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Beauty in the Field
Church of the Good Shepherd, Athens, OH

I have always loved wildflowers. I am fortunate to have grown up in a beautiful part of the country in a house with a large yard next to a wood that were both full of all kinds of flora and fauna. As a young child, I could spend hours wandering through the field and the woods picking bunches of wildflowers.

I have a memory of a time when my grandparents were at my house and I picked a huge bouquet of wildflowers for my grandma. My six or seven-year-old self thought it was a gorgeous bouquet full of colorful flowers: white, orange, pink, shades of yellow and lavender. There flowers of all shapes. To me, it was a joyful collection and I was happy giving it to my grandma, who received it with an obvious display of pleasure. She thanked me as she admired the colorful mix of flowers I had gathered for her.

But my joy was quickly squelched when my grandfather looked at the flowers and declared, "It's just a bunch of weeds."

I was crestfallen. I thought I had done something good, but when my grandfather said my beloved flowers were nothing but weeds, I felt foolish and somewhat ashamed for giving my grandma weeds.

Because we all know weeds are bad, right? Weeds are plants that cause harm. Why else would every gardener I've ever known, including my father and great-grandmother, spend hours and hours pulling weeds out of their gardens?

Weeds show up in today's Gospel, where Jesus tells the parable of the wheat and the weeds. This parable is only found in Matthew's Gospel, and it seems the author wanted those of us reading the parable to get something specific out of it by giving us an interpretation along with the parable itself.

Scholars have differing views on the interpretations of parables in Matthew's Gospel. Some point out the interpretation is evidence Jesus felt he couldn't speak directly in public and saved the informational version for his closest followers. Others say the interpretation is the author's alone and was meant for the select individuals who were part of their church community. Still others say the interpretation is evidence that even Jesus' followers felt frustration that Jesus didn't tell his message in a definite and succinct way.

Parables are not definite, not even the short ones. Parables invite us to ponder, to think, to consider, to ruminate on what Jesus was talking about. Where explanations give information, parables give us permission to be curious. Without explanation, there is a possibility that people will hear or see different things in the same parable. Perhaps the author of Matthew's Gospel was uneasy with such possibility or had a community that needed definition for Jesus' stories to begin to see the possibilities in them.

Either way, today we have a parable Jesus told to get people thinking about the kingdom of heaven. That's how parables often start: The kingdom of heaven is like... Just like today's parable: "the kingdom of heaven is like a sower who sowed good seeds in his field. But during the night, while everyone was sleeping, someone else came and sowed bad seeds, which grew together with the good. When the servants or workers noticed that there were weeds growing in the field, they offered to pull them up. But the sower, the guy who owned the field and the plants told them to leave the field alone, to let everything grow together, stating they didn't want to risk losing a single good plant in the work of weeding. And when it comes to judgment; that will happen after the workers have harvested the field, after everything has been allowed to grow."

At first glance it is a parable that seems to be about noticing the weeds and the desire to remove them, but God wants us to wait instead. But maybe there is more to this little story. Whenever I ponder a parable I like to go back to the very beginning, to the part where Jesus says, "the kingdom of heaven is like..." Because I believe in those first words is a key to what Jesus was playfully getting at. In this parable, Jesus said the kingdom of heaven is like *someone who sows good seed*...Jesus didn't say *God* was like someone who sowed the good seeds, but that the kingdom of heaven is like someone who sowed good seeds and is the same someone who told the servants to hold off on the weeding, trusting judgment to happen at harvest time.

Remember, part of the mystery of Jesus' resurrection is that through Jesus' death and resurrection the kingdom of heaven is here with us on earth, and it is coming, it isn't here completely, it has been sown like a seed and is slowly growing in the world. It also happens to be part of the reality of this world that other kingdoms have been sown in the world too: kingdoms of consumerism, kingdoms of power and prestige, kingdoms of violence and fear. And these kingdoms are all mixed up with each other, we can see evidence of them every day.

