

**LEAVE THE WEEDS ALONE**  
Sermon Preached by Jon M. Walton  
July 20, 2008  
Scripture: Psalm 139:1-12, 23-24;  
Matthew 13:24-30, 36-43

Henry Mitchell in his book, **Mitchell on Gardening**, says every garden needs a weed patch. It is a contrary point of view. Mitchell's argument is founded not so much on his admiration of weeds but on their ability to attract insects.

If gardeners stopped thinking of insects as enemies, [he writes,] they would find some pleasure in them. Butterflies alone are reason to forget poison sprays. ...Every garden should have a weed patch of nettles, dock, thistles and milkweed for the benefit of these epicurean beasts, and even a quite small garden should have a buddleia, as no plant attracts them better.<sup>1</sup>

Jesus also seems quite tolerant of weeds if the thirteenth chapter of Matthew's gospel is any measure. What we get there is not simply horticultural tips but also some insight into human nature and the character of Christian life.

The parable of the wheat and the weeds is unique in this form to Matthew's gospel, because it specifically mentions two plantings thinly veiled and referencing the kingdom of heaven. The first planting of seed is the spreading of the gospel. This is the welcome seed, the joyful news, the early planting of the love and grace of God. It is what we have longed to hear and joyfully receive. They are the words that lift our hearts and draw us closer to heaven, guiding our steps along the way.

But in the night, the parable tells us, an enemy came and sowed seeds among the wheat and went away. When the plants came up, bearing grain, so did the thistle as well.

The servants of the householder go to their master and ask what they should do, shouldn't they pull up the weeds and separate them from the wheat?

Now that's my sentiment. I like a clean and tidy garden. Weeded and kempt. I have never been much on the wild garden style, although a neatly kept and planted English garden can be attractive. For me it's the precision of the French style, Versailles, Longwood, the Brooklyn Botanical Gardens that delights my eye. "Get the weeds out," is my motto. The neatly clipped boxwood, the border of day lilies, the geometrical designs of a floral clock on Prince's Street in Edinburgh. Now that's gardening.

So I'm right in there with the aggressive pruning and uprooting crowd in the parable. Let's get rid of the weeds.

But the warning of the master is not to remove the weeds but to leave them. "Leave the weeds alone, because in gathering the weeds you might uproot the wheat as well."

In the Middle East there is a darnel weed that in its early stage of growth looks very much like the wheat, so much so that it is nearly impossible to tell the one from the other. Moreover as any gardener can tell you, some of these weeds have invasive roots, tubers or spreading spines that intertwine with the good roots around them. To pull up

the one is to pull up the other as well. It's a risk to leave it, but the greater danger, evidently is to be too aggressive in uprooting the early seedlings.

Of course, lest we be misled, the parable is not an almanac for gardening. It is an advisory about the human condition, and the fragility of faith, and the mixture of good and evil in us all.

"The kingdom of heaven," Jesus said, "may be compared to someone who sowed good seed in his field." And the good seed is the gospel, the hopeful and right, the kindly and just that marks the kingdom of heaven. And with the sowing of the bad seed at night, we see that good and evil co-exist in this world that God created and called "Good" but in which evil is present nonetheless.

The parable offers a simplistic answer to the question of how evil came to us. *While we were sleeping*, it says, *Satan entered the field and scattered the bad seed*. No reference to why God allowed it, or to Original Sin, or to the Garden of Eden and the serpent and the temptation of humanity.

The image and the metaphor is different altogether. *While we were asleep* the parable tells us, *Satan came in the night and scattered the seeds of evil*. It's not something that we could have prevented. It happened by stealth, in the middle of the night, when we were doing what we were supposed to be doing and we were asleep. It is a simple answer to the problem of evil, but a telling one.

There is a scene in Peter Shaffer's play *Equus*, which will be in a Broadway revival this fall starring Daniel Radcliffe of Harry Potter fame. The story is about a boy who blinds horses in a stable one night, and why he did what he did. In one scene, the psychiatrist Dysart, is speaking to the boy's mother, Alan's mother. She has her explanation of what happened.

