All Saints’ Church July 23, 2017

Proper 11 Year A

Isaiah 44:6-8 Romans 8:12-25

Psalm 86:11-17 Matthew 13:24-30, 36-43

Teach us your way, O Lord, and we will walk in your truth. Amen

This morning in our gospel passage, Jesus is not talking about agriculture. All farmers, gardeners, and those who live by the fruits of the land, know how to pull out weeds. In fact, your very life may depend on identifying what is weed and what is good seed. And you don’t wait. You get to those weeds as fast as you can. We know that. Jesus’ audience knew that.

So what’s Jesus talking about? I think we need to turn to Paul for help. Paul is so clear about our complexity of doing the “right thing.” We mess up…. often. He writes in Romans, “I do not understand my own actions. For I do not do what I want, but I do the very thing I hate….. I do not do the good I want, but the evil I do not want is what I do.” He is bemoaning his own human frailty, and I love him for it.

Good seed and bad weeds living side by side within us- we live within good acts and evil acts every day, even if we don’t commit them. The earth is being polluted, people are starving, sex rings are destroying young girls’ lives, prisoners are being tortured, even as I speak, even as we worship today. Right now. It can be paralyzing if we think we can carry this burden on our own. It’s what draws us to prayer, it’s what drew Jesus to baptism. Even though he did not sin, he was immersed in the world’s sin by his very human nature- of course he is compelled by the ritual of cleansing. We all are.

Paul writes in the Epistle read this morning, “We know that the whole creation has been groaning in labor pains until now, and not only the creation, but we ourselves, who have the first fruits of the Spirit, groan inwardly while we wait…”

Something is afoot? Something’s coming. What could it be?

I think Jesus and Paul are telling us that the Holy Spirit I coming…..to stop thinking that we, on our own, have the capacity to do the pulling of the weeds. Sure we can be more moral, no doubt, but there’s something else going on here.

That weakness that Paul so eloquently names is the very thing that qualifies you for adoption. Never mind your feelings of inadequacy; it is God’s work, not yours. The Holy Spirit is within you. We just don’t realize it most days.

Give yourself over, make yourself available, and let God groan with you, as the beauty of your own soul, your own spirit is revealed through God’s divine spark within you. It requires hope, for in hope we were saved…. not a hope that we can see (let me go after those weeds and get them), but rather a hope we do not see; a hope in our trust that God is claiming us as God’s own.

There’s a good work in us, weeds and all!

I saw this trust in God’s transformative spirit in the Truth and Reconciliation Commission of South Africa. Under the reign of apartheid, so many evil acts were done in the name of religion and country. Yet, rather than jail all the perpetrators, the country decided to reveal and expose the truth and grant amnesty rather than demand retribution. All with the hope that the nation could find restoration and move forward.

Hearings were heard throughout the country and they were filmed. There is one clip that is very moving.

A young black man, early thirties, with a family, worked for the white police who were responsible for maintaining apartheid. Just by working as one of the police, he was considered a “sell-out” to his own people. But he had made his choice; his good salary put food on his table.

But things got complicated. Now, he was confessing his part in a covert operation, in which he could, by the color of his skin, lure seven young black men, ages 15-20, to walk into a trap. He told them he knew where they could get guns- did they want to see? And when they all walked into the room, the secret police, who were waiting for them, shot all seven, justifying this murder by claiming these seven were terrorists, gang members, revolutionaries out to topple the government. They planted the guns into the hands of the now dead young men and posted the pictures to prove their guilt of treason.

This black policemen was now confessing that it had all been rigged….. and who were in the room with him? The seven mothers of the seven slayed.

And they let him have it, naming exactly the evil he had committed. He sat trembling and receiving as best he could their anger and their grief.

And then one mother said, “If forgiving you means you will be human again, then maybe I need to forgive you.”

And another mother said, “Maybe that is what we must do- you will not be human without us; you are the walking dead and we need to restore you back to the living.”

And with that the man put his head on the table and began to sob.

I often used this clip in my religion classes as a way to discuss both our human frailty and our goodness.

I remember one student, strong, articulate, a leader in our class discussions, after viewing this film, saying to the class, “This is all very interesting, Dean Hamilton, but what does this have to do with religion? Don’t get me wrong, I like studying this, but I signed up for a religion class.”

I responded, “Well, this is about forgiveness, revealing one’s heart, realizing how our own acts can condemn us, trying to find redemption, the courage to speak truth…”

She cut me off (not shy). “God is not mentioned; beliefs not named. I don’t know what religion these people believe in- if they even have a religion. This has nothing to do with religion.”

We fought for at least a week, as she was convinced her view of religion was correct and that I was taking us down the wrong path…. “this is not a religion class! I signed up for a religion class!”

Believe me, I viewed her as my weed. I was cultivating this beautiful field, and she was poisoning it. I wanted to pull this “weed” and choke her, before she could choke my harvest, my curriculum, my lesson plans….

And then something happened. As a class, we were discussing the powerful influence of our environment, our family, our physical situations, our upbringing and what would happen if you grew up with Nazi supporters, racists, those who believe in apartheid and they were your parents, teachers, clergy, friends….

My “weed” in the middle of our discussion, sighed. “I am privileged with good bones, good brain, good parents, good money and so were those white kids in South Africa. I could have been a perpetrator of violence- just let the evil system of apartheid run amok. I would have been one of the white folks turning a blind eye to all the crimes committed against humanity- happy in my fancy home….. which means I could also be on the wrong side of the Holocaust, the Civil Rights movement, the Free Press, all the things that really matter to me. I could be someone so different than who I am now.” She sighed.

The room was silent. And then I said, “Call it what you want, you’re not going to agree with me, but that is one of the most religious things ever said in one of my classes. It was real, came from deep within you, the seat of your own wisdom, unplanned, alive, full, sweet, but hard too… truth revealed to your classmates… Your soul spoke. And if religion is not about these things, then it’s dead on arrival….

“Maybe so, Dean Hamilton, maybe so…..”

Don’t pull out the weed too fast- trust in the power of the spirit within you to explore. Morality is not just an instrument of inhibition control, weed control. There are two paths to the seat of our integrity: (1) ethics, beliefs, principles, limits, facts, and guilt…… all good. Yet there is another path: (2) empathy, compassion, patience, vulnerability, remorse, embrace of the dirty truth of our failings, and love.

We need both paths. When we walk the latter, it can appear vague, emotional, and relative, and yet Jesus and Paul are telling us that it is more demanding, because we’ve entered into our internal work, our inner landscape, where we live, move and have our being. If we always “will” ourselves to do the right thing, then feelings and intentions go underground and our spirituality becomes a tool of repression. And God is left out of the picture. It becomes about our “goodness,” our “individuality,” our “power.”

Jesus and Paul are telling us to let our Soul speak, dive into the weeds, and trust that God is doing a good work within you, always.

Amen.