

10 Pentecost
Sermon for July 20, 2008
Raymond Raney

Genesis 28:10-19a
Psalm 139:1-11,22-23
Romans 8:12-25
Matthew 13:24-30,36-43

Weeding. That's what the servants in today's parable ask of their master. "Do you want us to go weed the field?" It's a difficult decision. The weeds might choke some plants. Then again pulling the weeds will pull up some of the wheat.

My former rector tells the story of being helpful one spring. He decided to go out and weed his wife's garden early one Saturday morning. When she came up he looked up with pride to meet her frown. "What's wrong?" he asked. "You've dug up all my perennials." She replied.

That's the problem. How do you know what's a weed? How do we decide?

How do you decide what to do? I mean, when you're faced with a decision, how do you decide? It could be as simple as, whether to buy a new shirt or blouse; or whether to follow the advice of that lizard and change insurance companies?

Some of us just act. I want the shirt. I'll save money, do it.
Some of us make lists of the pros and cons, and then weigh the cost.
Some of us ask the advice of those we trust.
Some of us pray.

I remember a time when my father's father, the man I'm named for, was trying to decide whether to attend the funeral of his sister's husband in a distant state. He looked for his answer in his dreams. He'd pray about it and then go to sleep. I remember he told me, I dreamed about the funeral and I wasn't there, so I'm not supposed to go."

How do we decide the matters of life and death? I ask that because I received an email from Fr. Tom Gray in Carlsbad about two priests in the Big Bend. I'll read it to you.

Dear Rio Grande Clergy--

One of the treasures of the Southeast Deanery is Big Bend Mission and the remarkable work done there through its clergy, Judy Burgess, Vicar of the Big Bend, and Elaine Ponton. This is a difficult time for them, and I hope you will put them on your intercession list.

Several days ago Elaine, the assisting priest and close friend to Judy Burgess, became ill. She discovered that she was somewhat jaundiced, and since she has struggled through treatments for cancer twice in the last several months, that was a particularly difficult discovery. She was treated at a medical center in Midland where the diagnosis was that the problem was not a recurrence of cancer but a liver infection which briefly responded to antibiotics and steroids. However, the antibiotics and steroids have stopped working and her liver is failing, and the physicians don't know what is wrong.

Elaine has returned home and has chosen to not continue any kind of treatment. In Judy Burgess'

words, "We are not expecting her to with us much longer without a major miracle."

Judy Burgess herself also became quite ill a few days ago, and after being airlifted to a medical center in Lubbock, was found to have a tear in her esophagus caused by gastritis. She has returned home now and is recovering as hoped from that brief but terrifying time.

We know the Lord stands as always in the midst of our lives, and that his presence and grace and love wash over us. But we also know the comfort and gratitude that comes in knowing that those who love and care for us are holding us in their prayers and best wishes--and that's what I ask you to join me in doing.

God Bless us all-- Tom Gray+

We will pray for Elaine and Judith today. That's what we can do – We can pray. When I was a chaplain at Presbyterian Hospital I encountered many people at various stages of cancer. Two women come to mind.

The first woman would do anything to hang on through the absolute worst of the chemo. She had been hospitalized for months and suffered enormous pain. She resolutely vowed to fight for her life till Jesus came and welcomed her home. She asked me to pray with her that God would give her the patience and strength to endure the pain

The other was a minister. She'd undergone four courses of chemo. Her internal organs were failing, and though her mother hounded her to undergo another round, she decided this was as far as she could go. She asked me to pray with her that God would give her the patience and strength to meet her end with dignity.

See this. This is the head of a stalk of wheat. The wheat kernels are held in this, and those kernels are what is milled into flour. This particular head of wheat came from a field in Assisi. A friend, one of the women in the Santa Fe Women's Ensemble, picked a handful when we were there. She gave me this one this past week. This is what a farmer harvests. This is literally what Jesus was referring to in the parable from today's gospel reading.

The farmer has prepared the ground, plowed and fertilized and tilled the soil before sowing the wheat. And after the field is planted, the farmer has to wait for the field to grow and endure the dangers of birds, locusts, hail, storms, and weeds. The farmer can do a lot, and what he does most is pray for patience and strength and a bountiful harvest.

A bountiful harvest is what Paul is talking about in our reading from Romans. For Paul, Jesus has planted a new hope for us all as heirs of God's kingdom. Being heirs may sound a little detached – let me put it another way. What Paul is talking about is being one of the family. Because of Jesus, we get to join God's chosen people. We are given the grace not just to call God – Father, but to call God – Abba. That's the Hebrew equivalent of Daddy. Not Father, Not Pappa. But Daddy.

Daddy. It means so much more. Daddy means being three years old again and cuddling up in Daddy's arms, knowing you are loved and protected. It's Daddy I called out for in the darkness to protect me from the monsters in my dreams.

That is our hope – that at the end it won't be a stern father with a long white beard making judgments on what we have done with our lives, but Daddy.

Daddy is what my mother always called her father. He was always Daddy to her. He was a kind and gentle man. When my mother married my father, as they were preparing to drive off, he slipped her a \$20 bill and told her: "I know you have to wait and see, but if he isn't good to you, take the bus home." And \$20 was a lot of money in 1945.

We all have to wait and see. We are the fields in which God has planted the hopes and dreams of the Kingdom of Heaven. We are charged with caring for those fields and nurturing the hopes and dreams of our children, our neighbors and our selves. That is our task in this life: each and every day we must work to nurture life.

As a friend of mine wrote me recently talking about the lessons today:

Our job is to nurture the field.

Every time we help someone in need,
we nurture the field.

Every time we resist evil, and repent of our sins,
we nurture the field.

Every time we proclaim by word and example
the Good News of God in Christ,
we nurture the field.

Every time we seek and serve Christ in all persons,
we nurture the field.

Every time we love our neighbors as our selves,
we nurture the field.

Every time we strive for justice and peace,
we nurture the field.

Every time we respect the dignity of another human being,
we nurture the field.

Our job is to nurture the field and do the will of our Daddy in heaven so that when the harvest comes, we can all be among the sheaves of wheat.