

First Presbyterian Church
Cheyenne, Wyoming
July 17, 2011
Rev. Bob Garrard

Worship Theme: God's Abundant Mercy

Genesis 28:10-19a, Romans 8:12-25, Matthew 13:24-30, 36-43

In 1998, Holly and I purchased a newly built house in Shorewood, IL, near Joliet, IL. The front yard had been sodded, but the back yard was seeded. This meant a constant battle with weeds that kept crowding out the grass in that area of the yard. Some of those weeds seemed to show up overnight. I learned about some of these weeds in college where I took a course called, "Taxonomy," which is the study of the classification of plants and trees. In the class, we learned that some plants are flowers to a number of people, and weeds to others. The dandelion is a prime example. Each dandelion head contains 100 flowers, so it readily proliferates. In Italy, it is raised to make salads and wine. Here, we curse it as a weed. Some weeds are God's quick way of stopping soil erosion until the "prettier" plants can be established. In college, I learned that some weeds do have a purpose. But, not in "my" yard!

All this leads into today's parable as told by Jesus of the weeds growing side by side with the wheat. It is a parable of judgment, salvation and God's ever-present love concerning members of the body of Christ, the church. It is vital that we understand that the purpose of God's judgment is not to destroy us, but to call out our sins, clean us up, and purify us. In God's judgment, God's abundant mercy is still there to redeem us. But as members and leaders of Christ's body, the church, we often confuse human judgment and the judgment of God. This is why the owner of the field told the workers not to pull up the weeds in the wheat field. We humans make mistakes on judging others: On what is a weed: What is wheat: What needs to be pulled: And what needs to be left for the harvest. Also, the owner of the field, God, is much more patient than we are, and again, abundant in mercy. Remember that in Jesus Christ God gave all to redeem us and make us a good harvest.

However, our human sinfulness in the church can make it tough for us to be patient and loving. "Who has not wrestled with the paradoxical character of a congregation, where committed members with perceptive visions about what the church ought to be and to do exist side by side with those who are indifferent or who apparently are motivated only by self-interest? This is not an idle matter, because often when the opinions of the people who act like weeds prevail over the opinions of the people who act like wheat, the whole congregation is affected in a negative way. Who has not wanted to be rid of the bad apples that spoil the barrel?" [Texts for Preaching-A Lectionary Commentary Based on the NRSV-Year A, pgs. 413-414\).](#)

Sometimes, however, a person or persons who are perceived as weeds in the church or the wheat field may actually be the healthy growth. They may be God's prophets or voice calling to the majority of the church to repent or reform. Quack grass is like this in some cases. The house next to ours in Shorewood was finished a year after ours. It was a pretty house, but for a good while it had just exposed topsoil spread around it. No grasses, bushes or trees had yet been planted. Almost overnight, quack

grass appeared. In my yard it was a nuisance, but in the neighbors it was saving the topsoil from erosion. It was calling out that the land was barren, and needed help. That quack grass reminded me of the troublesome people in a couple of churches I served. Even though they were very annoying like the weeds amongst the wheat in a field, or the grass in my yard, they were a voice reminding those churches that they had forgotten that they exist by God's grace alone, and that are indebted to God for all they have. Those bothersome people were a voice crying out that those churches needed God's help to be redeemed. Sometimes God speaks through the perceived weeds to save us.

There is also the tension in the church of exactly who the bad weeds are, because one person's weed might be another person's flower. In any church I have served, I have encountered people who were like noxious weeds that either needed to surrender to God's judgment to save them, that is straighten up, or they needed to move to another church. Of course, in a couple of churches some people thought I was the noxious weed, and wanted me gone. On my first day in one church, I learned that a part of the search committee that had recommended me judged me guilty of being a spy from the Presbytery. The church had done something wrong by the Presbyterian Book of Order five years before I came, and were trying to hide it. I knew nothing about it. Out of their guilt, these few people who acted like noxious weeds decided that I needed to be removed by the end of the first year. One lady thought I was Satan, himself, not a child of God living by the Spirit of God. I had not even told a pun, yet. I stayed and suffered there for three and a half years, with the same hope Paul wrote about in Romans, until some doctors told me to leave or my body would die from stress in six more months. God's judgment told me I had failed there. God's abundant mercy saved my life because I left three months later for a better place. I went to a church where I was perceived as a flower and not a weed. This can happen in a multitude of relationships.

Also in Romans, Paul writes that all of creation groans and waits in hope for God's abundant mercy to eliminate evil and death, and give us everlasting life in the Spirit. This process can include turning weeds into flowers. It can mean human beings, who perceive that they are worthless, unloved, separated and abandoned by God can have their viewpoint changed by the working of God's Spirit, and God's abundant mercy in Jesus Christ. It may mean that others must see the former weed as a new flower.

