

**Psalm 86: 11-17**

Teach me your way, O Lord, that I may walk in your truth; give me an undivided heart to revere your name.

I give thanks to you, O Lord my God, with my whole heart, and I will glorify your name for ever.

For great is your steadfast love towards me; you have delivered my soul from the depths of Sheol.

O God, the insolent rise up against me; a band of ruffians seeks my life, and they do not set you before them.

But you, O Lord, are a God merciful and gracious, slow to anger and abounding in steadfast love and faithfulness.

Turn to me and be gracious to me; give your strength to your servant; save the child of your serving-maid.

Show me a sign of your favor, so that those who hate me may see it and be put to shame, because you, Lord, have helped me and comforted me.

**Matthew 13: 24-30**

He 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.” ’

**Matthew 13: 36-43**

Then he 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!

**“The Man Behind the Curtain”**

**Rev. Pam Everhart**

**July 20, 2008**

A few years ago my husband turned forty on a Sunday, and I happened to be running the slides that day, and so I had a lot of embarrassing pictures of him up there. I hope Lynne doesn't do that on my forty-first birthday.

One of my favorite films of all time is from back in the late 1980s when I was in college. The film is *No Way Out*. Have you heard of that film? Kevin Costner, Gene Hackman? Well, this is a spoiler alert. I'm going to tell you the whole thing. Kevin Costner plays Lt. Commander Tom Farrell, who is a high-profile Navy officer that works at the Department of Defense, and Gene Hackman is the Defense Department Secretary, and these men are involved in a love triangle, only Gene Hackman doesn't know about Kevin Costner, Tom Farrell. And this love triangle ends in this woman's death at the hands of the Defense Secretary. They decide they need to frame someone for it, because the Defense Secretary can't go down for this, and so in the sweep of the house they find a film, like one of those Polaroid pictures, this is the Eighties, right? with a negative slip. All they see is that. There's an image they know is a man, but they can't tell who it is. So they're going to use the Defense Department computers to try to enhance the image and find out who it is. Well, it's Lt. Commander Farrell, and he's in charge of finding out who he is, and the Defense Department decides they need a reason for doing this, so they decide to make the person they're looking for on the film, Uri, who is the most legendary Soviet spy of all time. It's never been proven that he exists, but people assume that there's a Soviet spy that's in the higher-ups of the U.S. government.

So they decide that this man is going to be our Uri, whether or not he is, is irrelevant to the Defense Department. Well, he's sort of caught. There's no way out for Lt. Commander Farrell, and so the plot goes through the twists and turns of him trying to figure out how to avoid being found out, when obviously his picture is on file and being enhanced every day in the way 1980s computers could enhance things, over days. At the end of the movie, Lt. Commander Farrell is in a house, in a rural part of Virginia, outside of DC, speaking in fluent Russian to these people behind glass, and slowly but surely it dawns on the audience that Lt. Commander Farrell is really indeed Uri, the Soviet spy. A friend of mine in my dorm dragged me to see the movie, and she had already seen it, so at the end of the movie she watched me instead of the screen, to see my reaction, and everybody else in the theater is this way too. There's that moment of, "Are you kidding me? He's really a Soviet spy?" I mean, he's Kevin Costner. So there's this whole shocked disbelief, disillusionment, betrayal that goes on with the audience with this film. I love this movie, I own it. It's not quite the same at home, but there's still that shock at the end when you find out that Lt. Commander Farrell, this decorated Navy officer, is in fact a high-profile Soviet spy. Movies are great at that kind of shock or reveal.

How about when you discover at the end of *The Sixth Sense* that Bruce Willis is actually one of the dead people that Haley Joel Osment has been seeing throughout the film. That's another shocker ending that you don't expect. How do you feel when you see a film that has a twist and the main character turns out to be something totally unexpected? My favorite kind of film, it's very exciting, it's a very fun movie to go see, but it does make you squirm in your seat a little more than you want, maybe. When it happens in real life, it's a bit of a different story. When folks in our lives turn out to be something

other than what we expect them to be, it can be disillusioning, even heartbreaking. All of us have experienced this on one level or another. Perhaps it is the partner or spouse that you really thought you knew, that you find having an affair. Perhaps it's the son or daughter that you had assumed was passing all his classes or her classes at college, but instead is spending more time passed out in the frat house. Perhaps it's the friend that you made that you assume is a good guy, but then one night you see him on the evening news, arrested for a pretty hard-core film.

There are any number of people masquerading around among us, who seem to be one thing on the surface, but behind the scenes are something else altogether. What do we do with that? Well, the parable today speaks to this. You may think it's a story about all the weeds that you can't get out of your yard, I know that's the first place I went when I read it. But it's really story about good and bad living life together. The story is about weeds that grow up among the wheat, and the servants who want to pluck out the weeds so as not to ruin the wheat. Have you ever noticed, though, when you start picking weeds out of you're yard, there are some behind you, laughing, getting ready to come up out of the ground? That's what they do in my yard, anyway. Well, Jesus in this story tells the servants to leave the weeds alone. Now, this is good news is you're tired of that. Leave the weeds alone, let them grow until the harvest, together. Let them both grow together, the story says, until the harvest. This parable probably relates more to us than just about people that disappoint us. It can also relate to all those unexpected, unplanned, and sometimes tragic life circumstances that we encounter when we think everything is going just fine, thank you very much.