Maybe Jesus' parable isn't an invitation or a mandate to wait for the end of time when God's judgment will finally be completed. Maybe this parable is an invitation to consider the field where all these kingdoms grow together with God's kingdom of heaven. Maybe this field is less like a neatly planted row after row field of a farm or garden and is more like the fields of wildflowers from my childhood, full of color and shapes and smells. Maybe this parable is Jesus' invitation to delight in the beauty in the world instead of quickly labeling people or places as wheat or weed, good or bad. But to look instead for the beauty and growth and possibility of God's kingdom of heaven wherever we find it.

This parable reminds of the beautiful viewpoint of Bryan Stevenson, a lawyer and the founder of the Equal Justice Initiative in Montgomery Alabama. Bryan works with people on death row, many of whom were wrongly or unjustly sentenced. In the more than forty years of doing such hard work, Bryan has seen and experienced a great deal of pain and injustice. He's seen the ugliness of greed, ignorance, poverty, and racism. He knows the pain of loss. And he has seen some truly beautiful human beings and witnessed their growth, transformation and redemption.

This has led him to believe that none of us are the worst thing we have ever done. In his powerful memoir *Just Mercy A Story of Justice and Redemption*, Stevenson writes it isn't the bad things we've done that define us. Too often it can be too easy to think of someone who lied as a liar, who stole as a thief, and to not make room for the possibility that they might repent or change. It is a sin to deny folks the possibility that they will be transformed by God's mercy; and to deny ourselves of this same possibility. Because he has seen it happen and describes it in his memoir.

To me, that sounds like the kingdom of heaven growing in a field with all kinds of other kingdoms, and just by being there, just by growing, a little more redemption grows and spreads too.

Maybe this parable is warning that if we only focus on weeds and the removal of them, before long all we will see are weeds. Perhaps our fear of weeds choking out the wheat can belittle the beauty and strength and wildness of the wheat in Jesus' parable. Maybe the kingdom of heaven is stronger than we imagine, maybe it doesn't need our protective weeding. Maybe the kingdom of heaven wants our delight in its beauty and strength and wildness amidst all the other kingdoms of the world. When I think of those beautiful wildflowers I gave my grandmother so many years ago, I still remember their vibrancy. It took me years of learning about the importance wildflowers have to the ecosystem, especially for pollinators like bees,

butterflies and birds, that I realized my grandfather's judgment of the bouquet I gave my grandma was given in haste and ignorance. He hadn't spent enough time admiring, watching, and learning to truly distinguish between a weed and a wildflower and as a result he missed the beauty I delighted in.

I am not trying to judge or criticize my grandfather, I am only observing what might be why it is the nature of the kingdom of heaven to hold off judgment and wait until there has been opportunity for the possibilities to grow, change and bloom in the midst of the many kingdoms in the world.

As we experience the frightening increase in the daily number of new and active cases of COVID-19 here in Athens County, maybe there is something in the wisdom of Jesus' parable of the patient sower who watches the field. Somedays it can feel like all we can do is watch the daily reports of the new cases of COVID-19 and feel the stress and anxiety with each report. And while we do need to pay attention to this information, we could also widen our view. To notice who is being diagnosed, and to look for ways the kingdom of heaven is present and growing in the midst of all the fear or worry and increasing cases of the virus here in Athens.

I can't help but notice most of the people here in Athens who are being diagnosed are people in their twenties and late teens. There may be many reasons for this, and we can make educated guesses or make judgments out of anger because the actions of one group puts others in jeopardy. Or we might notice this is the age group we spent a great deal of time with before the pandemic. Many of the people who came to our Wednesday Free Lunch, stopped in the chapel, got a cup of coffee from our CrossRoads Café coffee shop ministry, or who walked by the church every day were in this age group. Since we have this connection, maybe we could say a prayer for them instead of making judgments.

Offering free face masks from the Tree of Giving in front of the church building is another way to respond to this crisis that offers love instead of anger or fear, and is perhaps one of the ways the kingdom of heaven is growing in the field of our neighborhood. In the spirit of today's parable, I invite you to take a look around you: where are you noticing the beauty of wildflowers in the fields where you are? When you notice the beauty, pay attention to it. That is where God is, and where God's kingdom of heaven is growing from the seeds Jesus planted.