

Grace Even for the Vegetable Guerillas and Woodland Outlaws

²⁴He put before them another parable: “The kingdom of heaven may be compared to someone who sowed good seed in his field; ²⁵but while everybody was asleep, an enemy came and sowed weeds among the wheat, and then went away. ²⁶So when the plants came up and bore grain, then the weeds appeared as well. ²⁷And 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?’ ²⁸He answered, ‘An enemy has done this.’ The slaves said to him, ‘Then do you want us to go and gather them?’ ²⁹But he replied, ‘No; for in gathering the weeds you would uproot the wheat along with them. ³⁰Let 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.’”

The juxtaposition surprised him- the juxtaposition of urban blight and an exotic forest of weeds. Richard Mabey lived in a beautiful, rural area just outside of London, and he commuted everyday to an area right around Heathrow Airport on the West side- a blighted area, once developed, but now forgotten. Well, forgotten by people, but discovered by nature. He says everyday he left the countryside only to enter the wilderness of the city. He writes: “The whole area was pocked with inexplicable holes and drifts of exotic litter. But most thrillingly to me, it was overwhelmed by a forest of disreputable plants.” He saw thirty foot high buddleia bushes, covered in blossoms. Wormwood, three different kinds of nightshade, and knotgrass, this amazing weed that if you stick a strand of it in a perfectly black puzzle box- with just a pinprick of light the grass will figure out how to worm it’s way through the maze to feast upon that light. And all of it right in the middle of the city, pushing up between broken glass and concrete.

Mabey became fascinated by these weeds- these, as he calls them, these “vegetable guerillas” and “woodland outlaws”. To his eye every weed is this absolute survivor- no one sewed those seeds there, no one watered them when they were dry, and every one of them originated in some other place, often some distant, far off land like China or Japan. And yet here

they all were, thriving in this exotic melting pot- this raw, vibrant, lawless Eden. And it led him to a life long fascination with weeds and to his recent book entitled Weeds: In Defense of Nature's Most Unloved Plant, a truly great summer read.

Now, I have to say...this fascination with and love for weeds- it's a fondness most of us do not share. I for one am in a pitched battle at the moment with this cloverish looking thing taking over my lawn. There was a little bit in the law when we moved in- and for the longest time I thought I'd just give it time, thinking somehow maybe my lawn would somehow send little grass ninjas to encourage that clover to move on. But alas, it turns out my grass has been reading Gandhi, or the Gospels, and has this pacifist streak. So, now I've decided to really go after it.

And I'm not alone in our household. I have heard Melissa personally threaten our children to within an inch of their lives if they ever pick up a dandelion and blow the seeds in our lawn or even our neighborhood. Even though you could not tell by my lawn, she and I both imbibed some of the English and American belief that a person's moral fiber might somehow be connected to the number of dandelions growing in their yard. And of course I know this is preposterous, but when it comes to weeds we are not a rational people. How many times have I seen the very nicest of ladies just get this look in their eye when they have their gloves on, their garden tool in hand, and a weed in their sights. It's a look that just says stay out of my way.

Well this view we have of weeds, this lust for eradication- it's a view shared by almost everyone in the story Jesus tells this morning.

Can you imagine it? Jesus and the disciples are sitting on a hillside, maybe at the end of a long, long day. The smell of something good cooking is in the air. And while they're sitting there, just waiting- Jesus says, "Let me tell you a story." He says, "Do you know what the kingdom of heaven is like? This way of life we're working for day in and day out? Well, I can't tell you what it is exactly, but it's something like this... See, once there was a farmer, a wealthy farmer with a great many servants. And when the time was ripe, he took out a bag of good seed, and after the servants had plowed over the fields, he went out himself, and he scattered those seeds, just as easy as you please.

Well, everything was going along fine, until one day the servants noticed something about those fields. They noticed that the wheat the farmer had planted, they noticed that that wasn't the only thing growing there. And so they rush into the house, and alarmed they yell, "Master, master!" And he comes running, "What is it?" And they tell him, "Master, we know you sowed the fields with good seeds, but now it's full of weeds. What happened?" And the master gets this look on his face. He tells them it was an enemy of his- probably that no good farmer over the hill who was always jealous.

(By the way, I've never seen more competitive people in my life than farmers. My grandparents on my dad's side were farmers, and when I would visit, I remember spending hours with my grandmother driving around looking at farms- comparing their fields and especially their corn. She'd always say things to me like, "Would you look at that corn? It's just pathetic,

don't you think?" And I never knew what to say- all I can tell you is that growing up in the suburbs, I really hadn't formed a real aesthetic sense for corn plants at that point in my life.)

Anyway, these servants do exactly what we would do- they see these weeds, and they just want to go after them. They just want to declare war on them and root 'em up. They're just like we are.

Yeah, they're just like we are. We like order. We like things, especially plants, to be in their place. In fact this is one of the most basic definitions of a weed, which is surprisingly hard to define by the way- one definition of a weed is that it is simply a plant in the wrong place. And surely the right thing to do when something's in the wrong place- surely the right thing to do is to move it.

And yet, this is what makes our story this morning so strange and peculiar. We expect Jesus to say when the servants offer to go into the field and root out the bad weeds, we expect him to tell us that the master was overjoyed. We expect him to tell us that the master ordered them to get their weeding mats and get their gloves and maybe some of those fancy weed removing tools they sell on TV that look so easy to use but you secretly suspect don't really work. And we expect him to tell them to just get out there and get rid of those little punks.

