

Good morning.

The parable that was read earlier seems to accept that weeds are a part of life, whether in our own psyches or in the world at large. I read in more than one place that Jesus was always turning things upside down to get people to see things differently, and he often used parables to do this. This scripture suggests to me that weeds might serve a useful purpose and they might even be our teachers. So what follows are some of my thoughts of weeds as teachers.

At parties sometimes, I find myself thinking the person I'm talking to is a bit boring. I start looking for someone more interesting, or to get some food or something to drink. After recognizing that this was a bit judgmental of me, I decided to try something else. When I started thinking a person was boring, I took a conscious breath and turned my attention away from scanning the room, and really looked at and listened intently to the person. Time seemed to open up. Instead of seeing it as a linear line stretching off into the future, to across the room, it seemed to open up and pool around me. We were standing in a pool of time that had capacity and presence. It was spacious. My sense of urgency and distraction lessened. It was very interesting to note the difference, that there was another way to experience time from my usual way of racing through it.

One way of understanding this parable is to move through the events, arriving at the ending, and drawing a conclusion. For the writer of Matthew's gospel, concerned about this group of people trying to live faithfully in very difficult times, it probably was important to encourage them that the trials and evils of the day would all be sorted out in the end, that good would triumph, so keep the faith. But, what happens if instead of racing along the linear line of story development to the conclusion of the parable, we allow time within the story to get quiet, to take a conscious breath, and let time pool around us? What might we learn—what might we see—if we take time to be present in the field?

In this field are crop plants that were intentionally planted by the farmer; and there are other plants that came not by invitation, but just seemed to appear. Both kinds of plants are not only allowed to remain in the field, but all are nourished by soil, sun, and rain—all the way through to the harvest. Everything is held in this field, both wheat and weeds. There is no judgment.

I like to think of myself as being accepting and not very judgmental. I'm a liberal after all—open to lots of things. I have noticed, however, other people can be pretty judgmental. A couple of weeks ago, Mike Elmore got me to thinking more about this when he said that the tree of the knowledge of good and evil might better be named the tree of judgment. To have knowledge that good and evil exist is not the same thing as being able to rightly discern what is good and what is evil. That, however, doesn't keep us from making such judgments. Pronouncing something as evil often means it doesn't please me, much like our pronouncement of "weed" on any plant we don't want in our garden. Often what we identify as evil reflects our own fears and our own shadow side. Our shadow is that part of ourselves that is made up of those aspects of ourselves that we reject, repress or disown. To be human is to have a shadow. The problem with yanking out the weeds is that we would be yanking out parts of ourselves. All of us are a mixture of weeds and wheat, and the parable tells us that yanking out weeds might cause damage to the wheat.

My judgment that another person is boring is part of my shadow. When I say I'd like to get away from them and do something more interesting than listen to them, I really mean I am boring and I'd like to do something more interesting than listen to me. I can go on and on about nothing, or on and on about something, but I repeat myself. I am sometimes tedious to be with. Sometimes I can't think of anything interesting to say; and I am after all, pretty ordinary. None of us like being ordinary or being thought ordinary. In our society, it is a sin to be boring. I'm thinking now it would be good if we didn't throw out the boring weeds—or, come to think of it, the angry ones, or the self righteous ones, or the needy ones, or the lying, cheating, thieving ones. All of us are a mixture of weeds and wheat. The parable seems to tell us to not start yanking things out, but let them grow.

I can see that we as individuals are a mixture of wheat and weeds and that we need to be thoughtful about what we call good and evil. But what about the evils in society and in our world, when suffering is intentionally and maliciously inflicted on human beings by other human beings? That is evil. About 6 months ago I participated in a meditation time in which the leader read a part about offering amnesty toward those who have inflicted pain, and that we recognize that we share in the blame; that we are not blameless. I trust this leader very much and I liked the idea the meditation was getting at which was our need to let go of blaming and vengeance. I was also very uncomfortable because I knew there were persons in the room who had been sexually abused as children. When the meditation time was over, I put my discomfort out to the group. One of the women whom we all knew was an abuse survivor, responded, and because it came from her it came with authority. She said that all of us have caused pain somewhere, that we are all human and we are connected to every other human being by our humanity, both the good and the evil. Just because we haven't inflicted pain in a particular situation doesn't mean we haven't participated in inflicting pain, and sometimes intentionally. I wish I could have her comment verbatim. I just remember being moved by the truth of it and the humanity of it. It strikes me that our standard religious sayings are truer sometimes than we know. Now when I read Romans 3:23 that says for all have sinned and fallen short of the glory of God, I no longer hear it as a condemnation of us so much as a connecting grace for us. It isn't meant to separate us from God or one another, but to be the truth that causes us to relinquish our judgments of each other, and to be drawn into the glory of God's forgiveness and grace.

Along with the dawning that I might be more judgmental than I was willing to acknowledge, was also the realization that I'm not as compassionate as I like to think. This is a problem for someone trying to follow Jesus, who is the very picture of compassion. The word "compassion" means "to suffer with." Most of us work very hard to distance ourselves from suffering or to aggressively eradicate it. We tend to see suffering as a weed.. We move sometimes too quickly to problem solving, leaving the person we're trying to help feeling inadequate and disempowered. Sometimes it isn't even their pain we're addressing but our own discomfort with brokenness. The opposite is also true. Sometimes we avoid a person because we don't want to know their pain and their suffering, or the magnitude of their problems. It is uncomfortable to feel our own powerlessness and so much suffering can be overwhelming. Suffering is not something planted in the field, but it shows up, and most of us see it as weeds, and we wonder why God doesn't yank it out, why it is allowed to stay in the field. People who let suffering be their teacher will tell you that the way of joy is through suffering. I don't understand it. I don't

particularly like it. I just know that it is true. Richard Rohr says that some things can't be fixed, they can only be grieved and forgiven.