This past Thursday, David Dalke and I went to a funeral for one of our United Methodist clergy. He served the people in the Kingsburg and Hudson areas, and he died tragically and very unexpectedly in a car accident. He was driving, just like we all do, on a Wednesday afternoon to a dinner appointment. His car swerved off the lane, went over onto the median, there was a head-on collision. We don't know much about what happened, really. He didn't seem to have a lot of outside physical damage, the family said, but suddenly he was dead, age 50. Beloved clergy, son, brother, spouse, father, and grandfather. An unexpected, out-of-nowhere twist of fate, an ending no-one wants or expects. Parents were there burying their son, their second son, it turns out, they buried their other one in 1981. It's out of order. It's not how things are supposed to happen. I saw these parents saying goodbye to their second son. I saw a wife saying goodbye to a husband on the brink of their 30<sup>th</sup> wedding anniversary. A youth spoke at his funeral. She spoke of all the things that Pastor Keith had meant to their community, but especially to the youth, not just the youth of that church, but the whole youth in Weld Central High School, it's a small town after all. She was thoughtful, she was eloquent, and really, she gave the most beautiful witness I have ever heard someone give to someone else's life. But do you know what? Her life was not supposed to include that moment. Her pastor wasn't supposed to be dead at 50.

Well, what does Jesus want us to do when all these bad things happen, when these weeds crop up among our carefully sown lives? We want to shout from the rooftops, "God, why, why do you let these things happen over and over again?" Now, when telling a story, a

parable, like Jesus does in this Scripture, Jesus usually just lets it sit there among the people. He tells a story, and then in classic Jesus form, leaves and goes in the house, and he does that in this story too. He tells a story and then he goes in the house. And that's usually where we're left, with the crowd standing there with their heads turned sideways, scratching their heads.

But in this Scripture passage, Matthew lets us in on a little bit more of the story. The Gospel writer today takes us inside the house with the disciples, following Jesus, behind closed doors, when they ask him to explain the parable to them. What Matthew is telling us here, we who get an inside view, a rest of the story, so to speak, of the parable, is that God is always about sowing good seed in the world. Now, there are some pretty alarming things in that Scripture about the bad being on one side where there's weeping and gnashing of teeth, and the good going into an eternal kingdom, and that's been used a lot to separate out good and bad in not-so-appropriate ways throughout the centuries in our church.

But I think what Jesus is really saying is that God outlasts all evil, because God is about eternal goodness. Jesus is telling the disciples that the world is an imperfect place, and that it will always have unexpected and unexplainable things that happen, perhaps even evil circumstances that come up. Jesus is telling the disciples, don't worry so much about that, just trust God and be faithful. Basically, Jesus is saying you really can't do anything about that unexpected, out-of-the-blue, unpredictable twists and turns of your life. It will happen. It doesn't mean we should ignore when people do bad things. There are human consequences for human actions. It doesn't mean that we should turn a blind eye to injustice around us. But I think it does mean that we can't spend a lot of precious time, that we may not have, worrying about getting rid of bad influences all around us. We can't spend a lot of precious time worrying about protecting ourselves or our children or grandchildren from all the evil influences that they will encounter. Let both of them grow together, until the harvest. Jesus wants the disciples to focus on growing and strengthening and building their own ministries. Jesus wants them to focus on helping the master to continue to sow good seed. The message of this parable is not about fear, but about hope, about growing and sowing on behalf of God. God wants us not to fear, God wants us to grow and sow. We fear, we do, it's human nature, but God is there in our fear, and God says, "Let it go, and grow for me, and sow for me, for you are my servant. You are my child. I will be with you."

In the 1939 classic film *The Wizard of Oz*, Dorothy encounters a fairy-tale land when a cyclone blows her family farmhouse from Kansas all the way to the Land of Oz. Now, you all know it looks like a beautiful land, but you've seen the movie, you know that behind every tree, danger lurks, and there's an evil witch somewhere out there floating around, out to get her. She heads down what looks like a cheerful yellow brick road, but as you know, around every corner, there's another obstacle, another sense of danger, peril. At the end, she's supposed to meet with a great and powerful and wonderful Wizard of Oz, but as you know, a great and powerful Wizard of Oz is not always what he seems. The great Wizard of Oz is exposed. Dorothy's little dog Toto goes and pulls a

curtain, and then Dorothy sees clearly that the great and powerful Wizard of Oz is in fact nothing more than a man behind a curtain, running a scam.

Our lives are filled with people like that, people who disappoint us, and bad circumstances that turn our lives upside down in a second. Jesus acknowledges that for us in this parable, and in this parable Jesus encourages us to keep moving forward, growing toward a harvest. Life is a hard garden to grow, there's no doubt about that. Pesky weeds never seem to go away. May God be with us as we seek to grow into a worthy harvest. Amen.