

Texts: Isaiah 44:6-8; Psalm 86:11-17; Romans 8:12-25; Matthew 13:24-30, 36-43

Every so often a little publication comes folded into the Chadron Record. It's called "the Weed Report" and no, by weed I don't mean marijuana. The Weed Report describes invasive plant species that have found their way into the fields, forests, streams and lakes of Nebraska. There are photographs and descriptions and maps of where these weeds have been found and where they are spreading.

I have to admit that even after living here for more than 6 years I have so little knowledge of farming that I would be hard pressed to tell you what is growing in any field around here. I can identify corn when I see it, but that's about it. Would I be able to tell you what weed is growing in a particular field, or even in my own back yard? Doubtful.

When Matthew wrote this gospel toward the end of the 1st century, Christians and Jews were becoming bitter enemies. The question for Matthew and the community to whom he wrote was this: Why have some Jews accepted the Gospel, the Christian message, and others have rejected it? Matthew had acceptance and rejection very much on his mind as he wrote his book.

At the same time, the book of Acts tells us how Christianity was spreading into Gentile communities. Paul himself took on the role of missionary to those who were outside of the Jewish understanding of God's chosen people. These new young churches had to deal with religious diversity. As the movement grew, as new people came to hear and respond to the Christian message, the question became: How are we to deal with those among us who initially seem identical to us but who as time goes on reveal themselves to be different in their faith expression or their background? Or to put it more bluntly: there

are some people among us who seem to be as worthless as weeds. How and when can we rid ourselves of them?

Wow. There's the question, huh? And it is a question that has plagued the church for these 2,000 years. How do we rid ourselves of these heretics, these outliers? It is the question behind the Inquisition. It is the question behind all manner of religious wars and conflicts. It is the question that led communities of Puritans, Quakers and others to leave Europe behind for a new start on a new continent. It is a question that led to schisms and splits over slavery, over divorce, over when and how to baptize. It is the question in our time over how to deal with people who are homosexual. All too often the answer is: we need to separate ourselves from those people. We need to pull up the weeds from our midst. "We" are productive grain and "they" are no more than fuel for the fire.

In the reading from Isaiah this morning, we hear the prophet speaking in God's own voice: "I am the first and I am the last; besides me there is no other god." (44:6) And immediately following this passage, Isaiah writes a satirical scene about an artisan who carves an idol out of a block of wood or who casts an idol out of metal in a forge. "How can a statue made of wood or metal be your god?" asks Isaiah. We are reminded of the commandment in Exodus 20:4: "You shall have no other gods before me. You shall not make for yourselves an idol."

The trouble is we have plenty of idols that we worship.

How about the god of individual achievement? How about the god of wealth and acquisition? How about the god of body image who whispers to you that beauty or thinness is what you should be striving for? How about the god of always being so busy that you don't ever take any time to rest?

And then there is the most pernicious god that Christians worship: the god of the zero-sum game. This god claims that each there is only so much of anything to go around, and that if someone else wants more – more opportunity, more civil rights, a better education or a better job – then there is less for me.

And here is what this passage from Isaiah has to do with Jesus' parable about wheat and weeds: When you worship something – anything – besides God, the dark side of that worship is that you end up wanting to be a god. You want to decide who is good and who is evil, who is wheat and who is weeds. It goes like this: if your god is individual achievement, then you would rather not be associated with someone whom you perceive to be lazy. If your god is wealth, then those who are poor are the weeds in your field. If busyness is the god you've carved for yourself, then idleness is what you abhor. And if the god you bow down to is named zero-sum, then you believe that those who are less fortunate deserve what they have and shouldn't want anything more.

Our national political debate has reached such a pitch that almost nothing can be accomplished in Congress. Finger-pointing, “us” vs. “them” and refusing to sit down together to work on the huge national budget and health care issues we face. It's idolatry on a national level. When you worship the god of the zero-sum game, compromise is impossible because you might have to give up something in order to work out a solution.

You see how it goes? Beauty – and ugliness. Intelligence – and ignorance. Strength – and weakness. Deserving – and undeserving.

If we are honest with ourselves – each one of us knows that we are made up of both wheat and weeds, sinfulness and goodness. Martin Luther called it “being justified and

sinner at the same time.” That is why confession of sins comes at the beginning of every worship service. We need to admit our own weediness and hear God’s word of forgiveness.

We are a mixed field within these walls. We all of us have wheat and weeds mixed up within us. We all know someone who could be described as a weed. But Jesus’ parable makes it clear that any attempt to uproot the weeds will damage the entire crop.

Remember that one of the disciples who asked for an explanation was Peter. Peter, whose own weediness led him to deny Jesus three times at a crucial moment. And yet it was Peter who became the first leader of the church.

I have been asked more than once why we have communion every Sunday in this church. After all, many of us (me included) grew up in churches where communion was offered once a month or even just 4 times a year. Doesn’t it cheapen or water down the significance of the sacrament to do it so often? In the moment, I said something about how we read in the book of Acts that the early Christians broke bread together whenever they met. But I’ve been thinking about this question more and more in the past few days. I think it has to do a lot with this parable. You come forward to receive Christ’s body and blood and I place a wafer made of wheat in your hands. The assisting minister offers you a sip of wine or juice. We speak Christ’s promise to you. That moment is holy and sacred. That is the moment between God and you, face to face. That is the moment when Christ tells you that he has given himself entirely for you. Forgiven sinner that you are. No one is turned away from the Lord’s table. We need to hear those words of promise as often as possible.

St. Paul writes in his letter to the Romans that all creation is waiting, even groaning in eager longing for the day when we will be set free from sin. We wait in hope. But we

also, unfortunately, get impatient. It's that impatience that entices us to want to decide who is the weed, who is the sinner, who ought to be separated out and thrown away.

Jesus' parable makes it clear that there will be a reckoning. There will be a moment when evil and good will be separated from each other. But the parable also makes it clear that the reckoning is God's to make, not ours. And the good news is, Jesus Christ died and rose from the dead so that we might be judged with mercy.

We are not the judges. We are not the reapers. We must leave that for God at the end of the age. Our job is to wait in hope for God's mercy and grace. And so we pray in the words of the Psalm we have just read together: Give me an undivided heart to revere your name. Great is your steadfast love for me: you have delivered my soul from the depths. Thanks be to God for the promise that God will not abandon us.