This might be one of those things where we learn more from experience than from talking about it. I invite you to use the next few minutes of this sermon time to participate in a way of praying that holds the suffering of another. If you are willing, imagine before you someone you love. Breathe in their pain and breathe out love over them...Now imagine someone in your life, a family member, a coworker, a neighbor, who is difficult for you to love. Breathe in their suffering, and breathe out love...Imagine a situation of suffering in the larger world. Hold before you an image of this suffering. Breathe in the suffering, breathe out love...Would someone be willing to tell what or whom they were holding in prayer? Together, let's hold this situation and breathe in the suffering, and breathe out love...Is there another one? Together we breathe in the suffering, and breathe out love...One more. Breathe in suffering, breathe out love...

Some things strike me about this way of praying. One is how like Jesus this invites me to be—to hold the suffering and breathe love into it. Another is, it's a funny little paradox that pops up in spirituality a lot, that holding involves a lot of letting go.

You might wonder, as I do, where is action in all this holding of the tension of opposites. When do we get to the part of acting for what is right and coming against what is wrong. Surely we are not just supposed to put up with injustice, or allow suffering when it is in our power to relieve it. The shift in advocating the holding of the tension of opposites is not to do nothing, but it is to change the way we see and the place within us out of which action comes. Seeing is everything—the lens through which we view the world and ourselves makes a difference. So much of our seeing is colored by our own areas of unfreedom, our fears and judgments, and by what we keep in our shadows. It is when we see rightly that we can act rightly. It is when we see as Jesus saw, that we can love like Jesus loved and act like Jesus acted. This is the “being” part. It is when we recognize that we are, at our most basic sense of identity, children of God, that our identity is “I am” and we are founded and grounded in the great I AM, that we can know our connectedness to every other person—and to all of creation—whose basic identity, like us, is that they hold the image of God in their being. When we see this, we will act out of our knowing that all things are connected, all things are held in God, good and evil—the world's dichotomies and our own. Isn't that what we see in this parable: the willingness of the field to hold all things.

When I first heard the term the Ground of All Being, I was captured by the image. I went for a walk and kept repeating in rhythm with my steps, “Ground of All Being.” It seemed to me that God was like a net that covered the earth—I couldn't walk without walking on God. God's nature, this Being-ness could get into people through their feet, through their contact with the Ground. Different people were made up of different amounts of this netting depending on how permeable their feet were and how much they allowed their being to be filled with this Being. Jesus was all netting. Other people were nearly all netting—for me it was Fr. Greg Schaeffer in Guatemala, Martin Luther King, Jr. and saints like Julian of Norwich and Therese of Avila. But all people had some netting in them, and we were all connected by the netting. I didn't know the term then, but some call it Web of Life or the Great Chain of Being. The thing to be tended to, in this metaphor, was the condition of our feet—keeping our feet soft and open, permeable, so that the nature of God could enter and fill us with our true nature. In recent days I've adjusted this

metaphor a little. It seems we are already netting. We have to keep our feet open and receptive not to receive what we are—we are that already—but so we can know what we are, connected to God, and through God, connected to everything else.

There is one more weed I'd like to talk about because I think if we understand it better, we might stop trying to yank it out and instead let it be our teacher. One of the contributions of modern psychological thinking is that we know that human beings develop through stages, and those stages can be mapped. Some of you may be familiar with James Fowler's book, *Stages of Faith*. Other psychologist and theologians have done similar work describing how people grow and develop psychologically and spiritually. There is a stage of development that is characterized by letting go of lots of the dogma from church, being open to ambiguities, looking more at the questions than the answers. A lot of us think of ourselves as being in this stage. One of the characteristics of this stage is that we look back at earlier stages with disdain, even judgment. More advanced stages beyond us actually see each level of development as necessary, and deserving of respect and being valued. In the silence of a recent prayer meeting, I felt myself soften and begin to appreciate that earlier ways of presenting spiritual truth—the ones I get impatient with—might be an expression of God's expansive and gracious provision for meeting people where they are. I saw again my lack of acceptance and insistence that others see what I see. God, however, will provide many ways to get connected, to just get people on the journey. I had a moment of thinking I shouldn't be so quick to disparage another person's way of talking about things and understanding spiritual realities. I felt gratitude for God's abundance and generosity, since I have been the recipient of both. It seemed possible to just accept their story without needing to correct it, fix it, or roll my eyes at it. I get impatient and disdainful of persons who think it is only their way, hardly recognizing that that is also my attitude towards them. I could be a little less defensive and a little more hospitable, as God has welcomed me whether my theology is weed or wheat at any given point.

As realizations dawn and our weediness is exposed, the final judgment we have to let go of is judging ourselves. We talk a lot about being on the journey. There are lots of ways of talking about it, that's what makes it a good metaphor. On my journey, all this dawning and awakening and seeing and holding has come in fits and starts. Rohr says, "There's no way you can love until you forgive yourself for not being perfect, for not being the saint you thought you were going to be. Compassion comes from a spacious place where a lot of things are put together and coexist, where we recognize, forgive and make friends with the enemy within. The passionate struggle with your own shadow becomes compassion for the struggles of our neighbor." Amen.

Postscript: About Wednesday following this talk,