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St. John's Church, Lodi, CA

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Proper 11A

This morning we hear another parable of the Kingdom of God. Last week we heard that the Kingdom of God is like an extravagant sower. This week, the Kingdom of God is like weeds growing in with the wheat, and oddly, we are admonished to not pull them out but let them grow. There *will* come a judgment, that is, a time the weeds are pulled out, but premature judgment could be detrimental to the wheat. In other words, weeding is above our pay grade,

Specifically, the weeds Jesus would have been referring to are darnel---or tares, as the King James Bible says, or *lolium temulentum*, if you know your weeds---a plant related to wheat, that looks like wheat, that hides out in wheat, but is poisonous in the end, causing blindness and even death if too many of its small black seeds turn up in the bread dough.

Believe it or not, it's not always easy telling the difference between a beneficial plant and a weed. Nor is the United States Department of Agriculture much help. They define a weed as "a plant that does more harm than good."

So how do we tell? How do we judge? I took a little walk along the irrigation canal close to our house, and

But what about this one? Recognize it? It's a vine from a blackberry bush. Well, I don't know about you, but frankly, I love blackberries. And I still believe the ones you go out and pick that are growing wild are much more flavorful than the cultivated varieties. Every summer I spend some time picking wild blackberries and we make stuff with them.

But I can't think of a more invasive plant in Northern California. Up in Mt. Shasta, where we have a cabin and a little land around it, you'll see patches of blackberries bigger than city blocks. Two summers ago, we were tromping through the woods---not a smart thing to do in mid-summer up there---and roused a nest of yellow jackets. Poor Beverley, trying to get away from them, lost a shoe and ran right through some blackberries. She is still picking thorns out of her foot... So are blackberries weeds or not? Do they do more harm than good? It depends on your perspective.

Now, what does this have to do with life in the church? Well, if I could be so frank, I think sometimes we look at some of our fellow Christians as "weeds." ... Which, I think is why there are so many folks out there who claim to be spiritual but don't want anything to do with the church. After all, the church and church folks can be a real pain.

I think that's why "spirituality" is all the rage - feeling religious, sort of, without the bother of having to be religious with people who are not as vaguely spiritual as you. "Spirituality is religious warm fuzzies without having to hang out with people we wouldn't choose to hang out with if it were not for the church. "Spirituality" is our Lord Jesus Christ without a body!

Or as the poet Shelley put it, "I could believe in Christ if he did not drag behind him that leprous bride of his, the church."

As a rector I've never had anyone withdraw from a church where I served saying, "Jesus' demands upon us are just too much." No, why they leave is, "We think the world of Jesus, but we just can't stand his friends."

Here's another parable that Jesus told: The kingdom of God is a great banquet where though really nice people are the first invited, they find other things to do. So the master of the banquet goes out and invites everybody - the maimed, the lame, and the blind, the broken hearted, Rotarians, rejects, racists, and reprobates, Harley riders and drunks, yellow dog Democrats and Tea Party Republicans That's God's table - a bunch of society's castoffs with whom few would spend a Saturday night. So says Jesus.

Jesus tells us that in God's garden, good wheat and bad weeds flourish together. It's not for you and not for me to cull the harvest.

Yet that is what we do, isn't it? When someone new walks through the door, a lot of non-verbal communication takes place... a lot of silent sizing up goes on in both directions. We make a judgment: These folks are either like us or not like us. We put out that vibe, and others pick up on it.

I've actually checked with some folks who've wandered in here and hung around for a Sunday or two and left; and I've also checked with those who have brought visitors with them, who ultimately didn't stick around. Some of the reasons they didn't stick around: "We felt some people were condescending to us... we were made to feel lesser..." And all without a word... all while smiling and saying, "Oh, we're so glad to see you today..."

If our mission strategy is to wait until the folks that we would really like to join St. John's show up---those with big fat checkbooks--- I'm afraid we'll be waiting a long time. We have neither the luxury nor the time to be that selective.

