

The Tenth Sunday After Pentecost
Proper 11, Revised Common Lectionary, Year A

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Episcopal Church of Our Saviour
Mill Valley, California

Grandpa in the Weeds
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Part of the simultaneous joy and challenge of having served in a community for a long period of time is that the old stories come up again. And I don't just mean the old scripture stories like today's familiar one, known traditionally as the "wheat and the tares." I mean stories we tell to each other that bring the Gospel to life in our real, imperfect lives.

So I'm going to re-tell a story to you all today that I've told before. It involves my grandfather, who spent many years of his adult and family life in Northern Michigan. The Upper Peninsula is known for long, dark, cold winters and cool, beautiful summers. He and my grandmother directed for a number of years a church conference center on the shores of Little Lake, with a little house in the woods, a dock for their rowboat, a sailboat in the garage, and a small chapel on the conference center grounds that came with a dedicated flock of church-goers from the surrounding community.

I don't ever remember there being a garden at my grandparents' home on summer visits there. I'm not sure the soil was the right kind or depth, if the growing season was long enough, or if the shade of the trees would have allowed it. But when my grandparents were older and they moved to the warmer climes of Newton, Kansas, about thirty miles from where I grew up, Grandpa decided it was time to dig into the rich, agricultural soil of the Midwest. He was going to plant a garden.

South-Central Kansas is known for many things, not least of which is weeds. With the winds that blow from springtime into the sultry summer days, seed from everywhere and anywhere ends up in even the most carefully cultivated plot of ground. My family would spend long hours keeping the careful furrows and rows behind our house weeded, and often to no avail. Bindweed, ragweed, and grasses of all kinds did indeed sometimes seem to be planted by the evil one at night when no one was looking. Alfalfa seed would blow in from the neighboring field and try to take over. Prickly Osage orange saplings would materialize where a squirrel had been busy shredding a hedge apple. We'd even see the occasional head of grain emerging in a stubborn patch. My mother had a name for non-weed species that sprung up occasionally: "volunteers." Now there's a church definition for you! In any case, it was inevitable by the end of the summer that some parts of the garden would be overrun, others would just be turned over by Mom or Dad behind the tiller, and others would be tolerably weeded, but that would only last a few days and then it would be time to start again.

Grandpa, on the other hand, never tried. His garden plot was a complete mess as I remember it, with no rhyme or rhythm. He planted. The winds and creatures of God (and maybe the evil one, too, who knew?) seeded. He watered the whole lot. Everything from low crab to tall, unnamed grasses took over, along with the crickets and the grasshoppers. It was his garden. I dare not go in. You

never knew what might be hiding amongst the weeds! A stray animal, maybe a skunk, a snake or two. I think my parents quietly thought he was crazy to be gardening in this way.

But Grandpa, as the growing season progressed, would disappear into the weeds and emerge a few seconds later with a beautiful squash, a pumpkin, maybe some beans or corn. I think it rather annoyed my parents, his boyish success with seemingly little effort after all the sweat and elbow grease that went into our garden, which was sometimes nevertheless overtaken by beetles, worms, moths, or blight and entire crops would be lost.

Today's Gospel for me is about Grandpa – Grandpa in his garden, his small plot not quite big enough to be called a field. His was a wisdom that maybe came with the grace of age, maybe the grace of understanding this Gospel in a way our more orderly minds can't, maybe just with not *caring* so much about what grew, but trusting that something good would come of it, anyway.

When Jesus tells this parable, he must explain it to his disciples as he has been explaining parables to us for a few weeks now. They, like us, are a dense people, often incapable of reading life's meaning into the richness of meaning found in everyday metaphors like weeds and wheat, wine and bread. He describes the Kingdom of God like an un-kept plot of earth, an untidy field, filled with good things and bad, roots intertwined, all growing up together.

Perhaps even more challenging – as is often the case in Scripture—is what Jesus does *not* offer in his parable of the wheat and the weeds. He gives us very little to go on, if anything at all, in how to distinguish between the wheat and the weeds, the desirable and undesirable.

