

**“Getting Into the Weeds”**  
**Genesis 28:10-19a; Romans 8:12-25; Matthew 13:24-30, 36-43**  
**1<sup>st</sup> Presbyterian Church, Marshfield, WI**  
**July 23, 2023**  
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**First Reading Genesis 28:10-19a**

<sup>10</sup>Jacob left Beer-sheba and went toward Haran. <sup>11</sup>He came to a certain place and stayed there for the night, because the sun had set. Taking one of the stones of the place, he put it under his head and lay down in that place. <sup>12</sup>And he dreamed that there was a ladder set up on the earth, the top of it reaching to heaven; and the angels of God were ascending and descending on it. <sup>13</sup> And the LORD stood beside him and said, “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; <sup>14</sup>and your offspring shall be like the dust of the earth, and you shall spread abroad to the west and to the east and to the north and to the south; and all the families of the earth shall be blessed in you and in your offspring. <sup>15</sup>Know that I am with you and will keep you wherever you go, and will bring you back to this land; for I will not leave you until I have done what I have promised you.” <sup>16</sup>Then Jacob woke from his sleep and said, “Surely the LORD is in this place — and I did not know it!” <sup>17</sup>And he was afraid, and said, “How awesome is this place! This is none other than the house of God, and this is the gate of heaven.”

<sup>18</sup>So Jacob rose early in the morning, and he took the stone that he had put under his head and set it up for a pillar and poured oil on the top of it. <sup>19a</sup>He called that place Bethel;

**Second Reading Romans 8:12-25**

<sup>12</sup>So then, brothers and sisters, we are debtors, not to the flesh, to live according to the flesh — <sup>13</sup>for if you live according to the flesh, you will die; but if by the Spirit you put to death the deeds of the body, you will live. <sup>14</sup>For all who are led by the Spirit of God are children of God. <sup>15</sup>For you did not receive a spirit of slavery to fall back into fear, but you have received a spirit of adoption. When we cry, “Abba! Father!” <sup>16</sup>it is that very Spirit bearing witness with our spirit that we are children of God, <sup>17</sup>and if children, then heirs, heirs of God and joint heirs with Christ — if, in fact, we suffer with him so that we may also be glorified with him.

<sup>18</sup>I consider that the sufferings of this present time are not worth comparing with the glory about to be revealed to us. <sup>19</sup>For the creation waits with eager longing for the revealing of the children of God; <sup>20</sup>for the creation was subjected to futility, not of its own will but by the will of the one who subjected it, in hope <sup>21</sup>that the creation itself will be set free from its bondage to decay and will obtain the freedom of the glory of the children of God. <sup>22</sup>We know that the whole creation has been groaning in labor pains until now; <sup>23</sup>and not only the creation, but we ourselves, who have the first fruits of the Spirit, groan inwardly while we wait for adoption, the redemption of our bodies. <sup>24</sup>For in hope we were saved. Now hope that is seen is not hope. For who hopes for what is seen? <sup>25</sup>But if we hope for what we do not see, we wait for it with patience.

**Gospel Matthew 13:24-30, 36-43**

<sup>24</sup>He put before them another parable: “The kingdom of heaven may be compared to someone who sowed good seed in his field; <sup>25</sup>but while everybody was asleep, an enemy came and sowed weeds among the wheat, and then went away. <sup>26</sup>So when the plants came up and bore grain, then the weeds appeared as well. <sup>27</sup>And the slaves of the householder came and said to him, ‘Master, did you not sow good seed in your field? Where, then, did these weeds come from?’ <sup>28</sup>He answered, ‘An enemy has done this.’ The slaves said to him, ‘Then do you want us to go and gather them?’ <sup>29</sup>But he replied, ‘No; for in gathering the weeds you would uproot the wheat along with them. <sup>30</sup>Let both of them grow together until the harvest; and at harvest time I will tell the reapers, Collect the weeds first and bind them in bundles to be burned, but gather the wheat into my barn.’” <sup>36</sup>Then he left the crowds and went into the house. And his disciples approached him, saying, “Explain to us the parable of the weeds of the field.” <sup>37</sup>He answered, “The one who sows the good seed is the Son of Man; <sup>38</sup>the field is the world, and the good seed are the children of the kingdom; the weeds are the children of the evil

one, <sup>39</sup>and the enemy who sowed them is the devil; the harvest is the end of the age, and the reapers are angels. <sup>40</sup>Just as the weeds are collected and burned up with fire, so will it be at the end of the age. <sup>41</sup>The Son of Man will send his angels, and they will collect out of his kingdom all causes of sin and all evildoers, <sup>42</sup>and they will throw them into the furnace of fire, where there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth. <sup>43</sup>Then the righteous will shine like the sun in the kingdom of their Father. Let anyone with ears listen!”

