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~ Matthew 13:24-30, 36-43 ~

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Grace and peace to you all, through our Lord Jesus Christ.

A reading from the Gospel of Matthew

Jesus put before them another parable: "The kingdom of heaven may be compared to someone who sowed good seed in his field; but while everybody was asleep, an enemy came and sowed weeds among the wheat, and then went away. So when the plants came up and bore grain, then the weeds appeared as well. And the slaves of the householder came and said to him, 'Master, did you not sow good seed in your field? Where, then, did these weeds come from?' He answered, 'An enemy has done this.' The slaves said to him, 'Then do you want us to go and gather them?' But he replied, 'No; for in gathering the weeds you would uproot the wheat along with them. Let both of them grow together until the harvest; and at harvest time I will tell the reapers, Collect the weeds first and bind them in bundles to be burned, but gather the wheat into my barn.'" Then Jesus left the crowds and went into the house. And his disciples approached him, saying, "Explain to us the parable of the weeds of the field." He answered, "The one who sows the good seed is the Son of Man; the field is the world, and the good seed are the children of the kingdom; the weeds are the children of the evil one, and the enemy who sowed them is the devil; the harvest is the end of the age, and the reapers are angels. Just as the weeds are collected and burned up with fire, so will it be at the end of the age. The Son of Man will send his angels, and they will collect out of his kingdom all causes of sin and all evildoers, and they will throw them into the furnace of fire, where there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth. Then the righteous will shine like the sun in the kingdom of their Father. Let anyone with ears listen!"

Let anyone with ears listen!

Indeed, we listen and we try to hear...

Jesus, in this message from Matthew, and in others this month, is concerned, some might say completely immersed, in seeds and harvest; in good seed and bad seed, in fruitful growth and in troubled growth. It is all too easy to simply walk away; so confusing and indeed condemning this Jesus seems to be. We know that we want to be the good seed — the children of the kingdom, as Jesus describes it, but we all know and acknowledge, sometimes to a fault, that we are too much like the weeds, the bad seed, the children of the evil one, the harvest of the devil. Again, I say: Let anyone with ears listen....

Some of you, perhaps many of you, are busy at this time of year worrying over or working with seeds — with your gardens, or your fields. With flowers that search for sunlight and moisture; for fruits and vegetables that blossom and grow; hopefully out of the reach of some of our four-footed friends who love to eat them just as they are. Some of you are tilling great fields and hoping and praying that the plentiful harvest that you grow, in order to feed the world, will be abundant and rich, yielding the bounty of the harvest so that you (and we) can feed our neighbours here and around the world.

I recently completed a drive across our magnificent country, returning to southern Ontario after a seven-month congregational assignment on the coast of British Columbia. Having driven our car to BC, it was necessary to drive it back! Both trips — one going west in late October, when the harvest had been gathered and the land was, in many ways, resting, and the return journey at the end of May, when the crops and the gardens were beginning to flourish and bring forth their fruits — were magnificent. We are so blessed to live where we live, where climate and topography, rich soils and the gracious care of the Creator, give us so much for which to be thankful and thoughtful.

Now you and I know, sometimes Jesus notwithstanding, that there are weeds in our gardens and in our fields. We do our best to get rid of them in order to keep our gardens and our farms as free of such intrusion as we can. But you don't have to go very far nor talk to very many people before hearing stories about stubborn and uncooperative weeds — they just don't go away because we wish them to nor simply because we try to dig them out — sometimes they just find another way to survive and grow, much to our collective dismay.

Again, we hear Jesus' words: Let anyone with ears listen!

In the delightful congregation in which I was working this winter and spring, there is a large and impressive food ministry — a comprehensive and important food bank and a programme of hot meals for anyone in the community to enjoy. A large number of local volunteers, many of them not church goers, works tirelessly cooking and serving, welcoming, and hosting. Generously and faithfully helping people choose the food they need — food of all kinds and sorts — not turning anyone away, not putting any barriers or tests in the way of people getting the food they need for themselves and their families. All these clients and friends are good people — many struggling against all sorts of demons — addictions, underemployment, unemployment, expensive housing, a system which has either forgotten them completely or left them with very few or no options in their lives.

Each one of them a beloved child of God; each one of them deserving of so much that we have to give. While far from the first of this kind of ministry in which I have been privileged to work during my ministry, this one was special. A relatively small community, in which most of the people knew this congregation's food outreach and which so many supported, either with food donations, financial assistance or by being there, setting up tables, helping clients to their choice of food, putting tables and chairs away at the end of the day, doing the dishes...

The seeds there, all of the seeds, were bearing enormously important and necessary fruit. Let anyone with ears, listen!

I think that is what Jesus may just have been talking about — our 'faith' (however profound or simple); our innate desire to be the 'good seeds' is always walking with and being tested by the things that the world throws at us — some of which we might label the stuff of the devil. No matter how hard we work, no matter how many food banks we support, no matter how much we advocate and cry out for justice and equity, no matter how much we care or love, those pesky old weeds — the weeds of envy and injustice, the weeds which separate us from our better selves, the weeds which constantly threaten to separate us and drive us apart — are still there. But we know, because of who Jesus is and what he has done for us, not to be a people without hope and optimism and grace.

Let anyone with ears, listen, I say again...

Rowan William, a former Archbishop of Canterbury and a distinguished theologian and scholar, recently addressed a clergy gathering in the Diocese of Exeter in England. Speaking of rootedness and of 'being' rooted' (here we go with seeds again...), he said:

"You don't go out into the garden and dig up the plants to see how they are growing. The timetable of grace is not up to us. Seeds grow at the rate they grow and should grow at the rate they grow..."

So, even though we may find the words of Jesus as reflected in today's gospel passage very harsh and final, we also know that Jesus is constantly calling us to grow our faith, just as we grow our seeds. And while we may feel that the choices offered to us are stark and inflexible, we also know from our lives together as church that Jesus also called a sinner employed as a tax collector — one Matthew by name — to be a disciple and apostle. He also called the wealthy Zaccheus to be transformed into a life of incredible generosity. Jesus dined with sinners, cured the sick on the Sabbath, broke Sabbath and Levitical laws openly and unafraid; invited a woman of ill repute to be among his closest confidants, and even, from the cross, asked God to forgive his tormentors. This Jesus calls us to tend our gardens, grow our seeds, and, indeed, to be children of the kingdom.

Our lives as those who till and steward the seeds of the world are adventures full of both wonders and fears. We might take two steps forward in our faith journey and then seem to slip back a step and a half. Like the grower in today's parable, we know all about weeds — the weeds of our lives — and how hard they are oftentimes to even recognize, let alone

take out of the soil. We also know that God loves us, comforts us, holds us, and walks alongside us in our greatest joys and our deepest sorrows. The wondrous timetable of grace is, indeed, as Archbishop Williams points out, not up to us. It is in God's gracious care and keeping.

Let anyone with ears listen. May you and I listen, today and in all the days to come.

AMEN.