On the big screen of the Anglican Communion in recent weeks, a group of Anglicans met in Jerusalem to proclaim that The Episcopal Church, the Anglican Church of Canada, and the Church of Brazil all apostate and devoid of Christ, and then proclaimed themselves the true believers, the Fellowship of Confessing Anglicans (FOCA, the newest addition to the growing confusion of Anglican alphabet soup.) Many of the bishops in FOCA, most of whom are from just a handful of the 38 churches of the Communion, are boycotting the Lambeth conference of Anglican Bishops, now gathered. Annoyed that the Archbishop of Canterbury hadn't tossed us aside, they had decided it was time to weed their own fields, drum out the "heretics," the undesirables, and to continue the arduous pursuit of the purified Church without Canterbury's help. It's an old pursuit that goes all the way back to the origins of the Protestant Reformation. In my most charitable moments, I wish them luck. They're going to need it. The history of purity movements shows they almost invariably create more division, not less. But I'm sympathetic this much: I like purity, too. I like everyone in agreement. Frankly, I like everyone in agreement with *me*. But I rarely get it.

I don't know about you, but my experience of being in community is of being in an impure patch of weeds where the good things pop up on occasion. Relationships are a messy business, involving disagreement, occasional entanglement, and constant re-negotiation. Speaking for myself, some days I feel like wheat rising up and fruitful. Others, I feel like the disorganized bindweed that used to plague the garden of my youth, wound round and spread all over the good earth. If there is wisdom to be gained from getting older, it seems to be the kind of wisdom my grandfather had in letting the garden grow up together – weeds and all. . . To recognize the plans for the neat furrows and carefully cultivated rows of Christians as a projection of my own delusions about power – a projection on an organic, messy, and remarkably resilient body of folk we call the Body of Christ.

Many gardeners would tell you the old horticultural wisdom that a primary definition of a weed is the wrong plant growing in the wrong place, and probably at the wrong time. Many theologians might say this is one possible way of defining the sins and evils we find in the world at any time, and sometimes – no, often – we find precisely this within ourselves.

But Christ's concern does not at all seem overly focused on order or our actions to purify sinful hearts. The distinction between wheat and weeds seems to be up to God and angels – higher powers with greater, perhaps infinitely greater, vision than we have. Jacob's dream in Genesis this morning is about these angelic powers promising him countless descendants, scattered like the seed. Read a bit further in the story of the ancient Israelites, and we soon learn that those seeds are of wheat and weeds, too. Our world has always been and always probably will be more complex than we'd like, and the wheat and weeds mixed together are not just about individuals – children of God and children of the "evil one" – but manifestations of the good and bad that grow up in our individual hearts side-by-side, sometimes so intertwined that we can scarcely sort out the roots of one from the other.

It takes only a momentary glimpse of our own lives and relationships to see this as true. We love with an imperfect love. Our friends and loved ones are not perfect towards us. We do good things and bad, sometimes from mixed motivations. We are an untidy garden ourselves just as much as the world is, and we sometimes do more harm than good when we try to weed our own patch of spiritual earth, pulling out the plants we want to keep along with those we don't. In fact, our weedy-ness reveals our humanity and an opportunity for God's grace to break in. Moreover, competition from weeds in the garden can sometimes prevent the infestations of pests and disease that often result from mono-culture. Weeds can encourage more competitive growth from the good plants and shade the more fragile. Perhaps that's what God intends among us and within us. I think the majority of the bishops in the Anglican Communion, including our own, now gathered at Lambeth, get that somehow, no matter how much they disagree on matters of theology or interpretation. Weeding in the fields of God without reference to today's Gospel is an exercise that often results in diminishing returns. Engagement in the real world of relationships and the Kingdom of God means having some tolerance for weeds, some degree of patience with weedy-ness – not only in those around us, but often in ourselves.

For we are creatures not of our own making or perfection, but creatures of grace, trusting that God, as the growing season rolls on, will rush into our midst and carry out all the good fruits of the earth of our weedy, fickle hearts. That Christ will burn away the chaff within and gather the grain of all that is good into the barn.

Grandpa seemed to know this piece of Godly wisdom: that perfection is not expected or even demanded of us as individuals or as a community; only a faith and love that waters the garden – weeds and all. God in Christ promises to take care of the rest.

Amen.