

Hello everyone. Sadly I'm sending this video sermon because I'm at home with COVID. So this is a lesson to wear masks in crowded places if you can, and keep those tests on hand.

Last week I shared my challenges with planting seeds. But I'm not a total loss. I do have some pots on my porch that are growing herbs pretty well. And I have been known to cultivate a raised bed in my backyard.

A few years ago, I even had a bumper crop. I planted my little raised bed garden in our tiny backyard, I turned the soil, and plopped in some herbs – basil and rosemary and parsley and cilantro. And I went to sleep. And when I awoke the garden was filled with plant life: Wild garlic, Japanese hops, tree of heaven, and some groundcover that I'm sure started at my neighbor's house down the street. Truth be told, this didn't really happen overnight while I lay sleeping. It happened overtime, while I was letting my garden fend for itself because I didn't want to get bit by mosquitos.

So when I went out to harvest my basil for some pesto, I had a hard time finding it, and then rescuing it from the vine that encased it.

It's not exactly the story of the wheat and the tares. You might call it the story of the wheat and the terrible gardener. Parables seem to be growing all around me of late.

For the second week in a row we get a seasonable garden story about the Kingdom of God. And it should be heard with the words of last week's Gospel still ringing in our ears.

So last week, as you may recall, we heard Matthew's version of the story of the Sower and the Seed. It's the first of several parables about the Kingdom of God that Matthew describes in this chapter. You'll recall that in this one, the word of God lands on all kinds of soil, where it often fails to take root and grow. But when it lands on fertile soil, look out – huge yields – 30, 60, 100 fold.

And the disciples of Jesus learn the good news that he considers them to be that fertile soil. They hear the word and understand it and they in turn bear the fruit that God has planted. It's great.

So after that story, I bet the disciples were feeling pretty good about themselves. And if we as church identify with those listeners – and we should – we might feel pretty good as well.

If the parables end there. But I hear Jesus saying quietly under his breath, "Not so fast, friends. I have another story for you."

It's a story about the perils of fertile soil. Someone sows good seed in their field, and while everyone is asleep an enemy comes and sows weeds among it. Not just any weeds. But tares, also called [false wheat or darnel](#). It can't really be distinguished from wheat until the head forms so you don't see it right away. It just looks like a really big yield is coming up out of the ground. However the flour made from it is poisonous. So in the end, it requires quite a bit of sorting at harvest. Finding tares in your wheat and getting rid of them was a common problem in Palestine.

And how long does it take to notice that half of the field is actually something else? That it's grown up right there along with everything else? Long enough for it to get so nicely rooted that you can't start pulling it out without yanking up the good wheat with it.

Now I find in these parables from last week and today, both signs of hope and cautionary tales.

What I find hopeful is that the Reign of God that Jesus proclaims in this chapter of Matthew is right here among us. Not in the future. Not waiting for us to fully deserve it. But fully present. And how do we know that? Because Jesus describes something that exists right in the middle of the mess – something that looks exactly like how human communities look – they are a mixed bag, some folks don't really listen when the Word of God lands right on them, some are led astray, some are overwhelmed their lives as we heard in the last week's story of the Sower and the Seed. And some – the ones that are supposed to have their act together and the ability to really bring on the yield, fall asleep, get tricked, and don't realize that there is evil growing right there along with the good.

That looks like our world today. The Kingdom of God is not a bubble of perfection for the elite, it's not a place of privilege or supremacy, it's not an island of calm in the storm. It's free-range hope and wild-caught love and long hoped for repair for all who have been pushed to the margins and the limits. And it grows up right alongside greed and corruption and collusion with other kings.

In Matthew the Kingdom of God undermines the powers and principalities that place themselves in opposition to God's love and justice. That's the good news : the Kingdom of God is at hand.

But here's the not so fast. There are other things are growing here as well, and we have to be able to identify them correctly.. Things that look like the Gospel but aren't. Things that are just familiar enough to trick us into thinking we can serve more than one master. Things that don't come from love and justice, and repair, but from their enemies. (for examples, see the news)

But they are seeds sown to deceive us. If it were a movie, I'd call it "The Empire strikes back." And those seeds are sown when we fall asleep and stop paying attention to the field. That's why Jesus elsewhere puts so much emphasis on staying awake.

Now Jesus changes his allegorical points a bit from the parable of the Sower and the Seed to the Parable of the Wheat and the Tares. In the first, the followers of Jesus are the dirt, and in

the second they are the good seed. But in both we have that very human combination of love and fear, weakness and power, wisdom and foolishness all mixed together – which tells us again that we are in the present.

Overall we have a struggle over what kind of fruit humanity will yield. Will it nourish God's creation or kill it? Will it nurture God's beloved community or Empire's selfish individualism? And is our role passive or active? What does it mean to trust God to do the sorting, and the judging and the burning, instead of making that our primary task?

That's also part of the caution in these parables. As church we have historically spent far too much time trying to figure out who should be in and who should be out, than asking how shall we open the doors to God's house as wide as possible. And as church, we have often kidded ourselves into thinking we were watering God's word, when we were actually fertilizing something else – privilege, power, domination, exclusion. And when that false wheat becomes visible for what it truly is, it is mean work, very mean work to get rid of it. I think we are finding right now that it requires immense faith and humility to allow God to prune us, to weed us, to tend us in a way that truly repairs the garden.

Paul, the great community organizer of the early church, made it his mission to help Christian Communities do just that. In his letters he repeatedly answers the question: how we are to be church in a world like this? In this exquisite passage from his letter to the Romans he reminds them and us how we live as wheat among tares, or to change the metaphor a bit, how to bring to birth something wonderful in the midst of chaos.

Paul is also the early church's midwife, and he reminds us of what animates us as the body of Christ – and that is the Spirit of God that we have invited to live within us. That makes us children of God, that makes us inheritors of a better future. Paul will remind the Corinthians that that also makes us ambassadors of Christ in this world. We are not to live passively waiting for a better future for ourselves. We are to let the Spirit do its powerful work through us to bring to birth something new.

The Earth is in labor, Paul tells the Roman Church, and it is anticipating a birth that repairs and restores and manifests love. It labors still, and we labor still as part of it. But labor is an act of hope. And hope is a belief in the good that is being born.

“For in hope we were saved,” Paul reminds us. “Now hope that is seen is not hope. For who hopes for what is seen? But if we hope for what we do not see, we wait for it with patience.”

And part of living in joyful hope, in expectant patience, is learning to rejoice in every sign of the presence of God that pushes through the cracks, that emerges from fertile ground, that makes itself distinct from the weeds around it. There are signs of those in the news as well. Jesus' parables are springing up everywhere.

Let those of us, who have ears to hear, listen.