

WORSHIP FOR SUNDAY, JULY 30, 2023

Pacific Presbyterian Church and First Presbyterian Church of Union, Missouri

17th SUNDAY in ORDINARY TIME

GATHERING

PRELUDE

CALL TO WORSHIP

One: Come, people of God, to give thanks and sing!
All: **We come in remembrance of all that God has done for us.**
One: All around us the world shouts God's praises!
All: **Let us join in the song of thanksgiving to God.**

***OPENING HYMN** "This Is My Father's World" GtG 370

1. **This is my Father's world,
and to my listening ears
all nature sings, and round me rings
the music of the spheres.
This is my Father's world;
I rest me in the thought
of rocks and trees, of skies and seas,
his hand the wonders wrought.**
2. **This is my Father's world.
O, let me ne'er forget
that though the wrong seems oft so strong,
God is the ruler yet.
This is my Father's world.
The battle is not done:
Jesus who died shall be satisfied,
and earth and heaven be one.**

Words: Maltbie D. Babcock, 1901

Music: Franklin L. Sheppard, 1915; harm. Edward Shippen Barnes, 1926, alt.
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UNISON PRAYER OF CONFESSION

We confess, O God, that our lives are a mixture of weeds and good seeds. The weeds choke us and limit our will to respond. The good seeds we admire and want to nourish. Yet we have allowed weeds to grow in our lives. Our focus has drifted from the harvest you intend to the fears and greed that hold us hostage. Save us from our futile striving after our own advantage. Forgive our misplaced allegiance when we settle for weeds. Reshape our will to conform with your intentions for us, that we may grow in likeness to Jesus Christ, in whose name we make our prayer. Amen.

SILENT CONFESSION

ASSURANCE OF PARDON

One: God does love us. We know this for certain because of Jesus Christ.
All: **In Christ, God seeks the lost and forgives the sinner and loves the world.**
One: So let us hear and believe this wonderful, good news.
All: **That in Jesus Christ we are forgiven. In Jesus Christ we are loved. Alleluia! Amen!**

THE PEACE

One: The peace of Christ be with you.
All: **And also with you.**
(From your seat, a brief sign of peace may be shared: a wave of the hand, a nod of the head, etc.)

THE WORD

SCRIPTURE READING Matthew 13:24-30,36-43

MATTHEW 13:24-30,36-43 (various)

²⁴ Jesus told them another parable: "The kingdom of heaven is like someone who planted good seed in his field. ²⁵ While people were sleeping, an enemy came and planted weeds among the wheat and went away. ²⁶ When the stalks sprouted and bore grain, then the weeds also appeared.

²⁷ "The servants of the landowner came and said to him, 'Master, did you not plant good seed in your field? Then how is it that it has weeds?'

²⁸ "An enemy has done this,' he answered.

"The servants said to him, 'Do you want us to go and gather them?'

²⁹ "But he replied, 'No; for in gathering the weeds you would uproot the wheat along with them. ³⁰ Let both grow side by side until the harvest. And at harvesttime I will say to the harvesters, "First gather the weeds and tie them together in bundles to be burned. But bring the wheat into my barn." "'

...
³⁶ Jesus left the crowds and went into the house. His disciples came to him and said, "Explain to us the parable of the weeds in the field."

³⁷ Jesus replied, "The one who plants the good seed is the Son of Humankind; ³⁸ the field is the world, and the good seed are the children of the kingdom; the weeds are the children of the evil one, ³⁹ and the enemy who sowed them is the devil; the harvest is the end of the age, and the reapers are angels. ⁴⁰ Just as the weeds are collected and burned up with fire, so will it be at the end of the age. ⁴¹ The Son of Humankind will send his angels, and they will gather out of his kingdom all things that cause people to fall away and all who do evil things, ⁴² and they will throw them into the furnace of fire, where there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth. ⁴³ Then the righteous will shine like the sun in their Father's kingdom. Whoever has ears, let them hear."

PRAYER FOR ILLUMINATION

SERMON "Be the Wheat" by Pastor Bill Vincent
(this is not a cereal commercial)



**One of these things is not like the others
One of these things just doesn't belong
Can you tell which thing is not like the others
By the time I finish my song?**

(“One of These Things,” *The Sesame Street Book & Record*)

No, this is not Sunday morning Sesame Street.

But can you tell the difference?

Talitha J. Arnold shares about those ‘tares’, those weeds of which we speak.

The bearded darnel is a devil of a weed. ... bearded darnel has no virtues. Its roots surround the roots of good plants, sucking up precious nutrients and scarce water, making it impossible to root it out without damaging the good crop. Above ground, darnel looks identical to wheat, until it bears seed.

(*Feasting on the Word*, “Pastoral Perspective”)

So the servants ask, “*Do you want us to go and gather them?*” after the weeds become noticeable.

And the landowner says, “*No... Let both grow side by side till the harvest.*”

There is an ‘un-prettiness’ in the world, a weediness in the world. That can be hard for us, sometimes, to distinguish the weediness from the good.