But he doesn't. He doesn't. In fact he says just the opposite. He tells his servants not to do a thing. He tells them not to touch a thing- to just let those weeds grow alongside the wheat, to just let them all grow up together. In fact he says if they pull up the weeds they might uproot some of the wheat, too. So, he says, they'll all just wait for the harvest, and then when the

reapers come, they can just take the whole crop and then they can separate out what's wheat and what isn't. But for now- for now they are to just leave everything be.

Now weed haters like us wonder why on earth does the master say this? Why does the master just allow these bad weeds just grow alongside the wheat? I mean yeah, you might lose a little bit of wheat here and there, but to let those weeds infest your field. For one thing they soak of up your water. And for another scholars tell us these weeds are darnel weeds- and they actually poison the ground around them- so just letting them stay they are already hurting some of the wheat. Why on earth let them be?

Well, the traditional answer to this is that Jesus was talking about the church, and he was pointing out the truth that sometimes it's hard to tell the difference between the wheat and the weeds in the church. Another thing about darnel weed, and it looks so similar to wheat when they're growing together that it's called false wheat by a lot of farmers. Up until the very last phase of growth when the seeds develop, most people just wouldn't be able to see the difference between what was good and what wasn't.

And traditionally people have said this is what Jesus is talking about. You and I get really exercised sometimes about who we think belongs in the church, or who deserves to have leadership positions in the church. And even though Jesus spent an inordinate amount of time in the bars hanging out with tax collectors, prostitutes, and other marginalized people, for some reason us church people have decided in our heads that actually church ought to really be for the good people, which, if we're honest, often means the people that are kind of like me and the

people I tend to spend time around. And traditionally, theologians and preachers have read this text as a reminder to us that this little duck, duck, goose game we like to play is simply above our pay grade. You and I are simply servants, and the farmer has told us to just leave the wheat and the weeds be- that judging between them will be someone else's job and will be done at a later date.

Now I like this reading, I do. And I agree with it.

But this week, I realized Jesus might also be getting at something else here. Maybe what's important isn't just the wheat and the weeds but also the patience the farmer has in allowing it all to grow together.

Augustine once wrote: "There is this difference between people and real grain and real weeds, for what was grain in the field is grain and what were weeds are weeds. But in the Lord's field, which is the church, at times what was grain turns into weeds and at times what were weeds turn into grain; and no one knows what they will be tomorrow."

You and I- we aren't plants. And the truth is sometimes we bear good fruit, but sometimes we don't. We all take umbrage at this story of the farmer leaving the weeds in his fields, because by and large- you and I just tend to assume we're the wheat. Others must be the weeds. In fact most of the time we're more than happy to supply you with names.

But in our more honest moments, who hasn't realized how like a weed they have become at times, who hasn't realized how like a guerilla vegetable or forest outlaw they have behaved- to themselves, to people you don't know say while driving, or, most painfully, to the people you love the most?

And when you realize this, when you realize, hey, maybe I'm not always bearing such good fruit- well, the patience of the farmer, the patience of the farmer who allows for time, who allows for change- well this can seem like a generous grace indeed.

Last week a lot of you know I went on vacation with Melissa's family to the San Juan Islands. And I've never been there- it's truly the most amazing place. I can't wait to go back. Our crew, and it was a crew, it was her mom, dad, brother, sister, uncle, plus their dog, along with the three ring circus that is the Evers-Hood's, stayed in a beautiful home on the Northwest coast of San Juan Island itself. We were right on a cliff overlooking the Pacific Ocean and could see Vancouver Island spreading out in front of us and the Olympic Mountains framing us to the South. And a couple of the mornings we stayed there a pod of orcas, thirty or forty whales swam past- bursting up out of the water to breath, slapping their tails- my favorite little whale was this guy who just seemed to be playing. He would keep his body straight, and he would just poke his little head out of the water like he was playing peek-a-boo with us.

Now, it should have really been a great time. I was on vacation. And those of you who asked last week about my time away, I said the appropriate things. When you asked about my week, I tended to talk about how great the Islands were, which was true. And really, who wants to hear anyone whine about being in the San Juans?

But to be perfectly honest, it was a very difficult week for me. One challenge is just vacationing with a fifteen month old- it's what I like to call childcare with a view. Brynne is at that age where she's just mobile enough to really be trouble. And in a house with multiple levels

on a cliff side...I think of caring for her like being in the secret service. She's a very driven, very important little person- and she's going to do what she wants to do and go where she wants to go, and so your job is to walk around behind her and make sure nothing kills her.

And then on top of all this, there were so many of us crammed into one space. Now I want to be perfectly clear- the Evers are totally fine people. It's truly not them. They like each other. They laugh. They have a good time. But being surrounded on all sides all the time- it's hard for me.

And within a couple of days I became a fairly extreme version of what Melissa calls 'cranky Ken'. This is not a version of me most of you ever have to see. Cranky Ken keeps his head down. Cranky Ken stops talking to people, other than what he can't entirely avoid, and then only spits out the briefest possible responses. Cranky Ken puffs, as Melis calls it, which is a kind of exasperated sigh. Now, I don't fight with people, and in general I'm not rude- I just exude this sense that I am in the 8th circle of hell.

And it's not a person I ever want to be, and it's certainly not a person I would want to be around. In terms of the text this morning, I become like one big, giant weed when I'm like this. And I'm a particularly kind of nasty weed, too- the kind that poisons the land around.

Now, obviously I have some work to do to figure all this out- how to do things differently and better in the future. The good news, and it's news that I'm truly holding on to right now, is that we have a good farmer, a patient farmer, and because of his patience, even this particular forest outlaw has some time, too.

For in the field of God, in the mercy of God's arms, even the unruliest of weeds may one day blossom like the most beautiful of flowers. **Amen.**