

One of the wisest people I know is also, very fortunately, one of my dearest friends. We met the week before seminary started and have been growing and learning together about faith and ministry and life and beyond now for many years.

I remembered recently a conversation from our last year of seminary that has particularly changed my life and perspective. We were sitting at her kitchen table and she said to me simply, but with great conviction, "I'm absolutely done." I was overcome with curiosity and asked, "Done with what?". "I'm done with stupidly high standards. I'm done with worshipping the god of perfectionism. I'm done with thinking my best means pushing myself to complete exhaustion and being overwhelmed. I'm done with this ridiculous hustle."

Well, those were some things she said. You get used to people saying really intense and spiritual and thought-provoking things in a community of fellow future clergy, but her radical realizations started to take root in me too. I know I certainly have moments of worshipping the perfectionism god and falling prey to high standards too.

I asked her to tell me more about what brought her to this place, what she was thinking instead, and it led to great conversation and reflection on that day and beyond. But the main phrase I took from that exploration is one that sets me free and I need reminders of often too. She said, "It doesn't have to be perfect to be good." It doesn't have to be perfect to be good.

What a gift to have this wisdom as we entered our first years of ministry, spread out through the region, and connected by our journey to connect with what is truly perfect, the love of God. We do not need to be perfect because God is perfect. And in our humanness, we need simply to do our best, and recognize that that is good. It does not have to be perfect to be good. This reality has served us both well over time.

What Jesus teaches us in this parable today is that the seeds are good. They are not perfect and held to any huge standard, their purpose is simply being good, growing, and giving grain as they are gathered. And in fact there is automatically imperfection amidst the grain, as the weeds are sowed right along with them. As the plants grow it takes a while before folks realize that the weeds are there too.

The natural suggestion, of course, from the people tending the field is to just pull out the weeds and burn them to keep only to good grain growing. The tricky part is that when we are growing, lots of things grow around us, and it takes time to determine whether they are good seeds or weeds. We grow and we learn and we live and all of this takes time to decipher.

Weeds can certainly be beautiful too. I'm reminded of a story I heard recently, of a little girl who saw some beautiful flowers outside, so she, very sweetly, wanted to pick a bunch and give them to her mom. She saw flowers made up of lots of little white flowers, Queen Anne's lace, and more of these flowers that looked just like them, only the blooms were yellow. She picked a whole bouquet and proudly presented them to her mama. Little did she know that the yellow ones were actually wild parsnip and poisonous, and the poor dear had red and itchy hands for the rest of the day. It's wild how the white flowers that so beautifully remind us of summer

weddings and British royalty are so very similar, in appearance and location, to flowers that are poisonous. What is beautiful and alluring can actually be toxic sometimes.

The weeds are alluring but they are not what nourish us. And it takes time to figure out what are the weeds and what is the good grain promised to us by good seeds. It's okay to be patient with ourselves as we need this time to sift out what is good, and what is nourishing.

God provides us with comfort, assurance, and promises of God's presence even amidst our waiting and growing. God lays the roots of this promise with Abraham, and reveals God's intentions for the Hebrew people to Jacob in his dream. God proclaims, "Know that I am with you and will keep you wherever you go." God promises generations of offspring, families that grow and spread throughout the land. This promise of family and descendants, naturally, takes time too. But Jacob delights in God's promises, that no matter where this family spreads to, no matter how long it takes for His people to come alive, God is always with them, God will keep them wherever they go, and they will surely be blessed.

So Jacob delights in these promises of God, and is filled with joy and conviction to mark this specific place in which God made the promises. Jacob used what he had available to him in that place, the rock of his pillow and some oil, which he called holy and anointed that spot. He called it Bethel, which means the house of God, and with that perfect love of God, it was good. That spot, Bethel, became a pillar and a home throughout the story of Jacob and his offspring.

No matter where we go, what we do, or where our journeys take us, we are going to encounter both good seeds and weeds. Sometimes the weeds look alluring and sustaining but they in fact turn out to be toxic. We can't beat ourselves up for the fact that weeds exist. We must simply do our best to be good seeds, and to sow good seeds in the world around us. The weeds we encounter and rely on, like the gods of perfectionism or hyper-achieving, of greed or comparison, of systemic prejudice, selfishness at the cost of others' well-being, or any other false idols, certainly do seem like what's true and real and necessary for many of us. But there comes a point when we recognize the toxicity of false gods. They do not nourish us. They cannot sustain us. They do not yield good grain or growth. And it can take a while to break free from their grasp.

But there is also always good grain amidst the weeds. We can always find pockets of goodness, of growth and nourishment no matter where we are, how much we might think we are in the thick of the weeds. God promises this to us - God says, "I am with you and will keep you wherever you go; for I will not leave you until I have done what I have promised you." The good seeds that are sown are from Christ Jesus, the new life promised to us in abundance by Jesus' sacrifice, his death, and his resurrection for us all. Jesus Christ died for our sake, to free us from the power of sin and death that threatens to hold us captive, so that we can have new life in the freedom of God's love, in the life-giving, life-saving goodness of God. New life can truly always be found, rising up from the ground itself.

Dear friends, as we all are coping with unprecedented challenges in our lives, as we are overwhelmed by what we should or should not do amidst the pandemic and all its fallout, among many other struggles, I pray that you will find the good seeds. I pray that there are moments when you see these good growing things and allow the new life they bring to take root in your hearts and in your spirits. I pray that the Holy Spirit gives you strength to discern what weeds you need to cut away to help you be nourished. And I pray that by God's perfect love and grace, you will see that it does not have to be perfect to be good. God is good, for all of us, for all of time. Thanks be to God, Amen.