And Jesus says very clearly that, in the end, the ultimate distinction, the ultimate decision, will not be made by us.

Of course, does that mean just anything goes?

No.

Yes, there is an ultimate reckoning.

And yes there are places and times for discernment and distinction and even discipline.

But still, that can be difficult.

And we wonder if maybe the best thing to do is leave everything as is and let everything go as it will.

But maybe the more pertinent question for us here today is , “What do we do now?”

Before that ultimate decision by God – not us – in the meantime, what do we do now?

And in some ways I think the response is fairly simple, though not always that simple.

The response is ... BE THE WHEAT.

If we see and discern that there are weeds around, and we don’t want the weeds, then we need to be the wheat.

And how do we go about that?

Well, it just so happens I have some thoughts and suggestions about that.

One possibility is for us to TAKE AFTER THE MASTER.

The master of the wheat, the master of the field, the master of all, who, notice, is not an impatient person. But is a very patient person.

That word ‘patience’ can also be translated ‘long-suffering’. And yes, sometimes, that’s exactly what it feels like: *long-suffering*.

But it's a patience the master exercises. And perhaps we should, too.
Patience, with a huge dose of tolerance, precisely because we're not good at making those distinctions between wheat and weed.

Amy Grant sings a song:

**... there's so much good in the worst of us
So much bad in the best of us
It never makes sense for any of us
To criticize the rest of us
We'll just find what we're looking for**

("Find What You're Looking For," *Somewhere Down the Road*)

If we're looking for someone to be nasty, we will find that.

If we're looking for someone to be disagreeable – especially with us – that's what we'll find.

If we're looking for someone to be intolerable and unreasonable, that's what we'll find.

We're not so good at discerning that good from that bad, that just versus that unjust.

So we need to be tolerant, even as the disciples recognized and were able to look back on their life and notice their own betrayal and denial and unfaithfulness. And if they could see that in their own life, maybe they could recognize that's what's going on in someone else's life as well.

And remember: our Master ate with 'sinners and tax collectors'. In some ways a shorthand, a very definition of weediness in life.

He did not become a weed. But he ate with them and fellowshiped with them and was present with them ... and was gentle with them.

And perhaps we could do so with others, and ourselves.

As we take after the Master.

Another thing we could do in this interim, in this 'now' time, is FOCUS ON THE GOOD.

And how do we know what the good is?

Look to Jesus Christ. There it is. That's the good.

Learn from him what it is to be wheat, and do that.

If the wheat – or whatever it is that we want to grow – if it is nourished and strengthened, if it is cared for and tended to, watered and fed so that it is strong, it can blunt and stunt the growth of weeds. For if the wheat is using all the nutrients and all the energy to grow and to be strong, then there is little for the weeds to draw upon for their strength and life.

Someone has noted, "**Feed your faith, and your fears will starve to death.**"

Perhaps too if we feed the wheat-ness of our lives then the weeds will starve to death.

Turn our backs on some of those bad habits and ways of ours. Not that we totally ignore them; for if we totally ignore them, we give them the voice (and power) of that silence.

But if we don't give them the time, if we don't give them that energy, but instead give that energy and time to that good within us and within others, then we nurture that good: we feed it, we strengthen it.

As we focus on the good.

And then NURTURE THE ENVIRONMENT.

Gary Peluso-Verdend reminds us that we all have some of that wheat-ness as well as that weediness in us. And he suggests that because of that what is ‘fitting action’ for us is to

attend as a community and as individuals to that which increases the potential for holiness. (*Feasting on the Word*, “Theological Perspective”)

What are we doing to nurture that good, to nurture that wheat-ness around us?

It highlights the importance of our environment, the importance of our community.

Addicts, who go through treatment and a long process of rehabilitation, as soon as they leave are in danger. For if they return to the very environment, the very community in which they lived, without other forces, without other influences to strengthen them – if they return to the very environment that nurtured them in their addiction, then they will fall right back into their old habits and behaviors and their old ways of thinking and choosing and living.

In an abusive relationship, one person can tell the other that they are worthless. And given time, that person will come to believe it.

But what if they heard something different? What if they heard a word that told them they were worthwhile, that they were loved, that they were precious. And told them not only in words but also deeds and simple presence.

A colleague had been invited to moderate the Session of another church. She had heard horrendous stories of how this Session was so divisive, always bickering. But when she got there, everything went just fine. By her simple presence, it made a difference in that entire environment.

Negative behaviors can be contagious, yes. But good, positive behaviors can be contagious as well.

