

GRACE TO YOU AND PEACE FROM GOD AND FROM OUR SAVIOR WHO IS JESUS THE CHRIST. AMEN.

The miracle in *this* parable is: Love Wins.

But that doesn't make it any easier to understand. Or accept. Or to act on.

Jesus' disciples themselves scratched their heads for a minute. Then they hotfooted it over to the house where Jesus was pouring an iced tea after teaching the crowds. "Really Jesus?"...the disciples ask. "The best approach is ... let it be?"

As Jesus' disciples, we're still trying to get our minds around the farmer who flings seeds with wasteful abandon only to become bird food and compost. Today we get a weed that in the agricultural world of Jesus' time was dangerous stuff. Not just an unsightly crab-grass. An insidious, elegant intruder, like the covid virus that fools our immune systems, the darnel weed is a fabulous look-alike to wheat. It comes up pretty... but when it comes time to get some grain off it, is all stalk and no show. Meanwhile, it sucks up the sun and water the *good* plants need to thrive. In real life the farmer ends up with nothing. But in God's garden, there once again remains an abundant harvest.

No wonder the disciples had questions. For the most part, we'd think God would want God's servants to patrol the garden. Be vigilant against the viruses. Be quick on the trigger with Round-up. Weed out the weedy. Do Jesus a favor!

Maybe like the favor my neighbor Walter did once. Though my vegetable gardens in the UP were compact and ordered... I kept a wildflower garden in a patch of dirt between my driveway and Walter's yard. I loved to let it run wild and see what would come up. Every year, there would be a surprise -- lupines that had leafed for years but never flowered... til that year. Black-Eyed Susans I never planted that, yes, a bird may have dropped one day, coming up as cheerful volunteers. These are hard to yank out even when they arrive out of order. They surprise and delight. They are living things.

This garden was a delight to me. But one day, I came home after work, and found my wildflower garden a patch of stubble.

Who did this? It wasn't the deer or the bunnies. It was... the weed wacker. My next door neighbor Walter had told his lawn care guy to help us out and tidy up that mess over there. "Poor Pastor Kim," he probably told him. "She's just too busy to attend to this lawn care, so we'll help her out some."

Hey. Looked like weeds to him. But I loved it! And, it was mine.

Which is where I get an inkling of what Jesus might have been getting at. Walter didn't have my vision, the owner's and caretaker's vision, for my little piece of creation. And none of us, none of us, have God's vision for what this world is to become either. We see our little piece of it. We are stewards, created co-creators made in God's image, with agency and humility to create and care for life and community.

But we don't have a God's eye view of the future and the plan for creation's redemption we're all groaning towards. In sin and ignorance, we are too often quick to cut down, to do arrogant violence to others, thinking we know best. That's one slice of the truth in this parable.

Still, (I warned you we might not be happy with the answers...) Is there any fundamental difference between the garden variety of cruelty, the kinds of cutting down of housemates and neighbors we engage every day, and viruses like systemic evil? Does Jesus really mean do nothing? Live and let live?

In that beautiful Neighbor's Garden across my alley one of our homeless neighbors slept under the shelter of one of the fir trees the entire month of December 2019. I wondered how long and for what reasons as neighbors we would let that last, or do something about it, and when something was done, what it might be. Was it safe for him? Safe for me, in the alley unlocking the garage door after work late at night? Do we let it be? Pretend we don't see? Call the police? Leave hot coffee in the morning? Assume everyone can get shelter? Work for decent housing for all, but feel helpless about this one neighbor?

So yes, we still have some questions of Jesus about the garden.

Jesus explains what probably seemed pretty transparent to the disciples in the first place. The garden we're talking about is God's good creation where all was whole and well. The enemy is the deceptive allure of sin, the crushing power of death, that continues to crop up to scar it.

Though God has sown good, the conditions of life in this world under free will are not perfect. It's a mixed bag: the world in its beauty and heart-breaking tragedy, its gift and promise and moments of transcendence, the cruelty of violence and greed in nature and human nature. As we examine our own hearts, the gardens of our own lives, and our neighborhoods, we know that's true. We see ourselves as "good people". We can do good, but ...not all the time. As Luther said, we are simultaneously saints and sinners, both, all the time.

What goes against the grain of our common sense is Jesus seeming unanxiousness about this current state of affairs. And, that it is love that wins--not rightness, correctness, excellence or superiority -- when time is given for God's vision.

