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Were there weeds in the Garden of Eden? The day I heard that there is such a thing as dandelion wine I started to question the either/or classification of plants as good or weed. Who are we to judge?

That's the question we start with in today's Gospel. A landowner's servants notify him that his crops have been corrupted. Somebody has sown alien seed in the field reserved for wheat. The servants are quick to offer to cleanse the land of the intrusion, but the landowner has a different point of view. He's not ready to make a final determination about the worth of everything growing out there. There may be some surprises, and harvest time will tell the final tale.

There's no doubt that the landowner sees his servants as too precipitous in their eagerness to fix the field. One question here might be, "Just what is a weed?" Wikipedia defines a weed as "a plant considered undesirable in a particular situation." Of course the next question must be "What is undesirable to whom?" The servants saw the weeds as undesirable. The owner saw the servants' presumed horticultural infallibility as undesirable. What needs to be eliminated here?

When Jesus interpreted the parable of the weeds, he talked about the world with good and evil people and he specified that the task of weeding questionable people

out of the community was not part of the disciples' job description. As the landowner, he mandated that there was to be no weeding. The sifting would happen at harvest. Until then everything would have its chance to grow.

People who would be quick to weed think they understand just how things should be. The "weeds" upset what they perceive as the divinely sanctioned order of the world: a well-cleared field with one (meticulously organic) crop. These people are caricatures like the stereotypical Pharisees of Jesus' time or the self-defined religious perfectionists of any age. They interpret precisely how strict rules apply to each situation and strive to maintain themselves in pure virtue. They know that contact with anyone or anything "unclean" diminishes their holiness.

Jesus was anathema to this sort of person. He touched the unclean, ate with sinners, worked on the Sabbath, and generally seemed to relish activities that were the symbolic equivalent of blowing dandelion seedpods over every manicured lawn he came near.

When Jesus told the story of a landowner whose pristine field had been sullied, he may have been talking a bit tongue in cheek, nudging his listeners to ask what makes the difference between produce and weeds. Adding to the humor he used to make his point, he followed the weed story with one of sowing a mustard seed in a field. He painted a wonderfully comic scene as he described a planter setting out into a field armed with a first-century shovel and one tiny mustard seed. Add to that the fact that his audience knew that mustard was a pernicious plant that tended to take over everything around it.

When Jesus says that the kingdom of heaven is like a mustard seed, he may well be saying that it's something growing prodigiously, much to the chagrin of many who see it. In that case, the mustard seed story refers to the tale of the weed-infested field and underlines the idea that it's not always so easy to know who or what should be uprooted.

When we listen to this Gospel in the summer we're challenged to ask what it calls us to think, say and do. Obviously, one of the first things the seed parables call for is a reassessment of whom we can call evildoers and who should take it upon themselves to uproot, excommunicate or shun them. As there has been so much talk in countries around the world about aliens, we need to have some serious discussions among people of faith about what is truly alien to the kingdom of

heaven.

With the parable of the mustard seed, Jesus talked about planting a fast-growing weed as a symbol of his ministry. That takes us right back to the first question: Who gets to judge what is weed and what is worthy? Frustrating as it may be, Jesus is not giving us the answers. One can imagine Jesus saying, “Let it grow together until the harvest, then I’ll send some angels to evaluate the situation.”

Jesus is not giving us the answers — perhaps we would find them too hard to accept. In regard to weeds in the Garden of Eden, my guess is that everything had its own appeal. Diversity? Yes. Weeds? Isn’t that just another name for the main ingredient of dandelion wine?

WISDOM 12:13, 16-19

“There is no god besides you who have the care of all ... your might is the source of justice; your mastery over all things makes you lenient to all.” This passage from the Book of Wisdom presents a strongly iconoclastic vision of divine power. In contrast to depictions of gods sparring for dominance and imposing their will, the writer of Wisdom describes divine power as persuasive and reconciling rather than coercive.

Some months ago there was an episode of the TV program “Madame Secretary” in which the U.S. secretary of state was groped by a chauvinist foreign president. Without thinking, she slugged him so hard and spontaneously that he literally didn’t know what hit him, except that he had a broken nose. He publicly attributed the visible injury to a boxing match against a national champion. Like any bully, his strength was based on the fear he could inspire rather than any innate quality of character or even his physical conditioning. His utter humiliation at being bested by a woman was a secret he wanted to keep at any cost.

Much of the world seems to function on the kinds of power described above. The arrogance of the ruler and the secretary’s forceful fist demonstrate the coercive power of authority and brute strength. Her power to expose him allowed her to manipulate him into doing something that was better for the world than his own plan would have been. Those two expressions of power over others suffer an utterly debilitating flaw. They function only until someone with more of that same kind of power arrives on the scene and imposes their will. As reflectors of stages of human development, they are the bottom rungs of the ladder and are too often the primary

kinds of power used in our world.

