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A: Pentecost 8

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Genesis 28:10-19a, Psalm 86:11-17, Romans 8:12-25, Matthew 13:24-30, 36-43 Salem, Bridgeport

“Don’t Worry about the Weeds”

So who are the weeds in your garden? Who are the people you just wish God would pull out?

Are they the heads of countries that invade other countries?

Are they the Democrats? Or the Republicans? Or all politicians? Or particular ones?

Are they the greedy, selfish business billionaires who make a game of not paying taxes?

Are they those who run Fox News? or MSNBC? or all media moguls?

Are they those people in customer service who seem to enjoy being unhelpful?

Maybe it’s a neighbor or someone on your condo board, or a relative that you can’t stand.

Or look around this room...

Do you see a garden that would be so beautiful

if only God would yank out those weeds that are strangling the life out of the wheat?

Jesus knew human nature which is exactly why he told this parable.

He knew how our minds are constantly at work, categorizing things,

judging them as good or bad, right or wrong, helpful or obstructive,

and classifying them “us” or “them”, with us or against us,

people we see as either part of our own tribe or part of another.

And Jesus knew how often we follow up our categorizing and judging with a wish or a prayer that

God would come and clean up the garden and get rid of all those weeds!

If God would only do that then everything would be fine and we would be happy.

Or maybe it’s not people that are the weeds in your life. Maybe it’s situations.

If only you would heal me from this illness, God. Or, if only you would fix my financial situation.

If only God would get rid of those people and situations that are weeds in our gardens,

everything would be fine and we would be happy.

This is the situation Jesus addresses and what does he?

What does he tell us to do about those weeds in our lives? WAIT.

But those weeds are choking the life out of us, Jesus! We need God to yank them out.

No, says Jesus. Listen to me. You really shouldn’t be so quick to judge.

What looks like a weed might be wheat, and what looks like wheat might be a weed.

The specific plants Jesus was talking about were wheat and tares,

which when they are young, look the same.

And by the time they start to look different,

the roots of the tares have already gotten entangled with the roots of the wheat,

so if you pull up the tares, you pull up the wheat right with it.

No, says Jesus. It’s not your job to identify weeds. In fact don’t worry about them at all.

Don’t worry about the people who are choking you or obstructing your growth.

Don’t worry about the situations that you find yourself in that are uncomfortable or challenging.

Because it’s not your job to judge. After all, God created all plants, right?

There really isn’t an innate difference between weeds and other plants;

a weed is just a plant growing where we don’t want it.

We see dandelions in our lawns as weeds, and yet some people love eating dandelion greens.

Although ingesting tares could cause illness, they have been used medicinally as well.

But Jesus! Those weeds are ruining our garden! They are choking the life out of us!

But Jesus' response is that we are not to worry

about the annoying people or the frustrating situations or the challenging issues in our lives. Instead, Jesus says, we need to wait and let God do the weeding when the time is right.

It's so hard to wait, though, isn't it?

We look at the world around us and we see all kinds of evil and destruction and injustice and we want to fix it.

And when we can't, we want God to fix it, and when God doesn't, we wonder why he doesn't.

And the truth is we don't. We don't know why there's sin or evil or destruction in the world and we don't know why there always seems to be so many uphill battles in our lives.

But Jesus says that we need to take our focus off the weeds, the challenges, & the uphill battles, and look beyond them.

Our Psalm for today has much the same message.

The writer says that even though the arrogant – the weeds – rise up against him and a band of violent people who are not focused on God seek his life, he's not going to focus on them.

Instead he glorifies God's name and he thanks God with all his heart.

He thanks God – in advance –

for loving him, for comforting him, for helping me, and for delivering him – from the weeds.

He turns to God, asking God

to teach him, to have compassion on him, to give him strength, and to save him.

He even asks God for a sign of favor so that those who hate him – the weeds in his life – may see it and be put to shame.

What Jesus says about focusing on God's promise for the garden and not its present state is so true.

The psalmist knew that truth.

And I was reminded of it also this week.

I was working on a song for my voice lesson, and there was a part in it that I dreaded, a part that went up like this: G-D-B-G, F-C-A-F.

And her advice was this: don't think about the high note; think to the note beyond it.

I tried it and it was easier – not easy, but easier.

And then she said, "you need to put more breath into it".

I did, and all the sudden, it was EASY!

So the first lesson is to think beyond the presenting problem or current crisis:

Don't think of reaching the summit of the mountain; think about crossing over it.

Don't focus on the battle before you; focus on the triumph you will feel when you win.

And the second lesson is to put more breath or more Spirit into it:

Remember to rely on the breath or the Spirit to carry us through whatever we face.

I think that's what is going on in our reading today from Genesis.

Isaac has sent Jacob on a journey back to the land of his mother.

Such a journey would have been fraught with danger, but in the part that came right before our reading, we find that Isaac has sent his son off with a blessing, with a vision, with a promise:

"May God Almighty bless you and make you fruitful and numerous....

