

[Epiphany 2019 weeds and worries]

EPIPHANY SEASON
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FIRST, MARSHAL
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PS 84:1-7; MT 13:24-45
Weeds and Worries

Prepare our hearts, Lord, to receive your Word. Silence in us any voice but your own that in hearing we may believe and in believing we may obey your will revealed to us in Jesus Christ. Amen.

Dear friends in Christ: Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ. Amen.

I'm guessing that most of us have at some time worked in a garden, on a farm, or a lawn...which means that we're pretty much all familiar with the tension in Jesus' parable about WEEDS in a plot, field, or yard.



What threats do these vexing vegetations pose to a crop? They use up water and nutrients, can stunt growth, reduce yield, and seem to reproduce with an astonishing ability...

I'll never forget the time in the late '70's when we drove up to my brother-in-law's hobby farm for a visit. It was the year that Carolyn's brother had committed himself to nurture his 40 acres of oats... *organically* – using no weed killer or chemical fertilizer.

Obviously none of you were there that day, but I'm sure you could still describe the scene as well as I. Lush, leafy... **weeds** towered over his shriveled, shortened crop. Organic farming has taken leaps since those days, but weeds will always be a worry for farmers and gardeners... even when they don't directly threaten a harvest.

Down in Atlanta where our daughter lives with her family, the trees along the highways are covered by an invasive weed called *kudzu*...Is anyone familiar with it?

From a distance, and in complete ignorance, this plant's proliferation is impressive, even beautiful. It doesn't matter what obstacle it encounters – this aggressive vine will cover fields, bushes, trees, boulders, even houses!



It has the amazing ability to grow at the rate of **one foot per day** – in any direction, so it ends up engulfing everything in its path...and therein lies the problem.

Spreading itself over an existing plant, kudzu effectively steals the sunlight, nutrients and water from its host bush, plant or tree, even as it injects too much nitrogen back into the soil! And as we learned in the children's sermon, every plant needs, water, nutrients and sunlight to survive and thrive.

It should come as no surprise to hear that kudzu is referred to by the locals as the *vine that ate the South*! Here's a sentence from one southern state's Department of Conservation:

Efforts to control kudzu infestations have included the following methods: cutting, digging, disking, prescribed burning and application of herbicides.
<https://mdc.mo.gov/trees-plants/problem-plant-control/invasive-plants/kudzu-control>

Any and all of those violent actions have met with very little success. There's only one option that has proven even remotely effective in halting the spread of this voracious monster...

I can just picture someone throwing up their hands in despair and saying, “If only we could find an animal to eat this terrible weed!” Well, when you need an animal that eats anything, what do you turn to? GOATS, right?

Sure enough, someone brought in the goats...and discovered that they were great at eating the kudzu, all the way down to its roots – which is the only way to prevent it from growing back. But the trouble with goats is that they’re pretty open to eating anything – and in the process of clearing a field of kudzu, they also cleared the field of every other living plant.

Do you see the connection with our gospel story for today? It’s no solution to the problem if the only way to get rid of the weeds is to ruin the entire crop... When the cure will kill the patient, something else has to be tried.

Then...someone thought to replace those aggressive goats with some humble sheep...and *Voila!*



It turned out to be a match made in heaven... 1) Apparently, the sheep like the taste of the kudzu; 2) it’s a great source of protein for their diet; and 3) that’s ***all*** they eat – the other plants that are vital to the health of the field are set free to grow and thrive...

It’s a creative and environmentally-friendly way to take care of a real problem, a real concern, a real threat...

Now, if only the *weeds* in our *lives* could be managed so well...

What are some examples of weeds that plague our society? Murder, drugs, hate crimes, suicide bombings, war, rape, hunger, disease...and, of course, the people who perpetrate these problems.

Whether they directly threaten us and our loved ones, or use up precious resources, our common human mindset says that such *weeds* are a menace and must be stopped. As the saying goes, *the only good weed is a dead weed...*

So what works for you? How do you go about eradicating society's problems from your life? What can you and I do to stop their growth? What are some strategies to effectively denounce, deter, defeat and destroy such evils...?

Unfortunately, we have a history of focusing primarily on trying to get rid of the people who **cause** such problems... Yet the fact that our prisons are full and the problems continue can cause a sense of frustration to creep in. And, even worse, that frustration can open the door to a dark sort of eagerness to take matters into our own hands...

Unfortunately, that kind of talk occurs in the mob scene of just about every **monster** movie ever made – from Frankenstein to Beauty and the Beast.



It's where the good townsfolk have finally had enough of being frightened and victimized. Someone encourages them to root out the evil that threatens their lives. So with pitchforks and torches, they build up their courage chanting, *Kill the beast...! Kill the beast...!* and off they go to do just that.

Active resistance to evil is one thing. A mob thirsty for blood is quite another. Here's what I'm talking about. Back in WWII, a man by the name of Dietrich Bonhoeffer was conflicted by this very issue. He was an aristocrat, an officer in the German army, and a Lutheran pastor. He was also a man who felt convicted by the evils of Hitler's murderous schemes and ultimately joined a group that had decided to kill *Der Fuhrer*.