A far more benign expression of power is nutritive, the power that supports the life of another. That is the power of parenthood, of the teacher, of anyone who helps others grow into all that they can be. The downfall of this expression of power comes when the giver creates or allows dependency to develop. The corruption of nutritive power creates a welfare state, whether in government, church or family.

God's power as described in today's reading from Wisdom is different. The first statement simply tells us that God's wisdom and power are such that coercion can play no role in the relationship between heaven and earth. This passage extols the divine willingness to forgive and then goes further. By saying "In those who know you, you rebuke temerity," the author indicates that God exercises power by calling everyone to be fully who they are, to speak and act in honesty with no fear of God or human beings.

The end of this reading reminds us that we are to imitate the God in whom we believe. If God, the most powerful, is beyond coercion and domination, how much more should we eschew them! Not only that, but we should judge any attempt at domination, whether by brute force or manipulation, as counter to the will of God. We will be rebuked for our temerity if we fail to speak out against such attitudes and actions.

ROMANS 8: 26-27

In his book *Thoughts on Solitude*, Thomas Merton shared a prayer in which he admitted that no matter how we try, we may not be following God's will. He prayed further, "But I believe that the desire to please you does in fact please you. And I hope I have that desire in all that I am doing." It was a powerfully honest and humble recognition of human limitations by a man many think of as one of our 20th century saints.

Merton said that he hoped he had the desire to please God in everything. The very use of the word hope gives us a hint that he was thinking of the working of the Spirit in him. We hope for what is beyond us; what we can accomplish on our own we call a plan. Paul's statement that "The Spirit comes to the aid of our weakness," tells Merton that his hope was well placed.

In this entire section of his Letter to the Romans, Paul has been talking about the effects of the Spirit in Christians. He has told them that the Spirit dwells in them, gives them life, and frees them from slavery to sin. He has invited them to dream of the unimaginable future God has in store and to base their dreams on their experience of the first fruits of the Spirit in them.

Now Paul goes one step further and tells the community that the Spirit actually draws them beyond their limitations, praying in and through them for graces they can't express or describe or maybe even imagine.

In the two verses we hear today, Paul describes the mystery of the Spirit's action within us. This is the Spirit's personal effect not just on us, but the Spirit dwelling in us and moving us from within. If Paul were not speaking of the context of prayer, what he is saying could almost sound like possession, being taken over by the Spirit. But, Paul prefaced this idea saying that when we do not know how to pray, the Spirit moves in us. The Spirit's work begins with our desire, our attempt to pray. When we open ourselves thus to God, Paul says that the Spirit will pray in and for us, enticing us into greater union with God and God's will.

MATTHEW 13:24-43

Today's part of the parable discourse follows directly on last week's parable of the farmer's 25 percent success rate in sowing seed. It appears that Jesus had great sympathy for beleaguered planters whose poor crop yields mirrored the disappointing results of his own efforts to sow God's word.

We begin with a story in which a farmer had a wicked, wily enemy so committed to his nasty plan that he snuck into the field at night and sowed bad seed. One can imagine the aggravation of the servants when they saw what sprouted where they had worked. Woe to the weeds sullying their soil! But, the master didn't see the situation the same way they did. The owner, aware that yanking up the weeds would endanger the newly-sprouting plants, tells them to keep calm and let nature take its course.

But, there seems to be more to the story than simply the protection of sprouts. Somewhere along the line, there is a question of judgment. Why were the servants so sure that the "weeds" should be eliminated? Did they have an excess of enthusiasm that led the owner to see them as a greater danger to the growing

wheat than the weeds would be?

The owner might have been thinking that some crops enhance one another like corn, beans and squash, the “three sisters” of pre-Columbian America. To non-experts, the beans growing up the corn stalk can look like parasites and the squash leaves that guard the soil’s moisture can be perceived as harmful sun blockers. This parable raises the question of what deserves to be called a weed. A way of stating the problem in contemporary language would be to ask when diversity is really life-threatening and when it is just challenging to a particular vision of how things should be.

When Jesus went on to talk about the mustard seed, farmers would have been quick to get the joke. The mustard seed, proverbially small, did grow into a big bush, but not always one that was desired. The *Mishna*, a collection of Hebrew oral traditions, warned specifically against planting mustard because the bush was noxious and would take over everything around it. Jesus was not just talking about the prodigious growth of the kingdom of heaven, but also commenting that some people judged it to be more like a plague than a crop.

