

Weed Whacker and Thistle Farms: To Weed or not to Weed

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Based on Matthew 13:24-43

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I. “To Weed or not to Weed?” Is that the question?

Weed Whacker

After a month of unbridled growth, I noticed my gardens in Minnesota had turned into a jungle. Like a human weed whacker, I tore into the tangled greenery, pulling up tall stalks by the roots, cutting thick branches and pulling out long vines. Who the devil has been planting this stuff? As in the Wheat parable, I imagined an evil force of Harry Potter proportion had infiltrated our Apple Valley acre, seeding buckthorn and other prickly, annoying weeds. Reason reminded me, those sweet birds we feed in the front yard contribute. Yet all I could see was the variety of greenery crowding and threatening my flowers. Some of them were not really weeds. They were perennials gone wild.

Black-eyed Susan (*Rudbeckia*) have overtaken my front garden squeezing out the purple Coneflower or *Echinacea*, enveloping my rose plant. I've renamed it “Rebecca” because of its zealous nature. Rebecca, Jacob's mother took over his life, pushed him into deceiving his father to receive the blessing. (Genesis 27) On the other end of my garden are common orange daylilies which you find on every roadside. I thought they would be easy to grow. However, they have doubled in size overshadowing my delicate blue balloon (*Platycodon*) flowers. The question is no longer “to weed or not to weed” - it is “how do we weed?” Weed whacking only works when you do not care if you lose a few good plants. And, “what is a weed?”

II. Darn Darnel or A weed by any other name is...

While focusing on clearing space around preferred perennials, my husband asked innocently, “Is that a weed?” He was referring to the tall alyssum plant with yellow flowers. “Today it's a weed”, I said throwing it on the pile. Honestly, it's my own fault, I love those mounds of white alyssum edging groomed gardens, I bought the seed for a taller variety which morphed into Godzilla spikes. One sales person's flower is another gardener's weed. Tom Bluitt, Covenant's resident agriculturalist a weed is nothing more than an aggressive plant which will seize any opportunity to survive and obvious thrive. Jesus' parable of the wheat and weeds is actually about wheat and darnel, a wheat like plant which is aggressive and opportunistic. Darnel looks like wheat in the early stages of growth. So, for the first few months, the wheat and darnel grow together like brother and sister. At harvest the wheat produces grain and the darnel does not. Jesus' wheat field seems less complicated with only two species.

Two examples, identified as good and bad, black and white. One thrown into the fire and the other not. The truth of my garden and thus life is this: human gardening is complicated. People

are not good and bad, right and wrong, we are complex. However, we are intermingled early on, the weeds and wheat, the flowers and vines, the dandelions and grasses all grow together. Roots intertwine.

III. God as Gardner or Angelic Threshing?

Last week, while I ruminated endlessly about the question “To weed or not to weed?, God persistently gave me answers, as I walked through the Covenant Garden. I could see the your volunteers “Weed early and often”. Better than I could ever maintain a garden, you are dedicated and meticulous. Thank you. However, I noticed one lone dandelion, which I unthinkingly pulled out by the root. Deciding to save it for this lesson, I placed in a cup of water. As so doing, I realized much to my dismay and amazement, there was a petunia branch in the midst of the dandelion. As careful as I tried to be I’d picked them both, flower and weed. The cautionary tone of the Parable of the Wheat and Weeds may be lost if we not careful. Let the angels take care of the harvest, not you. Because you may uproot both weed and wheat together. The early church may have felt need to cast out undesirable from the congregation. Unfortunately, this parable has been used to cleanse the Christian church in more than one point in history. The “Hag Inquisition” during the Middle Ages is an example of the misuse of this parable and unfortunately was used to justify tortuous acts. There are many dark shadows of intolerance in Christian history.ⁱ However, they missed the point of the parable, It is God’s job to purify by uprooting the bad seed. The temptation for followers of Jesus is to reach for that speck in the other person’s eye, rather than take the log of our own. As Rev. Elizabeth Johnson observes, “we whip ourselves into a weeding frenzy, certain that we know the difference between weeds and wheat and that we know how to deal with the weeds. Jesus makes it clear that we cannot be certain who is in and who is out. In fact, God’s judgment may take... us by surprise.”(paraphrased quote from Working Preacher website)ⁱⁱ

IV. Who would have thought of Thistle Farming? A good illustration of God’s surprising transformation of weeds is the story of Thistle Farms. I met Rebecca Stevens this summer as part of the worship planning for the Interim Ministry Network. Becca is not only the chaplain for Vanderbilt, she is the director of Thistle Farms and Magdalene House. To quote their own description, Thistle Farms, a social enterprise run by women who have survived lives of violence, prostitution, and addiction, is 10 Years old! Visit (www.Thistlefarms.org) a new way each week in June to help us celebrate. Thistle Farms products are natural and hand-made by the women of Thistle Farms. All proceeds go back into Thistle Farms and the residential program, Magdalene. We believe that love is the most powerful force for change in the world.ⁱⁱⁱ Becca spoke of her obsession with thistle farming as she preached at the IMN Conference worship. She conveyed her enthusiasm when finding a new batch of thistle in dry fields all around Nashville. She never thought this would be her vocation, her passion, Thistle Farming. But, it is.

I’ve pulled my share of thistles with thick leather gloves. However, after seeing the beautiful cards made out of thistle down and experiencing the grace of these rehabiliated and healed lives, I will never look at thistle the same way. Granted I will still pull thistles, as Becca would agree, but I will remember the thorny lives and painful abuse they represent. And, I’ll notice the purple delicate flowers and consider the serum within that may heal liver disease. I’ve slowed down my weed whacking enough to consider the parable is telling us. Maybe our job is not to garden as to become the flowers and wheat.

Yes, we are still responsible for plucking the weeds out of souls, praying for God's help and healing love.

V. Tangled vines, intertwined lives:

I look back at my own garden, zeroing on the Asiatic lilies and vines intertwined still wondering whether I should "Weed or not Weed" and carefully cut and unwrap the lily so it may stand tall and free. Martin Luther King's quote comes to mind, *"All I'm saying is simply this, that all life is interrelated, that somehow we're caught in an inescapable network of mutuality tied in a single garment of destiny. Whatever affects one directly affects all indirectly. For some strange reason, I can never be what I ought to be until you are what you ought to be. You can never be what you ought to be until I am what I ought to be. This is the interrelated structure of reality."*

This is the state of our garden: we grow together, interrelated, sometimes intertwined. Who you are and who God's calls you to be affects me. History turns on the way we tend our own soul. God blessed Jacob even as he ran away and when he wrestled with the weeds in his mind and soul. Isn't it good that we can leave the final judgment and blessing to God?

Lord, make me an instrument of your peace.

Where there is hatred, let me sow love;

Where there is injury, pardon

Where there is error, truth

Where there is doubt, faith

Where there is despair, hope

Where there is darkness, light

And where there is sadness, Joy.^{iv}

ⁱ "Does Inquisition Belong to Religious History?" Christine Caldwell Ames, www.historycooperative.org

ⁱⁱ Elizabeth Johnson, Working Preacher website contributor

ⁱⁱⁱ Downtown Presbyterian Church, Nashville, Tennessee and Thistle Farms can be located on the internet.

^{iv} Prayer associated with St. Francis of Assisi