



**SAINT THOMAS CHURCH FIFTH AVENUE**  
**in the City of New York**  
*The Reverend Canon Carl F. Turner, Rector*  
**[www.SaintThomasChurch.org](http://www.SaintThomasChurch.org)**

**Sunday, July 19, 2020**  
*The Seventh Sunday After Pentecost*

*Solemn Eucharist*

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A Sermon by  
The Reverend Matthew Moretz, *Associate Rector*  
*on*  
Isaiah 44:6-8 and Matthew 13:24-30, 36-43  
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### **Gardening Without Weeding**

What does it take for the works God to take root and grow? Is it seeing God appear right in front of you? Is it hearing the very words of God from on high? Is it getting knocked off your horse and blinded by shock and pain? This question occupied Jesus' teaching in a lot of ways. The Gospels show us Jesus' consistent exasperation at how God's communication can miss the mark, how He could speak plainly, and the crowds, his rivals, and even his closest companions would miss the point completely. He would preach peace, and it would be seen as sedition. He would heal, and it would be declared the work of devils. A great multitude could hang on his every word, yet there would be not a single ear to hear what he was saying, not really. This capacity for us to overlook and mistake things and people that are right in front of us is really beyond reckoning. Our judgment is so flawed. Our discernment: a tragedy of errors. And yet, even knowing the Cross was in store, Jesus kept trying, kept pushing to get through to us, and even now, casting death aside he still keeps pushing to get through to us, to take root, and grow.

We know, from last week's parable, that God, the great sower of seed, is casting that seed, that encapsulated potential for growth, casting it on every type of ground. The good soil, of course, but also the stony ground, the path way, and the thorny soil. Ultimately, in that parable, it is, indeed, only in the good soil that the seed takes root and can grow, but you can't say that the gardener didn't try. Does this gardener cast his aim wastefully or freely? Carelessly or carefully? Is this gardener tragically hopeless at his job, or fantastically hopeful, ever willing to reach into his seed bag for all eternity until the job is done or he breathes his last?

Now, remember, Jesus did not preach that parable from a mount, or in a synagogue, he preached it from a boat just off the shore of the sea of Galilee. The crowd had pressed on him with such intensity that this was the safest place for him to be. And standing on the pebbly beach, the great audience strained to listen to the Parable of the Sower over the water lapping at their feet. Right after that, as he continued to rock in the boat, Jesus tells them this second parable from today's reading where a sower, perhaps the same one, has planted his seed in very good soil. Indeed, an entire field of it, in this case wheat. This gardener has had a success story that has taken root and is ready to grow.

He has done everything right. But then, something horrible takes place in the night. The sower doesn't just have to concern himself with avoiding rocks, and thorns, and careless path trotters. There is searching, willful malice out there, too. An enemy comes to do harm to what would, on its own, thrive. A rival gardener sneaks into his field, twisting the same power of the sower, scatters weeds among the crop. Not just any weed, but an insidious weed like "darnel" that actually mimics the look of wheat, especially if planted at the same time, growing alongside the crop until it is too late. This is heartbreak of the image: God's work has taken root and is growing, and yet that work is threatened because something else has been sown, some other crop, some other purpose has taken root, and grows, draining resources,

taking up space, undermining the good purposes by co-opting the good soil to make a kind of poison, intoxicating in daniel's case, maddening.

The field hands are keen to pull out this poison and this evil intention by the root, to protect the wheat and purify the field. But what does the farmer tell them? On this farm, we aren't going to weed out the weeds. Weeds are no good, of course, but *weeding*? Weeding is much worse. The roots of the wheat and the tares are so intertwined, since birth. Even if you pull out only the tares, no easy task since they look so similar, the wheat will be pulled out, clod by clod, as well.

The gardener is not just telling them that their judgment is flawed, but the structure of reality is such that any form of judgment, no matter how precise, will have unforeseeable collateral damage. Above ground, it will look like you are being precise and surgical, but, under the ground, at the root, you will destroy untold good in destroying the bad. In seeking to root out evil, you will complete the desire of that evil one who sowed the poison in the night. Or in other words, it is in weeding that you become a higher order of weed.

This time around, the parable, for me, is not about what kind of soil you are, good or bad, or what kind of plant you are, food or poison, it is about what kind of field hand you are, what will your hand do in the field that is not your own, and that you didn't plant, and yet is your livelihood: a field full of daily bread and good fruit, yet beset by evils seen and unseen that are not your doing, what will your hand do? Root out? Or let be?

In a world riddled with affliction, our field's farmer calls us not to confident, decisive action but to confident, decisive patience. To let things be. To let things grow together until the harvest when all can be sorted out properly.

On the surface, this agricultural and spiritual plan looks so impotent, but at the root, our *letting be* or another way to translate the Greek *aphete*, our *suffering* things as they grow, is the only way to participate in the salvage operation of God. And this is not just plants, this is very much about letting people be, suffering with the ups and downs of people as they grow. After all, if we were honest with ourselves, if we have humility as a virtue, sorting people out, rooting out all of those weeds, this is no job for field hands in ordinary time. This is a job for the reapers at the great harvest. Judgement is not for humans fogged by time, but for the holy angels who course through time and space with no horizon and perfect sight aloft upon nothing but the Truth and the Spirit, like them hidden until the end.

*Letting be* requires so very much of us. It is very much not a sign of weakness. Like some yoga poses where the stillness required demands the entire body and mind and strength, maintaining such a posture, even while provoked, may be the most powerful thing we do, or, I should say, the most powerful thing we join in doing with the angels and with God. Jesus longs for us to give the judgment of others back to God, or back to God's reapers when all is said and done, so that we might not be a blundering obstacle to the truth, but a people who made straight its path with our mercy and our grace, linking our lives to the ultimate mercy and grace of God.

And this patience that Jesus asks of us today, our forestalling of judgement and reactive violence, our mercy serves to align us with God's mercy. And our pardoning of an injury, our not pulling out someone like a weed from the earth, gives us common cause with all those spiritual forces who aim for nothing to be lost, who scatter the seed of God on every sort of ground.

Are you confused by the world? Are you puzzled by what other people do, and why? Good. That's a start. For heaven help us if you think you have it all figured out. This is where the mystery of the world serves in your favor. Because it is not over until it is over. Our blessings ripple out beyond our horizon, but so do our curses. They can take on a life of their own. And you don't know where your prayers and hopes and dreams end and the actions of inspired and encouraged people begin. You don't know the damage you can do by meaning well. The stakes are high for every one of us. And so it is in places and times like these, we pray to God for the strength and patience and endurance to live out God's mercy in every field in which we toil, so that we might be able to join with Christ in those last words he left us from the Cross, "Father forgive them, Father *let them be*, for they know not what they do."