

"To weed or not to weed" by Dave Feick

Good morning!

My recent change in occupation makes me feel like I need to learn how to preach all over again. For the past 11 years I've had a Restorative Justice emphasis to my sermons. Not that I need to change that just because I no longer work for Micah as I feel that RJ is really what life is about.. I guess I may just be feeling the freedom to expand my perspectives now. And that's probably not a bad thing.

Several Sundays ago, Luke had a gardening emphasis for his sermon when he spoke about the workers in the vineyard. A couple weeks ago, the lectionary gospel reading was on the weeds in the field when I spoke at First Mennonite. Patty suggested I could just keep the gardening theme going and re-use my sermon from that Sunday. I was thankful for the suggestion because I wasn't coming up with any new thoughts on the feeding of the 5000 which we should be looking at today.

So let's talk about weeding.

First, though there's no reference to it in the OT story, some weeding has definitely taken place prior to the words we read.

Two weeks ago when I spoke at First Mennonite, the OT reading was about Jacob making his way to Paddan Aram, his mother, Rebecca's childhood home. He's escaping the wrath of his brother Esau because Jacob had taken both Esau's birthright and the blessing of their father.

As he stops for the night, he has a vivid dream of a staircase or ladder to heaven, with angels traveling up and down the ladder between heaven and earth. And Jacob wakes to recognize that this is holy ground and promises God that if God protects him in his wanderings and brings him back home again someday, he will worship God in this place. And he calls it Bethel, the house of God.

Today's reading describes some of his return journey, the journey home.

By now, he has done some weeding of his flocks - as he and his father in law did their best to deceive each other. According to the story, though, Jacob seems to win the contest between them, having gained the better flocks and leaving his father in law with flocks that might be less desired. Then, taking his wives and his children and all his belongings, he leaves what has been his home for some 20 years or so, in order to return to his real home.

And as he is about to enter home territory, he divides all his possessions into a number of groups and sends them across the river ahead of him, hoping to appease his brother's wrath. And lastly, he sends his family members across the river while he stays behind to wrestle

with the God who had blessed him once before and to whom he had promised his allegiance, now asking for one more blessing.

As the story continues, God changes his name from Jacob, the deceiver to Israel, one who struggles with God. And his descendants ever since have been known as Israelites and the nation of Israel. And he names the place where they wrestled Peniel - the face of God.

So, it seems that all Jacob/Israel's weeding and deceiving and wrestling works out well in his favour. And he becomes the inspiration to generations of descendants.

So then, in somewhat of a contrast, we have Jesus' parable of the weeds in the field where the lesson seems to be to not worry about the weeds. I feel like I've given considerably more thought to this parable as I prepared for these sermons, than I'd given it before. And I found myself wondering what farmers and gardeners, must think of this parable.

How many of us would let weeds grow up among the crop? It's certainly no secret that weeding is a constant issue for farmers and gardeners. So as we read this parable we may be left to wonder, is Jesus telling us this is how farming should really be done? Is this perhaps the basis for organic farming? But I'm sure there as well, there are efforts to reduce the amount of weeds in the fields. In any event, I'm sure a lot of farmers over the centuries have been left shaking their heads by this story.

I'm no farmer, but we've had our share of gardens where life or vacations got in the way of weeding and when it came time to harvest, it was sometimes difficult to find the crop in the midst of the weeds that had taken over. I'm mindful of our first home in Superb, which was owned by a local farmer. One Sunday, I brought along some of the weeds those weeds was a wild portulaka, and when he saw it, the land owner turned white as a sheet and the next day he and his son were there, first thing in the morning, digging up weeds, piling them up and burning them. It was a scene right out of Jim Stafford's "Wildwood weed." That fall, he spread Treflan on the garden and so nothing grew for the next couple of years.