### Getting into the Weeds

When I first started preparing for this week, the first thing that caught my attention was that Jacob renamed the location of his dream, “Bethel.” “Well now,” I thought to myself, “Bethel sounds a whole lot like Bethlehem, I wonder if they might be the same place or somehow otherwise related.”

In case you haven’t had the opportunity to go down that rabbit hole yet for yourself, the answer is in fact, no. Or at least probably not. There really isn’t any archaeological way to tell where Jacob was when he set up Bethel, so it could have been in the same place that eventually became Bethlehem. However, fairly unlikely.

To answer the next question, no – their names don’t even demonstrate a relationship between the two locations. Bethel, translated to English means “holy place” and Bethlehem means “house of bread.”

For those that know me, I can be a little hard-headed and won’t give up on an idea very easily. My mother may have even called me stubborn once or twice in my lifetime. However, as I continued to be drawn to this thought that they must somehow be connected, I eventually figured it out.

Bethel is where Jacob saw the spiritual world connecting directly with the physical world. Bethlehem was the location where a very much spiritual God became a very much physical human in Jesus. At the end of the day, both are locations where the spiritual world meets the natural world. And that’s where it appeared to end. I couldn’t figure out what this had to do with any lesson that I felt God trying to express from these readings.

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That’s when it hit me. In that parable, weren’t the slaves of the house ready to tear up the weeds, set them on fire, and start all over?

That’s the magic of parables. Just like Bethel and Bethlehem, parables are where the spiritual world meets the natural world. You see, Jesus speaks to us in parables so much because he wants us to understand – even when we don’t understand. None of us could understand the spiritual world because none of us have been there. But each of us understands this world, because we are familiar with it. Parables are Jesus’ way of allowing our minds to come into contact with spiritual thoughts through the limited knowledge we have of this world.

Parables are so prevalent in Jesus’ ministry that in just the 13<sup>th</sup> chapter of Matthew, there are 7 different parables. You have the parable of the Sower, the weeds, the mustard seed, the yeast, hidden treasures in the field, a merchant and his pearls, and drawing in a net.

Seven different stories that Jesus uses to try and help our natural minds come into contact with his spiritual world – even if only for a moment.

We like to think that this methodology makes us fully understand God and his ways. However, earlier in chapter 13, in verses 13 and 14, Jesus tells us the opposite when he tells the disciples that he teaches in

parables because it fulfills the prophecy of Isaiah – “You will indeed hear but never understand, and you will indeed see but never perceive.” Apparently not everyone will find true understanding in the parables.

Even more, of all seven parables in chapter 13, only two are explained. First, the parable of the sower and, from today’s gospel reading – the parable of the weeds, Jesus takes the time to explain. There must have been something that had Him concerned that even the disciples might miss the point of these.

If that is the concern, maybe we should look a little deeper at this one. There aren’t too many things in this world that have a nearly universal agreement, but weeds may be one of them. It doesn’t matter if you are Christian, Jew, Muslim, Atheist, born in this century, born in the first century, born in the time of Moses, or even what continent you were born on – you probably don’t like weeds.

How many of you have gone to Menards and spent 10’s or even 100’s of dollars on some new great weedkiller to get them out of your yard, garden, or driveway? You see the ads on TV letting you know just how easily that new Round-Up product will give you the perfect yard.

However, we all know that it isn’t as easy as that commercial makes it out to be. We know that our gardens, our yards, and our driveways will never be perfect. So we all understand that what Jesus is letting us know here is that no matter what we do, no matter how great that new weedkiller is, we will always have to deal with evil in the world until God sends his angels to get rid of it for us.

So now that we all understand the parable, we can all go home happy – right? Sermon knocked out in 5 minutes – call it a victory. Sorry, you aren’t getting away with a 5-minute sermon.

Scripture is rarely that easy and we have only scratched the surface at this point.

Think about it for a minute - When you are working on your yard and garden or when a farmer is working on his field – you don’t just get rid of the weeds, do you?

