to step in and act. We want to take matters into our own hands. We want to jerk those weeds up by the root and be sure that they are consigned to a place of everlasting torment. We want to be managers of the universe, and we don't understand why that doesn't seem to be working for us.

So, with the Twelve, we ask Jesus to explain this parable of weeds among wheat. And graciously, he does. But in the interpretation for his

disciples is the implicit command: *Wait*. Let the weeds and the wheat grow together until the harvest. Wait. The thing is, it's hard for us to wait. We're not good at waiting, even those of us in the church.

And, brothers and sisters, it seems to me that Jesus tells this parable of weeds in wheat especially *for* the church—for Matthew's first-century church and for our twenty-first century church as well. According to Jesus' explanation of the parable, the field containing both kinds of seed represents the world. We of the church have tended to hear this parable with smug self-satisfaction, inferring that we, the church, are separate from the world and assuming that our number is not made up of both weeds and wheat, but of wheat alone. We like to look at others and attempt to determine for ourselves whether they are weeds or wheat. We get so caught up in this process that it's easy to forget that we really can't tell the difference, and even if we could, this determination is not ours to make. We forget that all the trouble began in the garden, when our first parents ate the forbidden fruit that would give them power to discern good and evil. We forget that Jesus charges us with refraining from judgment and condemnation.

In reality, his church, like the world, consists of both wheat *and* weeds. We need to ensure that the doors of our churches are open and remain open, even to those we might consider weeds. *Especially* to those we might consider weeds. The knowledge of good and evil and the business of judgment belong to God alone. Perhaps we need to stop

focusing so closely on the actions of others, and examine ourselves.

With the psalmist, we ask God to “Search me...and know my heart; test me and know my thoughts. See if there is any wicked way in me...”

What if God stepped in right now and began to judge between weeds and wheat? What if God judged you and me today? How would you and I measure up? Are we as patient with others as we hope God will be with us? Patience when we or others are suffering is not our long suit. Years ago, at a time when I needed to hear them, a friend shared with me Paul’s words in today’s reading from his letter to Christians at Rome: “I consider that the sufferings of this present time are not worth comparing with the glory about to be revealed to us.”

This God of glory sees you and me from a perspective of grace; treats us with undeserved compassion, tolerance, and patience. I give thanks that God postpones the sorting of weeds and wheat until the harvest, defers the judgment until the end of the age. I give thanks that God gives the gift of time to both wheat and weeds. The Master Gardener nourishes us in the soil, washes us clean with life-giving water, lavishes abundant sunshine upon us. Responding to God’s tender care, weeds flourish, growing strong and healthy with the wheat. The Master Gardener takes even weeds and transforms us into something useful for service in God’s kingdom, makes of us something beautiful, makes us to shine like the sun, reflecting the glory of God.

In the name of God the Creator, God the Christ, and God the
blessed Holy Spirit. Amen.