Sometimes I feel like I have the memory of an elephant, but maybe it's just for unimportant stuff. But the gospel story brought to mind a number of stories from my childhood in Ontario, one of neighbors walking through what I recall being their wheat field and pulling weeds just prior to harvest - not that there were a lot of weeds, but maybe the teenage boys were getting on dad's nerves and he sent them out to pull weeds.

I imagine they used herbicides, but I don't really know. And I also may not be remembering correctly. Perhaps it was some sort of dream.

I also recalled one of the many times when mom sent me out to pull weeds in the garden - (when I was likely getting on her nerves) - I'm pretty sure it was in the corn patch. And I remember clearly that as I pulled out the weeds, I saw how the sun shone through, where it had been previously blocked out by the weeds. And I know for a fact that, at about the age of 8 or 10, that I thought how that would make a good sermon illustration. How we need to pull

the weeds in our lives to really let God's light shine through. I also remember clearly that I quickly told myself that there was no way I would ever become a minister. I guess God had other plans. Yet, here I am, over 50 years later and having preached many sermons, have never actually used that as an illustration until this brief reference today (and 2 weeks ago).

So, in light of all that, I can't help but wonder about Jesus' parable. Obviously pulling or killing weeds is a necessity for healthy crops.

So, we might ask, did Jesus really know nothing about farming?

I'm pretty sure that's not the case as he, in another parable, talks about the sower, sowing seed, and how the weeds tend to choke out the plants. So he obviously knew that weeds were not welcome in the crops.

I suspect that back in bible times, all farmers were organic farmers, that there were no herbicides to kill the weeds, and so pulling weeds was more likely to be the preferred way to ensure good crops.

I do wonder a bit about the aspect of an enemy who sows weed seeds during the night in his neighbor's field. But that wasn't the subject of my ponderings so I'll just avoid it other than to point you to Jesus' later explanation.

Kenneth Bailey was a theologian who spent much of his career in the Middle East and has studied and written extensively on his understandings of scripture based on the Middle Eastern culture which, in some ways and in certain places, has not changed a lot over the centuries. He loved to take stories from the Bible and have local people explain how they related to the customs and traditions that remained into the 20th Century. And he pointed out how some of Jesus' stories must have made people laugh both for their humor and for their absurdities.

This is likely another of those situations. As they listened, you can well imagine them poking one another and chuckling and mumbling to each other, "What does this guy know about farming? No one is going to let weeds grow among the crop."

And according to this passage, Jesus didn't explain to the crowd of listeners the point of his parable. He left them hanging. He began the parable by saying, "the kingdom of heaven can be compared to this." Probably not the image that most people might have had of the kingdom. The kingdom has weeds growing among the wheat???

But when they go inside, the disciples who were with him ask Jesus to explain the parable, which he does, and so it is left for them to share the explanation in their gospel writings or their own sermons later.

Perhaps remembering some of Jesus' parables, the writer of the first letter to the Corinthians, usually believed to have been Paul, says, in chapter 1 verse 25:

25 For God's foolishness is wiser than human wisdom, and God's weakness is stronger than human strength.

The reference there is to the crucifixion of Jesus and how it makes no sense to Gentiles that a Jew, put to death on a cross, could save the world. It's just foolishness - and yet, the writer says that God's foolishness is wiser than any human wisdom.

So also, Jesus' parables reflect the foolishness of God which outweighs human wisdom. But this foolishness seems to be an age-old problem.

The Psalmist many times over complains to God about the wicked and asks God to do something about them - destroy them, get rid of them somehow, at least punish them in some way. And yet, there always seems to be those in opposition to him and seeking his life.

Job's "friends" accuse Job of all sorts of things because they believe he is being punished for something that he has done. It's only logical that God must be punishing him for allowing some kind of weeds to grow in his life. Yet, even there, God has a different lesson for Job and his friends to learn.

I'm also reminded of Jonah who ran the other way when called by God to warn the Assyrians living in Nineveh and soon to be taking Israel into exile - of the coming judgment of God. He ran the other way because he knew God would change God's mind if the people listened and repented. He seemed to have a problem with God's grace when it came to Israel's enemies.