Of course not, you apply fertilizer to help it grow. You put fences around it to keep animals that want to eat your prized produce away. You break out the sprinklers or the irrigation equipment and make certain that there is enough water – even amid drought conditions. And you do all of this even when the weeds are still present.

I bet that Jesus understood this and his disciples did too. There is more that goes into having a green thumb than just pulling a couple of weeds. If that were not the case, even I would be able to grow something. That being the case, means there is something more to this parable, too.

Not only are we supposed to leave the weeds alone, we are supposed to tend to God’s garden. And that means that we will also be providing fertilizer and precious water and protection to those weeds – the archnemesis of the average gardener. Sounds a little like “love your enemies,” doesn’t it.

So not only are we supposed to ignore those evil weeds in the world, but we are supposed to help them grow? That makes no sense – why would Jesus ask us to do that. Not only ask us in parable, but take the time to explain it while all the other parables are left to the listeners to figure out?

Maybe it’s because he knows we’re human. Maybe it’s because he knows that we make mistakes. He knows that we aren’t, nor are we expected to be perfect.

An example from my own life – we had a small tree get blown down in a storm. It took a while for me to get to it, and when I did, there was a growth next to the tiny stump that was remaining. I stared at it for a while.

If it was a growth from the previous tree – that would be a great seedling to start because it would already have established roots. If it was a weed, I would spend a bunch of time running around it with the lawnmower, just to feel foolish down the road.

I compared it to the other tree I had planted about 30 feet away. I tried using Google to check the leaves. I spent more time than I would like to admit on making this decision before finally deciding to stab my shovel into the ground and pull up that little stump.

Sure enough, along with that stump and root-ball, along came a tree that was a little over a foot tall that could have grown into a full tree in a matter of a couple years. But it was too late to fix it now.

It's the same with the weeds in today's lesson. When you look at the various interpretations, you will often see the word "tare" instead of "weed." This is probably a more accurate interpretation, but most people today don't know what a tare is, so the word weed, which is also technically accurate, is substituted for easier understanding in many versions.

But it is important to note that prior to full maturity at harvest time, wheat and tares are nearly indistinguishable. It would have been nearly impossible for those slaves, eager to please their master, to remove all the tares without also removing or damaging the valuable wheat.

If you don't think that we'd make the same mistake as Christians, think about how many people throughout history have been considered the weeds of Christianity at one point or another. The heretics who believed the earth was round, the protestants who dared question the Catholic church, Asians, Africans, Native Americans – all were considered to be less than human and not worthy of God at one point or another.

Even today, it is probably important to remember how many people consider us to be weeds in God's garden. If you ask the right people, they will tell you that we aren't worthy of heaven because we believe that we can talk to God directly, or because we were baptized as babies, or because we believe that Christ is the Messiah.

Even as we sit here today, two major denominations are either splitting or potentially splitting. The Methodists over questions of whether or not to accept LGBT members and the Southern Baptists over whether or not it's acceptable to have women lead church services.

In fact, at a personal level, I would be willing to bet that some of you out there thought I was a weed at one point or another while I was growing up. Knowing some of the things I did, deservedly so. Some of you may even still think that! I'll let you in on a secret – at some point, each of you has most likely been considered a weed at one point or another by someone.

How many of God's children would we accidentally rip out of the ground, leaving them as nothing better than fuel for the fire if we let our own judgement run rampant and try to snuff out evil on our own? How many mistakes would we make? Might we uproot those we love along the way when we make these mistakes? Might we get uprooted ourselves?

That's why this parable was so important that Jesus didn't just leave it to us to try and understand on our own. We are supposed to love one another. We are supposed to care for one another. We are supposed to tend to one another in his garden. And yes, that even means those that you think might be weeds because when the harvest time comes, they just might bear fruit for the kingdom.

At the end of the day, those who you think are weeds, were also made by God. And he is trying his best to call them home. It might be that love and support – the water and fertilizer you give them that allows them to

grow into God's calling. It might be the fence you help put up around them that protects them from greater evils while they mature into God's design.

Or, and here's the real gut punch, you just might discover that you have been the weed all along, and because others heeded the commands of this parable, you were able to grow into God's calling and be saved. And this is probably the most important reason of all – because we are all sinners, we are all weeds at one time or another. But we are God's weeds and he may do with us as he pleases.

And he wants to let us continue to grow, develop, and hopefully one day flower in His garden, all the while expecting us to help the other weeds around us do the same.

In short - love your neighbor, love your enemy, and love your weeds!

Amen.