He explained to his sister-in-law, Emmi why he felt compelled to do something so drastic. Said the pastor, *If I see a madman driving a car into a group of innocent bystanders, then I can't, as a Christian, simply wait for the catastrophe and then comfort the wounded and bury the dead. I must try to wrestle the steering wheel out of the hands of the driver.*

Bonhoeffer was arrested by the Nazi's , sent to a concentration camp, and then two years later, he was executed just two weeks before the camp was liberated by the Allies.

So what *are* we to do when confronted with such weeds in our lives?

After seeing what others have done, maybe we should ask the question:
What does Jesus say we should do about evil?



Well, I think the **first** thing that comes to mind is that we must be very careful about deciding **who** or **what** is evil...and then we must be **doubly** careful about trying to destroy evil's harmful presence **as we see it** in our lives.

In Jesus' parable, the slaves of the Master were quite sure that they could tell the difference between the weeds and the wheat, **and** that they could take care of the problem by removing the invaders. You can just picture them excited, getting ready to grab their pitchforks and go out to...***Kill the beast!!!***

But the master stops them in their tracks, halts their attack and...drags them back from launching a mis-guided crusade... **Here's why:**

- 1) **As Jesus said, the servants would destroy the good plants in the process.** You've heard the phrase, "You have to fight fire with fire."

It's the practice of fighting an out-of-control forest or prairie fire by setting small controlled fires to create a dead zone. Then when the threatening fire arrives, it dies for lack of fuel... because everything has already been destroyed. At best, it's a worst-case option...at worst it leaves the world in ashes...

- 2) Another problem is that the servants weren't trained to deal with weeds! That job belonged to someone else. Only the harvesters were equipped to separate the weeds from the wheat.
- 3) And, finally, I think Jesus was fully aware of the effect of evil's threat on our frail human psyches. He knew that if we fixate on the threat of evil in our lives...then we will be caught, we will be trapped, we will forever be slaves to the forlorn hope that we can conquer evil, or to the fear that evil will conquer us!

In a presentation about the presence of evil in the world, a professor of mine once said, *The devil is kind of hard to find. But once you've found him...he's got you!*

Some of you have heard this story before. My brother-in-law was in the army stationed in Germany in the early 70's. He and my sister met another couple over there who were very serious about their faith – even got Deb and Jim going to church again.

But after a while, their new friends became preoccupied with the notion that evil was all around them. If the car broke down, or the refrigerator quit working, they were sure it was because of the devil.

They would lay their hands on the broken machine and ask God to bind the offending demon and cast it out of their appliance... *They found the devil...and he had them!*

In today's bible passage, Jesus invites us to re-boot our brains, to revive our spirits, to restore our souls. He encourages us to focus not on what's bad in life...but on what's uplifting and life-giving, what's righteous and good.

The same reasons apply.

1. In our efforts to destroy the “weeds” of society, we would just end up hurting innocent folk.

2. Besides that, ridding those nasty weeds in the fields of life is not our job – that’s a task reserved by God for someone else.
3. Finally, and most importantly, God did not create us – or equip us– to fight fire with fire in our struggle with evil. The side effects of **that** battle would be devastating – for everyone, ourselves included.

To these loyal, well-meaning, eager-to-be-righteous servants who had embraced an eagerness to **uproot the weeds**, to **eradicate the evil**, to **kill the beast** of that which they are certain is a threat...the mentor, the master, the maven says... *No... let both of them grow.*

In his book on the parables entitled Kingdom, Grace, Judgment, the theologian Robert Capon makes a big deal out of that little word **let** in Jesus’ command, *let both of them grow*. On the one hand, it gives us permission to recognize and accept our limitations, our human-ness, our inability to solve the world’s problems.

Let both of them grow says the master to the slaves.

Let it be sang the Beatle, John Lennon.

Let go...and let God says the philosophy of Alcoholics Anonymous.

Through all of this, God leads us out of Satan’s trap and into a place of green pastures, beside still waters, in right paths for his name’s sake, as it says in the 23rd Psalm.



For when we finally quit worrying and let go of that which we cannot control, things change for the better. We can focus on the good that we can do AND trust that God will take care of the rest.

Here you and I are called to do what we've been created to do...to let God's angels take care of the weeds in life...AND let God's Spirit work on us and in us and through us to embrace the miracle of growth.

We are called to nurture the *human* plants that make up our families, our neighborhoods, our world, right?

This is getting us back to our roots – literally! Genesis 2:15 tells us that Adam and Eve were put in the garden “to till the ground and keep it.”

That's the essence **our** job – turn the soil with some fertilizer, add some water, and pray for sun...the big three: water, food and light.

So what about all the ugly weeds in our world – those that spread so quickly, so far, and so wide?

Well, it turns out that God has taken care of that too.



The Lord figured out a long time ago that the only answer to the problem of life's evil weeds...would be to bring in a sheep.

Behold the Lamb of God who takes away the sins of the world.

Amen.