I was struck this weekend by testimonies to the witness of Representative John Lewis' life and speech: that love, and this time God gives creation to turn itself to love, doesn't mean letting injustice flourish. In John Lewis' keynote speech to the march on Washington, he asked how long African Americans should be asked to wait for the basic goods and resources of our common "Neighbor's Garden":

"To those who have said, 'Be patient and wait,' we must say that we cannot be patient. We do not want our freedom gradually but we want to be free now."

Toward this end Lewis asserts they will march.... And they will march everywhere injustice is reigning. But they will march with the spirit of love and the spirit of dignity. They would march "as if", in the spirit of that already future.

Presidential historian Jon Meacham said this weekend that John Lewis believed the reign of God come near in Jesus was accessible to us. As a follower of Jesus, he believed if enough of us did the right thing together.... if we treated each other with love and respect and then PUT THAT LOVE INTO ACTION, we could bring in God's reign.

We could experience God's kin-dom come, the Beloved Community where poverty, hunger and homelessness, racism and discrimination will not be tolerated because human decency will not allow it.

John Lewis lived with Jesus in the love and power of that age to come now. He lived “as if”. He put his life on the line for it, and called others into that world.

Jim Skelton was telling me how Pastor Noah Inbody, a former pastor of Immanuel’s, was called into this kind of love in the face of evil... a peaceful, non-violent resistance against hate. He had seen John Lewis and others mowed down on the Edmund Pettus Bridge, and afterward. He had gone with other Lutheran pastors and members to Selma to march.

Jim shared with us Pastor Inbody’s fear once he got down there. He felt it was the worst mistake he’d ever made, that he would be killed. But the call he had heard had sustained him, and the vision for the kin-dom. Members at Immanuel weren’t all behind this action. They accused him of just taking off and leaving them without coverage, which hadn’t been true.

In the brave space of today’s conversations and plans for action in becoming anti-racist individuals in an anti-racist church, we can learn from this humility and honesty in the leadership DNA of Immanuel’s past.

Jon Meacham said that he himself didn’t believe that this side of paradise we would see that world John Lewis lived in “as if”. But he was still inspired by John Lewis’ unshakeable conviction that love wins.

Today Jesus helps us grasp this vision of God’s love, God’s desire, for all creation. God’s desire for us to become more rooted in the good news of the Word, the mixed bags of our own lives becoming ever more fruitful for God’s kingdom.

There is a time now for us to find our voices and share what God has done for all humanity in love. Time for Immanuel to grow in the Holy Spirit to spread the message that changes hearts and lives, a message of God’s love in Jesus’ own death and resurrection. Time for the world to choose God, and God’s loving purpose for creation.

We may be called as disciples of Jesus, as offspring of this gardener, to take the risks involved these days to be more vigorous in our sowing, rather than our weeding. Less sure about identifying other humans as the enemy, and more as the same mixed bag we ourselves may be as saints and sinners. We may embrace in these days a call to sow, rather than weed, sharing good news that love wins. Doing more of what we used to call “Graceful Engagement” at Reconciling Works, than “patrolling the grounds.”

In Jesus we get a glimpse of God’s steadfast love for the world and an inkling of why we can be non-anxious in both hope and action. This state of affairs, even the evil the enemy of sin and death has sown into God’s good world, won’t last forever. There will be a harvest. All causes of sin, all causes of our sorrow and suffering and any evildoing, will be weeded out. And there will only be righteousness, shining like the sun, enjoying the birth of a new creation: the bliss God intended of life that is one with God and God’s loving purpose forever. In the story, it’s never going to be us, the disciples, that do the ultimate yanking, and throwing of weeds into the furnaces of fire. It’s not up to us to save the world. There is a savior, a call to follow. And the miracle: the assurance that with this savior it is love that wins.

Representative Eleanor Holmes Norton put it this way, that John Lewis believed that in God’s reign reconciliation was always possible. He held out for it, acting in the right now by marching in love and dignity knowing the future was assured.

We lean into this redeeming assurance and sow seeds of love and self-giving for others. That’s the harvest of the faithful. Jesus invites us into that world. Jesus: the righteous first fruit of the new

creation already coming to birth within and among us, groaning in God's labor pains to bring the fruits of this kin-dom, in and among us, to bear already now in the midst of the suffering world. Amen.