There’s a large study that was done a number of years ago. And from that study a book was written about children and youth, kids and teens – what they needed to succeed. One of the key points in that was the importance of adult relationships. To begin with, having good relationships with adults that were not their parents – sorry parents, but we understand – the importance of adult relationships besides their parents; and the importance of those relationships modeling positive, responsible behavior. That was something key in their environment, in their life, in their relationships that kids and teens needed to succeed ... and that we need as well. (Peter L. Benson, Ph.D., Judy Galbraith, M.A., and Pamela Espeland, *What Kids Need to Succeed: Proven, Practical Ways to Raise Good Kids*, Asset #3; *What Teens Need to Succeed: Proven, Practical Ways to Shape Your Own Future*, Asset #14)

So what will we do – how will we live, how will we respond, how will we relate to others – in order to nurture an environment in which wheat is more likely to grow and bear fruit, than are weeds?

Nurture the environment.

And as we take after the master and we focus on the good and we nurture the environment, let us never forget GRACE.

The grace of the master.

The transformative grace of our Lord and God.

Douglas Hare reminds us of the parable and that whole point that we're really not up to separating the wheat and the weeds, "**Only God can make such judgments,**" he writes. He says,

In the meantime we must be more patient with one another. Taken in this way, the story becomes a parable of grace.

Then he makes this wondrous insight:

In the strange world of the parable where separation is graciously postponed, it may even be possible for weeds to become wheat! (*Matthew*, Interpretation series, p.155)

Now wouldn't that be something?

Something not only for others, but for us as well.

"For weeds to become wheat."

Through patience and long-suffering.

Through accentuating the positive and focusing on the good.

Through positive reinforcement and nurturing that environment and that community.

"For weeds to become wheat," by the grace of our master, who is patient with us all.

Thanks be to God!

***HYMN** "There's a Wideness in God's Mercy" GtG 435

1. **There's a wideness in God's mercy,
like the wideness of the sea.
There's a kindness in God's justice,
which is more than liberty.
There is no place where earth's sorrows
are more felt than up in heaven.
There is no place where earth's failings
have such kindly judgment given.**

2. **For the love of God is broader
than the measures of the mind.
And the heart of the Eternal
is most wonderfully kind.
If our love were but more faithful,
we would gladly trust God's Word,
and our lives reflect thanksgiving
for the goodness of our Lord.**

Words: Frederick William Faber, 1854, alt. Music: Dutch melody; arr.
Julius Rontgen, ca. 1906. *Public Domain*

***AFFIRMATION OF FAITH**

(next page...)

**We trust in God,
whom Jesus called Abba, Father.
In sovereign love God created the world good
and makes everyone equally in God's image,
male and female, of every race and people,
to live as one community.
But we rebel against God; we hide from our Creator.
Ignoring God's commandments,
we violate the image of God in others and ourselves,
accept lies as truth,
exploit neighbor and nature,
and threaten death to the planet entrusted to our care.
We deserve God's condemnation.
Yet God acts with justice and mercy to redeem creation.
In everlasting love,
the God of Abraham and Sarah chose a covenant people
to bless all families of the earth.
Hearing their cry,
God delivered the children of Israel
from the house of bondage.
Loving us still,
God makes us heirs with Christ of the covenant.
Like a mother who will not forsake her nursing child,
like a father who runs to welcome the prodigal home,
God is faithful still.**

(from *A Brief Statement of Faith*, Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) Book of Confessions)

PRAYERS OF THE PEOPLE

One: Lord, in your mercy...
All: ...hear our prayer.

THE LORD'S PRAYER (Contemporary)

**Our Father in heaven,
hallowed be your name,
your kingdom come,
your will be done,
on earth as in heaven.
Give us today our daily bread.
Forgive us our sins
as we forgive those who sin against us.
Save us from the time of trial
and deliver us from evil.
For the kingdom, the power, and the glory are yours
now and forever. Amen.**

OFFERING

Invitation

Reflection

**Unison Prayer of Dedication*

God of grace and embrace, we thank you for your mercy toward us, your provision for us, your guidance of us. In gratitude we offer what we carry in our hearts and our pockets. Receive also the offering of ourselves; and use all that we have and all that we are to share your good news and embody your grace, all to your glory. In Christ's name we pray. Amen.

SENDING

***CLOSING HYMN** “Lord, Dismiss Us with Your Blessing” GtG 546

1. **Lord, dismiss us with your blessing;
fill our hearts with joy and peace;
let us each, your love possessing,
triumph in redeeming grace.
O refresh us,
O refresh us,
traveling through this wilderness.**

2. **Thanks we give and adoration
for your gospel's joyful sound;
may the fruits of your salvation
in our hearts and lives abound.
Ever faithful,
ever faithful
to your truth may we be found.**

3. **Savior, when your love shall call us,
from our struggling pilgrim way,
let no fear of death appall us,
glad your summons to obey.
May we ever,
may we ever
reign with you in endless day.**

Words: Attr. John Fawcett, 1773, alt.; stanza 3, alt. Geoffrey Thring, 1880, alt.
Music: Sicilian melody, 18th cent.
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***CHARGE AND BLESSING**

One: ...And let the gathered people of God say...
All: ...**Amen.**

POSTLUDE

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