And much of the OT history is of conflicts with other peoples and nations who worship other gods and who are obviously in the wrong - or who are used by God when Israel or Judah is in the wrong.

So as Jesus explains the parable to the disciples, he reminds us to trust in God. To be patient, knowing that God has it all under control, even when it seems like foolishness.

As the war goes on in Ukraine, like Jacob, we struggle with God, trying to know how to feel about it all, and we do feel helpless as to what we can do. Professed pacifists are even questioning their pacifism, wanting someone to rid the world of Putin or to at least find a way to put an end to the war and also his rule. I know that my prayers have often included pleas to God to intervene in this situation.

But the wisdom amongst the foolishness of God in this parable seems to be telling us to let God handle it. God is in control. Could this be part of God's "foolish" plan for the world? Is God calling people who can intervene in a peaceful way in this situation to find a way to mediate a solution and they're just not answering? Or they're working to find the right way to go about it? Jesus elsewhere in scripture encourages us to plead our case with God and

perhaps that's all we can do while we patiently or not so patiently wait for it. Still, it grieves us to learn of the ongoing destruction and suffering in Ukraine, especially where relatives are involved. And maybe, if nothing else, it serves to remind us that there are more situations in the world for which we need to pray and act for compassionate and peaceful resolutions.

In my visits with patients at St Paul's this past month, I have become more acutely aware of the inadequacies of our health system and how unjust that often feels to people.

I am also seeing the weeds in the fields to be the multitude of illnesses that confront us in our lives and to recognize that these, too, the great Creator could remove from our lives, but instead, allows them to be part of our lives and in the worst cases to even take our lives.

That doesn't mean we don't still call out, like the Psalmist and ask God to remove them from us. And in the midst of the sadness and frustration that is expressed, I've also heard stories of miracles of healing in people's lives. And as I listen I'm also reminded that even the apostle Paul asked God to remove whatever was the thorn in the flesh that plagued him and instead, heard God telling him, "My grace is sufficient for you." But one has to be careful as to when or if one might share that message with a patient.

And with my new role, I am being asked to once again consider becoming involved in the process of advocating for government funding for spiritual care to be reinstated. But just as our advocacy for RJ and CoSA funding has seemed to fall on deaf ears, I find myself wondering what can change in the case of spiritual care. Yet, we cannot give up.

We began this morning by reading together the words of the Psalmist, pleading for God to hear us, knowing that God has the answers for our questions, the power to change situations. But ultimately, to empower us through the Holy Spirit to exemplify God's faithful love in amazing ways, knowing that at some point in time, we will see God's face and God's righteousness and receive God's wondrous blessings.

Thus, the message for us today seems to be that when life does not make sense, when all sorts of evils occur in our world; when it feels like there is nothing we can do; we live our lives, we trust God to guide us in all truth. Nowhere in our scriptures this morning does it tell us what to do about the evils in the world, than to just bide our time and let God work things out.

And yet, at the same time, in living our lives, in experiencing the steadfast love and faithfulness of God, even in small ways, we can be the change that the world needs. Not by judging or condemning, but in reflecting the mercy and grace of God in our relationships with one another.

And Jesus' parable of the wheat and the weeds reminds us when the ways of God seem foolish to this world, that truly, they are the only thing that makes sense.

One last thing that strikes me about Jesus' parable is the fact that over the centuries, we have found uses for many grains, which can be mixed in with the wheat in making bread. Many of these ancient grains might have been seen as weeds in the past. Now they, too, have become useful and even helpful. Even that suggests that there is hope for the weeds in the midst of us.

As we encounter the weeds in our lives, may we trust in the knowledge that God has a plan that God is bringing to completion, desiring that all may find true faith and a full experience of the one, true God. So may we find that hope as we trust in God. Amen.