

***One Person's Weed is Another Person's Wheat***  
**Genesis 28:10—19a; Matthew 13:24—30; 26—43**

Let me ask you a question: *How can you sleep at night?* In today's first reading from Genesis 28, Jacob sleeps and there's a certain quality to his sleep that I'm not sure we can duplicate. First of all, he's on the run. Are you on the run? Second, he's a fugitive from his own dysfunctional family—from his own brother. Do you happen to come from a dysfunctional family? And, third, the reason he's making a beeline out of Beersheba and hurrying toward Haran is that he's done something immoral, something utterly selfish and self-centered. Jacob has stolen the blessing of his father Isaac—a blessing that was rightfully, traditionally, meant for the first born. And so, in fear of Esau, whose intention is to kill him (27:41), Jacob flees as far away as he can... and yet, he can still sleep at night. Can you sleep at night?

I'm asking because I don't know how many times people have come to me and shared how they're having trouble sleeping—and why is that? Is it because there's something on their minds, some burden, some guilty feeling, some worry about what to say, what not to say, what to do, what not to do. Sheryl and I came up with 'a rule of life' that we sometimes fail to practice. It's that we won't go to sleep when one of us is angry at the other; and typically, when I become stubborn and refuse to reconcile before the night comes on, I toss and I turn and wake up with a measly hour of pitiful sleep to show for it. In addition, if I struggle to sleep because I've failed to surrender a concern or a conflict or a disappointment that I have with the church, there's a sense that I'm missing something. Do I need a new pillow? Jacob puts a rock under his head and sleeps; and during that sleep, despite everything, he dreams of God's blessing!

Now, it's no coincidence, I think, that in the parable that Jesus tells in Matthew 13:24—36, there's a fascinating reference to sleep. Verse 25 says, ***“but while everybody was asleep, an enemy came and sowed weeds among the wheat and went away.”*** And as Jesus happens to be teaching a crowd of first century Jewish people who are nourished primarily by what they grow from the land, my guess is that even this nuance in the story hit home. In other words: just look at this gorgeous field of wheat; just look at the stalks blowing in the breeze, a vast swath of golden grain, nearly ready for the harvest. Just look, but look closely: right alongside all that healthy and wholesome vegetation, there are weeds that have also been sown; and in that region of the world, the bearded darnel, isn't so easily distinguished from the wheat. And so, with that image in full view, Jesus is teaching: ***“THE KINGDOM OF HEAVEN MAY BE COMPARED TO...”***

1. The mature crop of wheat which continues to grow; and
2. The servants of the household who feel confident enough to catch a little shut-eye—to fall asleep—even if an enemy comes in the night to sow weeds into field; and
3. It may be compared to the wheat and the weeds, intertwined at their roots and at times utterly indistinguishable from one another.

And here's where we need to pause and make our own twenty-first century connections. There are days—aren't there?—when the dandelions seem like marigolds; and when the marigolds seem like dandelions. And, on a certain level, of course we know the difference. The difference is that one golden bloom has the reputation of infesting our plush, green lawns as the most insidious invasive weed known to suburban America; and the other is a bright burst of beauty whose strong pungent scent has the practical application of deterring rabbits and other pests.

On the flip side, do you know what we get when we add a little sugar, one juicy orange and one sour lemon to four quarts of fully blossomed dandelions? This weed can be made into a fermented wine—*Dandelion Wine*; and the only reason we know that is somebody somewhere refused to yank it up by the roots when they had the chance. What a world, huh? A friend of ours shared the story of how he wanted to impress his fiancée by digging up the gnarly green leaves near her front door. She came home from work and asked him why he destroyed the rhubarb that had been growing there for decades. (No rhubarb pie for you!) How could he have known? He was just trying to show her how helpful he'd be as a future husband!

