

Seventh Sunday after Trinity Sunday

Isaiah 44:6-8

Psalm 139: 1-11, 22-23

Romans 8:12-25

Matthew 13:24-30,36-43

St. Thomas's Anglican Church

+In the Name of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit

I may not be much of a gardener or houseplant keeper, but there is one thing that can drive people mad when they tend to plants—weeds! You have this nice garden, you are growing your lettuce, your tomatoes, your pineapples and all of the sudden you find this invasive plant that is just coming up out of nowhere. It was uninvited, it doesn't even go here! Weeds compete with your plants for water and nutrients and so to maintain a garden you have to occasionally remove the weeds.

Jesus continues to explain and describe the Kingdom of Heaven again with farming and gardening allegories, and we too dive into Jesus' parables once again to understand how to have the Kingdom of Heaven manifest within our midst. Last week, I discussed how we are called to be the good soil that allows the seeds that Christ brings to grow and thrive. When we give people that trust and safety, the seed of faith placed in their heart can begin to thrive. True relationships with God thrive in true relationships in others because we see the Spirit of God moving in and through the love shown to us and the love, we show to one another. Something beautiful can begin to grow. Now that the seed has been planted and cared for, it begins to sprout, and eventually you can see the first stalk and leaf poking its way out of the soil. But just as prepping the soil for planting can be difficult, caring for a plant can become a challenge.

Is your plant hearty and rugged and need little attention, or is it frail and allergic to tap water? Most importantly, what happens when invasive plants show up and start causing

problems? Jesus describes a farmer who planted wheat seeds and when those seeds started to grow, someone else came and planted weeds in them. The farmer decides to let both grow and will sort out the rest later. I do not know if this is appropriate farming practice or not, but once again there is a relationship and dynamic at play here between the good seeds, the weeds, the soil, and the planter. The soil is what is required for the seeds to thrive, but it can also be a place where weeds can thrive, because what are weeds except wild plants. There is both harmony and conflict, and these are elements that can exist within any community and how they are dealt with and managed will determine whether or not the seeds will thrive and be harvested or not.

As I said last week, faith is a relationship, it is a two-way street, and when we are in community with each other faith can grow and thrive. But community will always carry with it the possibility of conflict. We all have known this and encountered this with family, friends, roommates, and people we share space with. Sometimes it is over simple things, like who's turn is it to do the dishes. Sometimes it is over major things, like betrayal or worse. Sometimes it's both, the dirty dishes in the sink mask the bigger problems at stake here.

We are imperfect people, and though we often find that we are able to feel more complete in relationships, we can still butt-heads with other people because we are all sinful, shortsighted, and sometimes selfish. And where there is a thriving person, relationship, or community, there too can be challenges and conflict that we cannot easily get rid of.

One of the major points that come up as to why people are not particularly interested in church is due to the conflicts that seem to arise within our midst. Churches are seen as judgmental, hypocritical, and hostile places. Sometimes this has been a warranted critique: the televangelist who proclaims humility but flies around on their public jet, the preacher who preaches love but condemns LGBTQ people from the pulpit, or the pastor who talks about

fidelity in marriage but cheats on their spouse. And though these examples may represent a minority of people causing harm, they nonetheless create a situation where their rhetoric and actions spoils the bunch and so people do not want to go near places like churches. Weeds have grown that can choke out community and people, especially those most vulnerable and most in need of community.

However, even the more mundane issues can be divisive: how dare the church hall use green curtains instead of blue, how dare the church use one liturgy book over another, how dare this thing change, how dare this thing stay the same. To people on the inside, these kinds of things can seem like make or break issues, but outside, some of these seem rather petty and off putting.

When we invite people into our lives and into our communities, what will they see and encounter? Will they encounter the ecosystem necessary for them to grow and thrive, or will there be conflict and discord that will choke them out and send them away? In being a community that faces outward, we have to be prepared and able to receive people into a space where they are able to thrive and grow, and that means being able to look ironically inward and ask ourselves “who are we,” and “what do we want?”

When we invite people to come to church (and I hate to break it to you, you actually have to invite people to church if you want it to grow and thrive, advertising and programming can only do so much), they will see how we act, how we treat them and others, and if we actually make an effort to respectfully incorporate them into the community. They will also see quickly what kinds of conflicts or fault lines exist in a community. How we manage that conflict will say a great deal about whether or not we are able to invite people into a life with Christ.

In the Book of Common Prayer there is the Summary of the Law that goes “our Lord Jesus Christ sayeth...thou shalt love the Lord thy God with all thy heart, and all thy soul, and all thy mind, and all thy strength. This is the first and great commandment and the second is like unto it, thou shalt love thy neighbour as thyself.” These words ought to be the forefront of how we engage in our relationships with one another and with God because what is required for relationships, for faith, is love. It doesn't mean going up to a stranger and saying “I love you” before introducing yourself and saying your name (if anyone did that to me I would probably slowly back away before dashing out), but it means seeing a person as God sees them, a beloved child with their own unique story, history, and indeed future. Whether this is someone we have known for 40 years or never met, we need to be open and receptive to who they are and where they are in life.

We must engage with others with the love that Christ has for us. When it is someone new in our midst, we gently welcome them and ask them to join us for coffee to build a friendship. When it is someone we have known for many years, we express our joy and continue to deepen our relationship by sharing more of ourselves with each other. When it is someone we are in conflict with, we approach them with humility and grace and try to seek resolution both to apologize or to forgive.

These are the basic building blocks for any kind of community, and for a church it is not that much different. Hate, no matter the context, is always foolish; and love, no matter the context, is always wise. We as a church however are called to a higher standard to practice what we preach, and if we do not love God with our whole heart or love our neighbour as ourselves, then the weeds will grow up and smother the garden until nothing thrives. It may seem simple, but grudges and resentments can often last a long time but building the kingdom of God means

to set aside the conflicts and divisions that choke the community so that we can welcome all people who come seeking faith and community. The conflicts of 40 years ago are not worth fighting today.

Conflicts will always exist, but that doesn't mean that we should abandon hope and not try to resolve conflicts! Someday these conflicts will burn away and disappear but what will remain is the fruit that has managed to grow in and amidst this challenging and difficult world. People have enough problems, let's not add to that. But you may be asking, we have planted the garden and raised the plants, we have built these relationships, but what are we supposed to do with them now? Those my friends are the questions for next week where Jesus reveals what the purpose of these relationships are in the Kingdom of Heaven.

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