

“Eat Your Weedies?” (19July2020)
Matt13:24-30,36-43; Rom8:12-25

The creation waits, groaning, longing for things to be better. Hoping.

We know the waiting, the groaning. We know pain and struggle. Plenty plainly is not what we want, not how it should be. We're sad, left wanting answers.

We might wonder how it got this way. That question is prompted by the parable and remains in Romans. Why is it like this, and what can be done?

The parable sets this up with the image of weeds in the wheat field. The farmer, whom we might well cast as God, didn't want weeds and didn't put them there. That's as much answer as we get today for why there's evil and suffering. God made the world good, but the bad stuff still showed up, unintended by God's goodness.

The workers bring it to the farmer's attention, maybe equivalent to us praying about the problems we're facing. It's not as if we needed to point them out to God, but it can be our way of groaning.

But we don't stop there, do we? Like the workers, we'd jump into solutions, wanting to retaliate against the wrongs.

Remarkably, Jesus says no. He doesn't tell us to get to work eradicating the evil, doesn't send us out as justice warriors to hack away at the overrunning obstacles. He says wait, says we can still trust the good and aren't helped by needing to rush to judgment.

Thinking of our wanting to judge, let's start simply with weeds, as Jesus does.

Dandelions. Weeds, right? Except my mom still recalls adorable little me bringing her yellow bouquets. Dandelion root is an antioxidant that can prevent aging. And who doesn't like to blow on the pretty seeds? Still a weed?

Garlic mustard? Weed. Invasive. Bad. But brought by immigrants as an early green to eat after winter, to fight scurvy. They didn't say weed; they said healthy and helpful.

Clover is spreading in my yard, and I'd like to spray it. But it fixes nitrogen in the soil. And how could I potentially poison a lucky four-leaf clover?

Purslane? The food pantry gardens pull it constantly. But it's also about the most nutrition-packed plant you could find. Weedy or not?

Chicory spreads like crazy. But it's a pretty purple. And anything that can serve as a coffee substitute gets points in my book.

Sometimes it's even a name. How would you feel about creepin' jenny or field bindweed? But what if you got to know it as wild morning glory?

And even if you dislike them, what about our honeybees or other insects that really rely on them? And any plant grew naturally native someplace in the world, in an ecosystem.

It's complex. We may have reasons to pull them, but can't have final say of good or bad.

Jesus may have anticipated our tendency to go overkill with herbicides. But he wasn't just offering gardening advice. It's not just good wheat and bad weeds. His was a metaphor about people. We relate because we are trained in binary dualisms of good OR evil, and we live in a time of extreme polarization.

Take masks, a clear example among us now for making dualistic divisions.

To make it more church-y, I've heard repeatedly this week that wearing a mask is the Christian thing to do. If you're personally living out your faith by wearing a mask, super. Go for it. But should we stake our identity there? They will know we are Christians by our masks? The next step would be that those without masks are anti-Christ. (And, of course, others argue this pattern exactly in reverse.) So is that ultimately what's important? Even the silly statement that if Jesus were around now, he'd wear a mask isn't intended to be helpful. It's intended to take sides.

What if they knew we were Christians because we weren't so self-righteous?

I realize masks help slow the spread of the virus. I understand the science (as much as any of us do). Yes, you may feel those refusing masks endanger you and others. The sides may seem awfully apparent for right and wrong.

But following the parable, it was striking to me that in Dane County's new orders, part of the communication was "If you see someone without a mask, don't call 911. Don't tattle and report them. Let us handle enforcement." It reminded that people could have an underlying condition or whatever, and you don't know the whole story, so you can't presume they're just flaunting the rules. Don't rush to judgment.

Secular authorities seem to reach a similar point as Jesus about toning down the judgment. The county directly said, “It is not your job to intervene. Your job is to wear your mask and stay six feet away.”*

Jesus says enacting judgment isn't our job. As workers, we want to rush in and start yankin' and jerkin' and heavin' and hoeing the weeds. Maybe Jesus says it's not our job because, along with our efforts against the bad, we end up damaging the good he is trying to accomplish. I wonder when we're drawn into debates and skirmishes if we get into fighting people and perspectives instead of fighting the virus, or just add to the frenzy. With masks, what is solved by grousing constantly about the President? It substitutes insignificant grumbling for the real groaning.

Maybe picking polarized battles with condemnation and mask-shaming strains relationships that would be helpful or good. What's sown are seeds of dissent. That seems an inevitable downside of binary dualism with good vs. bad.

And defining it by your prejudices and presumptions, or your own self-confidence or self-doubt, rejects God declaring you a beloved child and obstructs God's good view of what creation should be becoming.

Maybe the whole instruction from Jesus is against the practice of dualism, of making things either bad OR good. When we take it as our Christian task to decide what's weedy and what's weedy (I find the confusing, close sound of those words instructive), when we get judgy, we lose track of our real job as those workers in God's worldwide farm, the work of fostering life. Focused on problems to be rooted out, we get sucked into negativity. Work for justice *can* be part of our Christian calling, of course. I say that particularly with a mind celebrating the life of John Lewis.

But our main Christian identity isn't fighting injustice or defining good vs. evil. Our main Christian identity is in being loved by God, including as forgiven sinners. It's not that you are so weedy, it's that God can transform weeds into wheat. You are loved even when you're weedy. That love loves you into what you should be, and

therefore into your role in making the world what it should be.

It's important to remember that Jesus isn't known for oversimplified condemnations. He hung out with prostitutes and tax collectors and got a reputation as a party animal. More, Jesus himself became a weed, became one despised. He faced the violence of being judged as bad, and so Jesus himself was thrown into the furnace of death.

But like the Bible story of the three men in the fiery furnace, Jesus emerged, coming out to bear God's saving and life-giving good news to us and all creation. That is our hope. Through our suffering, we look toward the good we know is in the works. Even when we get sucked into selfish desires and our projects of judging bad and we start weeding out the wheat, still we stay sure in the hope that we will be set free, and the whole world with us.

Yes, we are groaning and in pain, Romans recognizes, and all creation along with us. It's not just for human injustice or our futile inability to fix the wrongs; it ripples throughout the world and maybe universe. We're all suffering. We're waiting. We can't much explain why God is operating this way, why we have to wait, or what the real cause of our being unable to escape these problems is in the first place. It doesn't bother to blame.

Instead, much better, we look ahead. New things are coming to birth. We'll rejoice, but not just us. Certainly not as Christians or good people who did the right things escaping off to heaven. All creation with us, because we finally know what it is to live as the beloved children of God. That's what we're hoping toward, hoping confidently. Freed from needing to be in charge of all the rights and wrongs, we're freed to get on with what really matters, not to be part of the work of destruction but of the work of life, being wheat that grows for the good God intends.

* <https://www.publichealthmdc.com/blog/put-your-mask-on-leave-the-enforcing-to-us>