*May he give to you the blessing of Abraham, to you and your offspring,,
so you may take possession of the land ...God promised to Abraham."*

In other words, Isaac was giving his son the same advice that my voice teacher gave me:
think beyond the current challenge.

Then we read that Jacob “came to a certain place and stayed there...because the sun had set”.

A “certain place”, an ambiguous place, a place in the dark, at night, on a lonesome journey.
Jacob might well have been asking God why he had to face such a challenge,

but it seems that God was giving him the same advice as his father had given him,
the same advice that my voice teacher gave me: think beyond,

for God speaks to him in a dream and says,

“I am the Lord, the God of Abraham your father and the God of Isaac;

the land on which you lie I will give to you and to your offspring,

and your offspring shall be like the dust of the earth,

and you shall spread abroad ... [in all directions] ...

and all the families of the earth shall be blessed in you and in your offspring.

Know that I am with you & will keep you wherever you go & will bring you back ...

for I will not leave you until I have done what I have promised you.” [Gen 28:13-15]

When Jacob had gotten to the place, it had seemed ambiguous, unknown, unnamed,

but after God himself reaffirmed the promise and Jacob’s projected future,

Jacob awakes and exclaims,

“Surely the Lord is in this place – and I did not know it! How awesome is this place!

This is none other than the house of God...the gate of heaven.” [Gen 28:16b-17]

Jacob has done what Jesus later teaches in the parable:

he has looked beyond the weeds to God’s promised harvest,

beyond the battles to the victory,

beyond the mountain to the land beyond.

Instead of worrying about weeds, instead of focusing on the current state of the garden,

we need to think beyond and take in a deep breath of the Spirit

so that we can trust in God’s promised future.

The Apostle Paul comes at this same truth in our reading today from Romans 8.

There were so many amazing translations of this passage

that I couldn’t bring myself to weed out any of the good stuff,

but instead picked flowers from different translations and arranged them all into a bouquet.

Paul writes that we are not to live our lives on a mere human level –

because when we do that, we are categorizing and judging and wishing away the weeds.

Instead, Paul says,

we need to be filled with the Spirit, to “obey the Spirit”, to be “led by the Spirit”.

We need to understand that our heavenly father

does not want us to live difficult, burdensome, exhausting lives controlled by “fear”,

but rather the “adventurously expectant” lives of beloved children.

Paul wants us to know

that just as God promised to bless Abraham and Isaac and Jacob with descendants and land,

so God promises that we will “celebrate victories with Christ”

and receive “an unbelievable inheritance”!

Whatever the weeds or the mountains or the challenges in our lives are now,

they are “less than nothing compared with the magnificent future God has planned for us”!

Those who choose not to see it, can’t see it,

but if we open ourselves to the Spirit, God will give us hope.

Yes, maybe the current circumstances are making us uncomfortable, or sick, or nauseous,
but we just need to see ourselves as pregnant with the promise of new life.

I love the way Paul puts it:

“All around us we observe a pregnant creation.

The difficult times of pain throughout the world are simply birth pangs.

But it’s not only around us; it’s within us.

The Spirit of God is arousing us within. We’re also feeling the birth pangs.

These empty and barren bodies of ours are yearning for full deliverance.

We were saved by this hope, a hope that we can’t yet see,

for who hopes for what is already here?

So in our moments of impatience,

let us remember that hope always means waiting for something that we haven’t yet got,

but something that we know is on its way!”

All of our readings today remind us to lift our focus from the present problems in our lives
to God whose promises will be fulfilled in the future.

All of our readings today call us to think beyond –

beyond the current condition of the garden, to the harvest God will give,

beyond the attacks of the enemy, to the assurance of the victory God has promised,

beyond the trials and travails of our travels, to reaching the destination God desires for us,

beyond the frustrations and fears as we look at the world around us,

to being upheld by hope in the one who holds us.

We are called to think beyond.

And all of our readings today call us to trust the Spirit, to get us from here to that place beyond.

We are called to trust the Spirit –

to trust the Spirit to fill us even when we feel the life being choked out of us by weeds,

to trust the Spirit when we feel we are under attack,

to trust the Spirit when the journey is rough or hard or simply long,

to trust the Spirit to take away our frustrations and fears and fill us with hope and faith.

We are called to trust the Spirit to get us from where we are to the place God has called us.

We are called to think beyond.

And we are called to trust the Spirit to get us from here to that place beyond.

I’m so grateful for the promises God has made and confirmed in my life.

I’m so grateful for God’s miracles and wonders and signs.

I’m so grateful for God’s encouragement and support.

I am grateful that God has not answered anyone’s prayer to yank me out of his garden -- yet!

Whatever the current conditions in your life,

whatever weeds are worrying you,

whatever adversaries are attacking you,

whatever jolts in the journey you’re experiencing,

whatever fears you face,

remember to think beyond the present problems to the possibilities and promises of the future.

Thank beyond and then be filled with the Spirit,

because it’s only through the Spirit that we will get to the place God has called us –

to that promised land, that glorious victory, that plentiful harvest,

and that unbelievable inheritance! Thanks be to God! Amen