

The Weeds Inside Us

Sunday, July 19, 2020

Scripture: Matthew 13:24-30 (The Parable of the Weeds)

I have a deep familiarity with weeds. Weeds were my constant companions most summers growing up. One of my regular chores was to get up early in the morning, before the sun was too hot, and pull the weeds out from among the other more desirable plants in our garden. If there had been rain, the weeds often seemed to grow unbelievable amounts overnight. What had been tiny plants the night before looked as if they were going to take over the world the next morning.

As any gardener or farmer knows, one of the tricks of getting rid of weeds is knowing which plants among your crops are weeds. It wasn't unusual for us to have vegetables or sunflowers spring up in unexpected places, their seeds dropped outside the rows or by a bird or the wind from previous years plants. We affectionately called these plants "volunteers." It was important not just to learn what weeds looked like, but to identify possible volunteers that we didn't want to uproot. We had a particularly hearty type of weeds in our garden that I learned quickly to spot. You do have a pay attention when weeding though, one glance up at the sky or to see why the dog is barking, and your hand is easily around an unsuspecting pepper or tomato plant that pulls up out of the ground as easily as any weed.

This parable about the weeds and the wheat that Mary read for us this morning is not very familiar. Perhaps this is with good reason. I confess, I don't really like the us/them implication of this parable. I don't like the implication of the weed sower lurking around the field, I don't like the judgement on the weeds or what it stirs in my own longing prayer to please let me be among the wheat that is stored in the barn and not burned with the weeds. Surely there is more here than be suspicious, on the lookout for evil, and wait for God's judgement.

In many ways, this parable could be the poster child for the twentieth century theological movement known as neo-orthodoxy. Neo-orthodoxy is a bit misleading in its name, it did not grow out of the orthodox or Fundamentalist movement in the early part of the 1900's. Neo-orthodoxy's parentage is actually Liberal theology of that era. Many of you know that a major voice on the side of Liberal theology in that time was Harry Emerson Fosdick, who preached from our own sanctuary during his tenure at First Church. Neo-orthodoxy developed as a reaction to Liberal Theology, whose Social Gospel movement was not seen as a strong enough anecdote to the crisis of World War I and the looming danger of World War II. The emergent voice of Neo-orthodoxy was the Swiss theologian, Karl Barth. But many other names would join this list over the decades from 1930 to 1960, Emil Brunner, Reinhold Niebuhr, and depending on who you ask, Paul Tillich. The major tenants of neo-orthodoxy included divine transcendence, exploring the tension of God's judgement and grace, and the drive to *separate* religion and culture.¹

These are worthy theological pursuits. But, personally, I resonate more strongly with Liberal theology, the Social Gospel movement, the thrust of religious education and education as responses to the world. I also gravitate to the theological children of neo-orthodoxy: liberation theology, black theology, womanist theology, feminist theology, queer theology, just to name a few. These theological siblings have collapsed the separation of religion and culture back together again, emphasizing human experience and liberation as salvation. I started thinking about this parable from that viewpoint and wondered how we might read it if we aren't trying to separate religion and culture, wheat and weeds.

It is striking how the weeds and wheat grow together in this parable. While their separation appears to be the parabolic imperative, their togetherness is a powerful image. To move away from the us/them idea in this parable, we have to see the wheat and the weeds as part of us. This parable offers us something different if we are able to learn the ways that weeds and wheat get tangled within us.

I had this parable on my heart when I attended a virtual Quaker Meeting earlier this summer. The meeting was hosted by the Brooklyn Friends School where my daughters attend. In Quaker tradition, a set of questions is presented for reflection. The Head of School, Crissy Cáceres, posed this query for the community to consider:

Do you seek to understand where a person's words and actions come from when those words and actions are uncomfortable for you? Do you listen patiently and seek the truth that other people's thoughts may contain for you? As you learn from others, do you consider the ways in which you can act in support of peace and justice?

This query is not afraid of the weeds in our fields. In fact, this query is encouraging us to pay attention to the weeds inside us. This query offers us a way to *listen* to the places where we are uncomfortable. Listening here is no passive act of just hearing. Listening here is compassionate. Listening here is seeking understanding.

A little earlier in the chapter we heard the parable from, Jesus is teaching about the purpose of the parables, when he quotes Isaiah:

‘You will indeed listen, but never understand,
and you will indeed look, but never perceive.
For this people's heart has grown dull,
and their ears are hard of hearing,
and they have shut their eyes;
so that they might not look with their eyes,
and listen with their ears,
and understand with their heart and turn—
and I would heal them.’