Look Doctor, [she says] You come to us and say, who forbids television? who does what behind whose back? – as if we're criminals. Let me tell you something. We're not criminals. We've done nothing wrong. We loved Alan. We gave him the best love we could.... No, doctor. Whatever's happened has happened *because of Alan*. Alan is himself. Every soul is itself. If you added up everything we ever did to him, from his first day on earth to this, you wouldn't find why he did this terrible thing – because that's *him*; not just all of our things added up... You've got your words, and I've got mine. You call it a complex, I suppose. But if you knew God, Doctor, you would know about the devil. You'd know the Devil isn't made by what mummy says and daddy says. The Devil's there. It's an old fashioned word, but a true thing... I only know he was my little Alan, and then the Devil came."<sup>2</sup>

I don't know what you say to such a simplistic explanation of life as that, except that at some profound level, the hopelessness and inexplicability of the human condition defies our ability to capture it except in the most simple of images.

The parable is like that. While we were sleeping our Adversary, Satan came and sowed bad seeds among the good. Oh, I know you don't believe in Satan. Too

nineteenth century. But sometimes words fail and simple explanations and outward symbols of deeper realities express it better.

St. Paul in his letter to the Romans writes of the struggle he experienced between good and evil within his own soul. "I do not understand my own actions," he says. "For I do not do what I want, but I do the very thing I hate." And doesn't that say volumes? There is nobody here who does not know exactly what Paul is talking about. Those internal conflicts that turn us inside out. The battles we fight with ourselves to do what we do not want to do, but do anyway.

Anyone who has struggled with an addiction knows what this is. As one young man once told me, "I sit in church, and all I can think about is the fact that not more than five minutes from here I can score a hit of cocaine."

We live with a kind of internal tension all the time, the good seed trying to grow side by side with the bad within us, and it is a struggle. Our temptation is to go cold turkey, to try and uproot or excise the evil inside. So we go on the crash diet and try to change a lifetime of eating patterns in one week. We stop smoking... for the eighteenth time, and believe with all our heart that we can reverse thirty years of two packs a day.

The good and the hurtful are always within us. John Calvin was adamant about it, intractable in fact. Sanctification, or becoming more holy, was always a renewable commodity for the church's theologians. That's because we are always making an uneasy truce between the good and the evil within us. And it's hard to do, in fact, it's impossible to do on our own.

To make the point I want to tell you a story, a story about a man who was a drug addict, mentally disturbed. He used to live every day on pain killers and sniff hits from cleaning solvent bought at computer stores.

He used to hang out with a couple of women friends, even though he was married and had a daughter of his own, at least before his wife left him because she feared his fits of violence and delusional behavior.

He was paranoid most of the time. He totaled his car one night in the wee hours of the morning, when the parable says Satan sows his seeds. His sleep was disrupted and he would call his friends in the middle of the night, half crazy, imagining wild things, disrupting their sleep.

One time he shot up his apartment with his guns, and the SWAT team had to be called to talk him out of his home and talk him down from the ledge if not literally, then figuratively.

This guy was pretty lost, don't you think? Not the sort of person most of us would like to admit we know or with whom we would necessarily consort. But let me tell you something else about him.

There's a picture of him in the bulletin this morning. A picture of him carrying an Iraqi boy who was wounded in the earliest days of the invasion in 2003. He's Pfc. Joseph Dwyer, who was an Army medic in those early days when the battle was engaged. There was an "editorial observer" article about him in Tuesday's *Times* this week.

Joe Dwyer's and that child's picture was carried by nearly every news service and magazine in this country when it was first released. It was exactly the compassionate picture of American intervention and concern in which we wanted to believe. A child injured in war, saved by an Army medic. That's powerful!