The image of the yeast has its own dose of humor. Jesus doesn’t tell us exactly how much yeast the woman in question has on hand, but it had to be a substantial amount because she mixed it with 30 to 50 pounds of flour — enough to make bread for a small village. Perhaps that was precisely the point Jesus was making: Some yeast plus a lot of flour and the effort of one hard-working woman make enough to nourish an entire community. The kingdom of heaven can flourish from the most natural processes because creation was designed for it.

Finally, the disciples ask Jesus for an explanation of the parable of the weeds. Again, as in the parable of the sower, he gives them a point by point explanation, giving the parable an apocalyptic meaning. On the most basic level the apocalyptic interpretation promises that evil will not win in the end. But, the way good will win does not necessarily reflect human judgment. The disciples are not called to police the kingdom. The Son of Man will send the angels to do the sifting when harvest time comes. The disciples need only sow seeds and mix yeast; with just that effort the kingdom promises to sprout like weeds.

Planning: 16th Sunday in Ordinary Time

By: Lawrence Mick

Today's readings can be seen as part two of last week's passages. This is clearest in the Gospel, as Jesus explains the parable of the sower and seed that we heard last week.

The first reading reminds us that God "has the care of all," which surely means all of God's creation, not just humans. Paul again speaks of groaning, but this time he refers to the Spirit groaning within us. Since God's Spirit is in all things, this could also remind us to care for all that God has made. So, if you didn't address creation care last week, or if you want to make it a double-header, you could easily focus on it this weekend.

On the other hand, the stronger message of these texts calls attention to God's mercy and the need for repentance. The first reading ends by reminding us that God gave God's children good ground for hope permitting repentance for their sins. The psalm proclaims God is "merciful and gracious, slow to anger, abounding in kindness and fidelity." Paul speaks of the Spirit coming to the aid of our weakness, and the Gospel includes a call to repentance for "all who cause others to sin and all evildoers."

This might be a good time to think about a summer penance service. It's been months since Lent, and there are months ahead until Advent. Because those two seasons really occur rather close to each other, the bulk of the year can go by with no invitation to repentance and reconciliation. Can you find effective ways to invite people to gather to celebrate God's mercy together outside of those two seasons?

You might also combine these two themes by focusing a penance service around repentance for our sins against God's creation. In the midst of summer, many people spend time in nature, hiking, camping, biking or just relaxing outdoors. Could you invite people to gather to give thanks for all the gifts of creation and to seek forgiveness for the times we have not appreciated these gifts adequately or cared for them properly? You could even begin such a service outdoors, giving thanks as the assembly experiences the goodness of nature and then proceed into the church to offer prayers for forgiveness and the opportunity for confession.

It might also be possible to arrange a service that begins with a parish picnic. If that isn't workable on the parish grounds, the parish could gather at a park and celebrate God's mercy in the out-of-doors. Sometimes, we need to think outside the box (or

outside the church walls) to entice people to gather for creative worship.

Prayers: 16th Sunday in Ordinary Time

By: Lawrence Mick

Introduction

Today we are presented more insights about God, the kingdom of heaven, and what is expected of us. The overwhelming message is that God is all about power, justice, lenience, kindness and most of all, love. We are offered endless opportunities to hear and respond to God, but nothing matches God's efforts to claim us. God chooses us, sends help on our behalf, and invites us into a reign of love and peace beyond all measure.

Penitential Act

- Lord Jesus, you tell us the meaning of the kingdom of heaven: Lord, have mercy.
- Christ Jesus, you promise that the righteous will shine like the sun: Christ, have mercy.
- Lord Jesus, you invite us to hear your word and enter into God's reign of love: Lord, have mercy.

Prayer of the Faithful

Presider Let us pray, my friends, that all may hear and respond to God's call.

Minister For the church: That it may clearly proclaim God's loving invitation to all people...we pray,

- For those in every level of government who are responsible for policies that enhance the lives of others, especially the most needy ... we pray,
- For those who feel alone, rejected, unloved — especially children; and for all who have never experienced God's love ... we pray,
- For those who demonstrate God's love by caring for the poor, the vulnerable and the unlovable...we pray,
- For those who are afraid to relate to others or who cannot ask for help ... we pray,

- For those suffering from the summer heat; and for farmers who depend on good weather for their crops ... we pray,
- For those in this community whose needs we may not know; for the sick, the dying and the grieving among us ... we pray,

Presider Gracious God, we are overwhelmed by your relentless love for us. Help us to believe that we are, indeed, worthy of your love. Show us how to reflect that love to others, especially those in most need of it. We ask this in the name of your Son, who gave himself for us. Amen.

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