Speaking of weeds that become flowers, last week I shared part of such a true story about a Jason Flor who changed from weed to flower. His brother, Walter wrote about Jason, who at one time had a very serious alcohol problem. Jason was like a seed that had been planted in very rocky soil. But, by God's mysterious grace he was given another chance to grow in the good soil of life, especially with a wonderful job opportunity given by a man whose life he had saved 20 years before.

There is more to this story. In this part, Jason seemed to be living like a weed, who on at least one occasion, had a good purpose as a weed. Yet, it appears that at the same time Jason was being turned into a flower by God's abundant mercy. It is also obvious that Walter, his wife Sis, and their family were people who hoped for what is not yet seen, and waited for it with patience concerning Jason.

Walter wrote, "On May 30, 1998, we received another 3 A.M. phone call. It was South Suburban Hospital again. This time, I went to the hospital and Sis got to stay home. (Last week we heard that Sis had answered such a call before at 3 A.M.). Jason had been in a car wreck. My heart sank. Things had been going too well. I was sure Jason had screwed up again. I was wrong. He had been sober. The car wreck was not his fault, but he was in pretty bad shape. His head had pushed out the windshield, and he looked like Boris Karloff's 'Frankenstein.' But something as miserable as a car wreck was more like divine intervention" or God's ever present love.

"The car wreck impacted our family in a positive way. Jason spent a little time with us to recover. Sis and I thought it was good for our teenage drivers to see Jason's injuries. They wanted to see the car, also. That Monday was Memorial Day, and we all drove to the junkyard in the nearby town of Markam, IL to see the wreck and its bowed and cracked windshield. Jason needed to get his apartment keys from the glove compartment of his car. We had taken two cars to Markham because we were going to make a side trip to the Toyota dealer in Oak Lawn, IL to drop off son Ben's car to be serviced later that week. As we were leaving the junkyard, the tow truck driver gave Sis his card. 'You never know when you will need a tow,' he said. You may have already guessed what happened next. As we made our way north, Ben's car lost power near 95th street. Then a huge black cloud blew out from under his car. Sis and I were amused. Both cars pulled off of the road. On a holiday, when no businesses were open, who should we call but the tow truck driver who had given Sis his card fifteen minutes earlier. "

It doesn't stop here. "Because of the accident, Jason could not go to work for a week at his new job. But he kept in touch with his office by telephone, helping to troubleshoot. By the end of the week his boss realized that he could not do without him. His part-time job now became full-time. That would have been enough of a miracle for most people. But it gets better. Several months of hard work on the job and of being sober really paid off. Jason is now comptroller of the company." God's life giving Spirit and ever-present love were turning Jason's life as a weed into one as a flower. He is growing in the perception that he is a precious child of God.

The reading from Genesis is also about a wayward child of God who was more than a bad weed. As we heard in the introduction, Jacob was the grandson of Abraham and Sarah and the son of Isaac. Rebekah was Jacob's mother. God had made a covenant with Abraham by faith and promised that his decedents would be many, would own much land, and be God's chosen people, whose purpose was to show the abundant mercy of God to the world. A major crisis occurred in this plan of a good harvest of wheat when Jacob and his mother acted as weeds. As we learned last Sunday, Rebekah had given birth to twins, Esau and Jacob. Esau was born first, but Rebekah favored Jacob over Esau. Because Esau was the first-born, he was to inherit the greater portion of Isaac's wealth. Rebekah and Jacob plotted and succeeded in deceiving Esau and Isaac so that Jacob was given the larger share. Now Esau was madder than a raging bull and was out to kill Jacob. If the truth be known, Jacob pulled some other dirty tricks on people along the way. He was a true scoundrel. In my book

of self-righteousness, he deserved to be severely punished, and pulled from God's garden. He was a bad weed.

As Jacob ran for his life, he rested at night, and God spoke to him in a dream. It was the dream we heard read about in the scriptures where he saw a stair stepped or ladder-like ramp going up to heaven. God spoke to him. God gave him hope that he would live, that God's abundant mercy would be with him, and that God would carry on through him the promises made to his grandfather, Abraham. Jacob named the place where he slept and dreamt of God, Bethel, which means "House of God." So God took this bad weed and made him into a flower, a stalk of valued wheat, restored him to God, and eventually his brother's good will. I would have pulled him as a noxious weed. God's judgment was to love him, save him and make him a worthy child.

Of course this is what God does for each of us in our lives and in worship. When we say our confession of sin, we are asking God to turn us from weeds into flowers. When we are given the assurance of pardon, we are reminded that Jesus Christ shed his blood to wash away our sins, died for our sins or our weedy-ness, and made us right with God. He restored us as God's adopted children who call God, "Abba" or Father. He turns us from weeds into flowers or wheat. He reminds us of God's abundant mercy. Each week, whether you feel like a weed or a bundle of the finest wheat, come to worship the Lord, experience God's abundant mercy, and celebrate being made God's redeemed child, again.