

ST. JOHN'S EPISCOPAL CHURCH
COMPASS, PA

July 23, 2023 – PENTECOST 8 / PROPER 11A

The Rev. Dr. Nina George-Hacker

Homily: “*God’s Garden*”*

Isaiah 44:6–8 (The Lord alone is our rock and our strength)
Psalm 86:11–17 (A prayer for God’s mercy, guidance, and favor)
Romans 8:12–25 (Our earthly sufferings cannot compare to the glories of heaven)
St. Matthew 13:24–30, 36–43 (Jesus’ parable of the weeds teaches about God’s Kingdom)

Weeds get a lot of bad press. According to the Miracle-Gro folks, they are “unsightly.” And some guy named Jason on YouTube hawks a spray to “Fix Ugly Yards” full of weeds. To most of us, they’re just a nuisance. So much so, an enterprising person invented the weed-whacker, which some of us use quite zealously on our lawns.

But what is a weed? To some, it’s simply a misplaced wildflower. For instance, I really didn’t mind the violets, clovers, and buttercups that used to spring up in our lawn. Some weeds aren’t pests at all—rather, they are welcome additions. Just think of chamomile and mint that are used for herbal teas. Or dandelions, whose tender young leaves make an excellent green vegetable when steamed and garnished with olive oil and lemon. But frankly, most of us don’t want them invading our lawns or flower beds. So, perhaps a weed is whatever we don’t want in our gardens.¹ Does this mean that a weed is not necessarily a weed—that its classification depends on one’s point of view? To further explore this, let’s turn from our back-yard gardens to God’s Garden, where we also spent some time in last Sunday’s Gospel lesson.

Who does Jesus say are the weeds among us? People we treat as unwanted annoyances that we’d like to get rid of? Do we treat unbelievers as though they are weeds? Those who are of a different race, class, or ethnicity than we are? Or simply anyone who is different from us, or with whom we disagree? If you think having both Democrats and Republicans in our congregation is a diversity you can’t tolerate comfortably, imagine my family in Greece: At one point, it included a fierce monarchist, whose brother-in-law was an ardent Communist!

The Rev. Dr. Katherine Hough, an Anglican priest in British Columbia, tells of a homeowner who wanted his front lawn on the Canadian mainland to showcase the native blossoms from his vacation home on a nearby island. There, he found a few plants in a meadow and carefully transplanted them. The following spring, his lawn was a carpet of delicate blue and white flowers. Within a couple of years, the flowers carpeted not only his lawn, but also those of his neighbors on both sides and across the street. The angry residents, preferring manicured *green* lawns, tried to eliminate the plants from their properties. But they could not, as long as the householder had them in his yard.

So, a petition was started to have the weeds removed from everyone’s lawn, including the yard where the plants originated. Civic pressure won out, and the neighborhood is once again a sea of boring, regulated, restricted, uniform *green*.²

This fellow’s neighbors were like the eager servants in the parable Jesus tells in today’s Gospel. They were in a big hurry to eradicate the weeds. Yank ‘em up, kill ‘em off! Get rid of the undesirables—the beggars, the lepers, the morally questionable, the useless elderly, and the mentally ill. Or, closer to home, the punks and lowlifes, those vulgar young people with all their tattoos and piercings—anyone who doesn’t conform to our standards or expectations.

We might employ euphemisms to disguise our disdain for those we find unacceptable, referring to such persons as “challenged” or “difficult.” We would prefer to have them out of our way, or at least out of sight, where we could effectively ignore them. Yet Jesus teaches that it is only the Son of Man—that is, Christ Himself—and His holy angels, who will do the sorting out of who’s who, and will reap the harvest at the Last Judgment.

In Revelation 14:14-16, we find St. John’s vision of that day: “Then I looked, and behold, a white cloud, and seated on the cloud one like a son of man, with a golden crown on his head, and a sharp sickle in his hand. And another angel came out of the temple, calling with a loud voice to him who sat on the cloud, ‘Put in your sickle, and reap, for the hour to reap has come, for the harvest of the earth is fully ripe.’ So he who sat on the cloud swung his sickle across the earth, and the earth was reaped.”

Jesus is saying that it is not for us to judge who is evil or good, included or excluded, worthy or unworthy. In fact, in another part of the Gospels, Christ warns that we will be surprised at who gets into heaven, and who doesn’t. God alone decides. However, Scripture assures us that evil will not triumph, nor unbelief go unpunished.

So, if we are not to be weed-whackers, then how are we to deal with people who really rub us the wrong way, those whom we feel are junking up the beautiful gardens of our lives with their unsightly weedy-ness? The answer leads me back to my two uncles.

Although they *seriously* opposed each other’s politics, nevertheless they sat down to meals with one another often, while sharing laughter and pleasant conversations. And when my uncle who was a Member of Parliament (I’ll leave you to guess which one), was imprisoned by the Greek Junta in 1967 for his beliefs and activities, my other uncle went to visit him with care packages on a regular basis until his release in 1974. Of course, at every visit, *that* uncle lectured the prisoner about his ideology and the consequences thereof, but would hug and kiss his brother-in-law upon leaving, because after all, they were family, and loved one another deeply, regardless of their beliefs.

Which is precisely what Christ calls us to do in John 13:34-35 (NIV): “Love one another, as I have loved you. By this everyone will know that you are my disciples, if you love one another.” Although there may be weeds among us, we are called to leave the gardening to Jesus. Because it’s not our job to do the gardening. Do you remember last Sunday’s Gospel? We learned that God is the Master Gardener, and we’re just the hired hands—planting, watering, and so forth. But God gives the harvest.

As such, every one of us is part of God’s Garden. And He calls us to treat all His plants the same way. Each one is entitled to life, growth, and our tender care, as we encourage them to be beautiful and flourish.

And we are to trust that Jesus—whom, ironically, Mary Magdalene mistook for the gardener when she encountered the risen Christ—can transform the weeds amongst us. Through the ministry of the Holy Spirit, God is able to fertilize their hungry souls, prune their thorny sins, and empower others (maybe even some of us!) to reach out and help them.

We also need to remember that when *we ourselves* are the weeds—yes, at times, we, too are prickly, and can be noxious to others—Jesus continues to love *us*, feed *us*, prune *us*, and teach *us* how to accept others in love. May we seek to be more like our Lord, and treat others as kindly as He treats us.

Let us pray: Heavenly Father, we confess that sometimes we can be overly fussy about the gardens of our lives, too eager to root out those who are not pleasing to us. Help us to see others as You see them, and to love each one with the boundless love of Christ, by whom we ourselves are loved, and in whose Holy name we pray. *Amen.*

* Adapt. N. George-Hacker, “God’s Garden,” 20 July 2014, St. Christopher’s Episcopal Church, Cobleskill NY. Used with permission.

¹ Adapt. N. George Hacker, “Weed ‘n’ Feed,” 14 July 2002, Wesley Grove United Methodist Church, Gaithersburg MD. Used with permission.

² K. L. Hough, “Images and Ideas,” *Word & Witness: A Complete Resource for Celebrating and Proclaiming the Gospel: Pentecost 7A* (Vol. 93:4, 18 July 1993) p. 3.