Private Dwyer became an instant hero in those days and for good cause. But eventually he came home, and like so many of the vets who have come back from Iraq and Afghanistan, the war was still going on inside him. The visions of death and destruction, anguish and suffering, fear and anxiety were his constant companions. He sought help and got treatment for post-traumatic stress syndrome and addiction. His mind went crazy with delusions and fits of rage.

And yes his wife left him and took their daughter for the sake of peace and a safe environment for both. The two women friends whom he sought out were also medics, and together they passed the time, going to movies, hanging out. Fellow travelers caught in a time warp bound by a common experience.

He was haunted by what he had seen and lived. He became a Baptist, searching scripture on his lunch hour, looking for solace and peace.

When the SWAT team broke into his place one day after he had shot up his apartment, he was grateful they had come so that he could tell them where the Iraqis were.

His mother Maureen said about him, "He just couldn't get over the war. Joseph just never came home."<sup>3</sup>

On June 28<sup>th</sup> the police broke into Joseph Dwyer's apartment and found him on the floor dying amid pill bottles and spray cans of aerosol which he had sniffed to deaden his pain.

Satan came in while he was asleep and sowed bad seeds. Does anyone here have a better explanation than that?

We have a tendency to demonize that which is within us that is not perfect or that we believe is sinful. The bad seed, the weeds in our life that just keep showing up, the thistle and thorn and burr.

It's a good thing to try to live a good and holy life. But none of us is going to get away with imagining that we will live a pure life, spotless and without sin. We are always a mixture of dust and glory.

Some of us choose our sins and tend them and nurture them and keep them growing, and some of us find that the sin in our life is not of our own doing, that it shows up on its own and is intractable, with its invasive roots winding around what is healthy and good so that the two are inextricable.

Like Joe Dwyer, who was as much a victim of what he suffered as he was a sinner inflicting suffering on others, we are all a mixture of sin and sainthood. It's not always easy to pull up the weeds in our lives. They're right in there with the flowers sometimes.

This should be an advisory to any of us who are on a tear to purify the world or the church or weed out the friends we no longer need, or to pass harsh judgment on

others. None of knows what it's like to walk in that other's shoes, or what weeds or what flowers have bloomed within them.

"Don't pull up the weeds," Jesus said, "because the healthy plants are in there too. Let them grow together," he urged the servants, "and at harvest time we'll get it all straightened out."

If there is any good news in all of this it is that the God who spread the seed in the first place and gave the rich soil to receive it, is able to separate the bad from the good and knows the difference. If the parable is any sign of hope, and I think it is, this should not be a fearful or frightening conclusion to hear, but a hopeful and encouraging one.

Maybe our eyesight is not so good sometimes, and what meets our eye as weed is instead a young and unformed stalk of wheat. We are not meant to make that call in the final analysis, especially in the *final* analysis. The parable scores the point that in this life the weeds and the wheat are intertwined.

The good and the bad are inseparable, and only in the end are the two sorted out; maybe not so much for punishment, as that in the end all that is dross is burned away until what is left is gold. Maybe the process of getting rid of the imperfect and sinful, is a matter of accomplishing for us what we never could, that in the end all that has ever held us back or kept us from shining, or made us bloom less gloriously than we might is lifted from us and cast off our shoulders. I suspect, because of that, there is a place in heaven for Joe Dwyer, and for you and for me, in spite of all the weeds that once have flourished. For even the weeds draw butterflies, and that alone is reason to be patient with them.

At the last day, if we are patient, we will be presented faultless before the throne of God's grace, perfect at long last, and free of all that has ever made us less than so.

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<sup>1</sup> Henry Mitchell, **Mitchell on Gardening**. Boston: Houghton Mifflin Mariner Books, 1999. p. 144-145.

<sup>2</sup> Peter Shaeffer, **Equus**. London: Penguin Books, 1973. p. 78.

<sup>3</sup> This and all references to the details of Dwyer's life are found in the Editorial Observer column of The New York Times, Tuesday, July 15, 2008 entitled "*Losing Private Dwyer.*"