And Jesus tells not to anyway. That kind of selectivity... that kind of pre-emptive weeding... is above our pay grade.

I think that sometimes we want to believe that *we* are the “end users” of the Gospel... That it’s all about *us* being saved, *us* being nurtured, so that *our* lives will be better. In a church world that has *us* as the beloved and special people of God, it’s easy for us to believe that if people really “get God”; we’ll see its effects *in the church*... Attendance will go up *in the church*...Pledge receipts will go up *in the church*...that indeed the destination for the work of God is *in the church*.

In this church-centric view of God, if we want to go find God, where do we look for him? *In the church*. In fact, many Christians seem to believe that God is at work in the church and that the world is a wild and wooly place, and that out there, in the world, God is struggling to get along. So we hear people talking about putting God back into schools, and putting God back into our neighborhoods, and all like that... and we wonder why our pews aren’t filled.

In a kingdom view of God, that is, in Jesus’ view, God is out in the world, and God is having a ball! God is always working *beyond the categories* that we would call “his people.” In a kingdom view, people are looking for God in the world, in the street, in the workplace, in the rec. club, in their neighborhoods, on the East side of Lodi, amongst the brown people and the poor people and the Muslim people.

Last week I told you a story about the Brotherhood of St. Andrew chapter at St. Paul’s, Benicia and how it helped Sarah Jane and her two boys. Did I mention that the Brotherhood of St. Andrew was a worldwide organization within the Anglican Communion whose mission is to foster the spiritual growth of men and youth?

Well, here’s another story. One of the men from the Brotherhood came to me and said that he wanted to start a ministry at St. Paul’s that would serve one meal a week to the hungry in our area. I questioned him... Was there really the need? Because I hadn’t seen much evidence. This particular person, who actually worked for the Solano County Social Services, produced the data showing that indeed there were lots of people in Solano County being under-served.

So we started the ministry of serving one meal---just one meal---on Wednesday evenings to anyone who showed up, and doing that out of our tiny parish hall and inadequate kitchen. The first week I think five or six people showed up; and of course, I thought, this is going to be a non-starter. But the next week, fifteen or so showed up; then the following week it was twenty-five; then thirty-five, then forty-five. It leveled off at forty-five.

Interesting, the responses: Whoa, there might really be a need here... I guess we’re going to have to keep this up. We applied for a UTO grant so that we could buy an industrial grade dishwasher that cost over \$6000... this was about 1996 or 1997. We got

the grant, so we couldn't use not having a dishwasher as an excuse. We had to keep doing the ministry.

And the most amazing thing happened. Lots of folks---both men and women---got involved. They actually were glad their church was doing something concrete for "those people." And then an even more amazing thing happened: The volunteers---proper, selective Episcopalians from St. Paul's---began to sit down and chat with the people we were serving food to, and guess what they found out? *That those folks were humans too.*

And they heard their stories, and some of them reported back, "If not for the grace of God, I could be in that situation myself..." and bonds were formed, and some of the people who came to eat---not many---but some... actually joined the church.

More importantly though, it changed the way we as a worshipping body, understood our *raison d'être*; our mission; and people became more open and welcoming, not because the rector told them to be, but because they understood. They got it. Outreach ceased to be something academic after that. St. Paul's Feeding the Hungry Ministry stills is going strong after fifteen years, and it came into being because one guy from the Brotherhood of St. Andrew had an idea.

The words uttered by Jacob in the reading we heard this morning from the Book of Genesis come to mind: "Surely the Lord was in this place, and I did not know it!" Those interested in "spirituality" are wanting some kind of visitation from the Holy while living vaguely religious lives and not wanting to get our hands dirty; when God is often hanging around in places where we have to get our hands dirty. And then once we get our hands dirty, we along with Jacob exclaim, "Surely the Lord was in this place, and I did not know it!"

... How awesome is this place! This is none other than the house of God, and this is the gate of heaven."

Amen.