In the query and in the prophet's words, a theme emerges about listening. Listening is the spiritual practice that removes the weeds of dullness that have grown up inside our hearts. The weeds inside us may surprise us. The weeds inside us could actually be areas of discomfort that signal to us opportunities for growth. If we ignore them or refuse to recognize them by simply pulling them out, we lose the possibilities they offer us.

My friend, Kevin Sandberg, is the Executive Director for the Center of Social Concerns at Notre Dame University. Kevin has written extensively about *listening*. I like the very premise of his work, because it assumes that listening is a spiritual skill to grow, not a simple matter of hearing, or paying attention. Listening, truly listening, is an engaged spiritual activity. He also points out that “It is a curious aspect of education—religious or otherwise—that listening, while the most utilized communication skill, is the least taught. This “inverted curriculum” (cf. Swanson 1984) persists because we assume that we listen much better than in point of fact we do.”ⁱⁱ How can we improve our listening skills, and furthermore, how can we recognize listening as a spiritual practice and not just a physical act of hearing?

In order to improve any skill, we have, spiritual or otherwise, we first do need to recognize where our weaknesses might be. This recognition is also important with listening. These “weeds” might be uncomfortable to name, but they also help us consider where and how we might change, and what we might need to focus on to listen more fully in more situations. We all know ways in which our listening falls short. It might be when we are distracted when we

pick up a phone call, or we respond to an email too quickly. Our listening might be less effective when we are overtired or hungry, or overwhelmed. Listening might also be hard with people with whom we disagree. Perhaps we find ourselves listening less and instead creating counter-arguments in our mind. Listening may be hard when we don't understand the ideas, or when they make us uncomfortable, or when we feel ashamed or guilty. Dr. Sandberg also suggests that it is uncertainty that puts listening to its greatest test. Given the uncertain times we are living in, it seems like a good idea to consider ways we can strengthen our listening skills.

Within the Quaker tradition, listening plays an integral role. One of the ideas at the core of Quakerism is that God is present within each of us as an "Eternal listener."ⁱⁱⁱ God as listener with us allows us to avoid self-deception. It is through the love of that Eternal Listener that our comfort and discomfort are exposed and we are moved to act. God is then perceived as present in all our conversations, within us, within the person to whom we are listening. In this way, listening is *not* a passive activity. Listening, in its deepest spiritual sense, brings us into "present relation with the divine"^{iv} and we are moved to respond to that interaction. Ultimately, we listen in order to act.

We listen to understand. We listen to recognize our discomfort. We listen to seek God's presence in our lives and in others. We listen to respond. We are surrounded in these days with cries to both listen and act, rightly so. But we are not listening if we fail to recognize the interconnectedness of listening and acting. If we are simply reacting, we are not listening. If we are listening without action, we are not listening. If we push away what makes us uncomfortable, we are not listening. With the presence of the eternal listener, these are spiritual listening skills that we need to build: hearing the interconnectedness of listening and acting, and recognizing the eternal listener's presence with us and others.

We start our work of spiritual listening with the charge from Isaiah, listen to when you don't understand. Listen to when your heart feels dull. Listen to when you are uncomfortable. Listen for the eternal listener in others and in yourself. Don't be afraid of silence. Move listening out of the behavioral realm that you learned as child or teach now as a parent, and put listening in the spiritual realm. Connect your heart to your ears. Be aware of your breath when you listen. Acknowledge when you weren't listening. And keep this query close, as you listen, and ask yourself: *Do you seek to understand where a person's words and actions come from when those words and actions are uncomfortable for you? Do you listen patiently and seek the truth that other people's thoughts may contain for you? As you learn from others, do you consider the ways in which you can act in support of peace and justice?* We can all build a stronger spiritual practice of listening and trust that God is listening with us, weeds and all.

ⁱ Gilkey, Langdon. 1992. "Neoorthodoxy" in *A New Handbook of Christian Theology*. (Abingdon Press: Nashville, TN), p. 334-337.

ⁱⁱ Sandberg, Kevin. *Listening in Religious Education: The Gift of Self in the Face of Uncertainty*. PhD diss., Fordham University.

ⁱⁱⁱ Ibid.

^{iv} Ibid.