And so it goes, right? Even here, in the midst of this community of faith, you and I try to be helpful. And perhaps the best way we can be helpful is by eradicating or irradiating those pesky, evil weeds that grow up between us. I'm not talking here about the literal plants in Northwood's Garden. Let's make the leap. Right here and right now, because of our upbringing by imperfect families, and because of the shame and the guilt related to imperfect decision-making, there are elements and infestations of evil. We admit that. But what's complicated is that the good and the not-so-good are so very interconnected and enmeshed, the parable of Jesus offers this wisdom: ***“LET THEM BOTH GROW TOGETHER.”***

Remember the dialogue:

***“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? He answered, ‘An enemy has done this.’ The slaves said to him, ‘Then do you want us to go and gather them?’ But he replied, ‘No, for in gathering the weeds you would uproot the wheat along with them...’”***

Adam Eckhart tells the story of about a son who took his teetotaling mother to worship on Christmas Eve; and how he noticed the man, sitting in front of them, occasionally jerking his head back. The man held a flask of whiskey in his hand; and the son worried that if his mother, who didn't approve of drinking alcohol, saw him, she'd demand the ushers escort him out of the service. She *did* see him; but rather than do what her son expected, the mother whispered into her son's ear: "That man is exactly where he needs to be." You see, it's hard to know. On our own—and even sometimes with God's guidance—it's hard to know what weed we perceive to be evil may turn out to be the wheat. And, I suggest, we would do well in our individual lives, and in our biological families, and in our faith communities if we just held off trying to purge, trying to purify and to separate out—not to mention, trying to bifurcate the eight-billion people on the planet into neat and easy categories of *good* and *evil*. And maybe we should sleep on it.

Wendell Berry is this masterful poet, who also happens to be a cultivator of Kentucky farmland—and he does so now at age 91. Listen to his poem, "*The Necessity of Faith*":

True harvests no mere intent may reap.  
Finally we must lie down to sleep  
And leave the world, all we desire  
To darkness, malevolence, and fire.  
Who wakes and stands his shadow's mark  
Has passed by mercy through the dark.  
We save the good, lovely, and bright  
By will in part, in part delight;  
But they live through the night by grace  
That no intention can efface.

Now, there's a lot in those ten lines to unpack; but what leaps out at me is the pulling back from *intention*—from what I intend and what you intend— and living by grace. Sure, I can acknowledge how the evil in the world has messed things up. But if I make the eradication of evil my mission in life I will do more damage than I've intend. Moreover, if this congregation defines its mission as condemning all the evil we experience in the world, where's the possibility of redemption? Where's the grace?

In her novel, *Where the Heart Is*, Billie Lett describes a conversation of two friends. Lexie can't sleep because her ex-boyfriend has sexually-abused her children; and what can she possibly say to them? She's the one who invited this evil into their lives. On some level, she's responsible for all the trauma and all the heartache they're going to have to go through for the rest of their lives. And yet, this is how the friend, Novalee, responds:

Tell them the our lives can change with each breath we take... Tell them to let go of what's gone because men like Roger never win. And tell them to hold on like hell to what they've got—each other, and a mother who would die for them.... Tell them we've all got meanness in us... but tell them that we have some good in us too. And the only thing worth living for is the good...

Now some of you, I can tell, aren't going to heed this advice. Whenever someone tells me to *let go*, my inclination is to hold on. Inigo Montoya, in the classic *Princess Bride* film, seeks out the six-fingered man who killed his father. And when he finds the evil villain, he kills him in a sword fight—only to discover: “*You know, I’ve been in the revenge business for so long, now that it’s over, I don’t know what to do with the rest of my life.*” Our gut—our base instinct—says that we should go after the evil and not rest until the righteous hero in us has been avenged. But come on! What are you going to do with the rest of your life?

At the end of the day—and at the end of long centuries of abuse—the Crusades, the Spanish Inquisition, the Church-sponsored enslavement of indigenous people around the world—the point of Jesus’ teaching is a little more than ‘*Wait & See.*’ It’s more like ‘*See & Wait & Don’t Be So Vigilant as to Neglect our Sleep.*’ In the parable itself, those who have worked the land can see the weeds close up; and it aggravates them. It aggravates them just as it aggravates us to discover that people have been hurt, morally and spiritually injured, by something that’s happened in church. And so, right alongside the mature moments of faith and faith development, it’s perfectly acceptable to see and to name the evil. But then what? In his explanation of the parable to the disciples, verse 40 says: “***Just as the weeds are collected and burned up with fire, so it will be AT THE END OF THE AGE***”—which is to say, *NOT NOW*.

“Above all, trust in the slow work of God,” wrote Pierre Teilhard de Chardin. “We are quite naturally impatient in everything to reach the end without delay. We should like to skip the intermediate stages... Accept the anxiety of feeling yourself in suspense and incomplete.”