



Dealing with Weeds

Gen 28:10-19a; Is 44:6-8; Mat 13:24-30, 36-43; Rom 8:12-25

Weeds are a problem, especially in my garden. About six weeks ago, I had them all cleared out. Now you can hardly find the vegetables in the lot for the weeds. I need to get out there with hoe and shovel and spend a few hours getting rid of these plants that choke out the ones I am interested in cultivating. That is our normal reaction to the various problems in life. We view them as enemies to destroy, obstacles to be removed from our paths. In today's parable, Jesus presents us with a very different picture of dealing with weeds: leave them be and be productive. While he speaks of God's response to our unfruitfulness, is there some way to appropriately apply the story to our own lives?

Jacob was surprised by God. Isn't that how it normally goes? There he was, minding his own business, just trying to get some much needed rest. He was tired enough to be using a rock for a pillow. He thought he was fleeing to protect his life, as well as to find a wife among his own people. He had no real expectations that God was anywhere nearby. He had no sense of God's protection and direction. He was just traveling along his journey, oblivious to God's presence and concern. With sleep, he was surprised by a dream.

Jacob was a crafty man. He was a diligent worker. He was a schemer. He was self-reliant, following his mother's directions to help him take advantage of people and the life situations that faced him. He did not openly depend on God. He was more of the frontiersman of our American heritage: the rugged individualist, self-reliant in all things. God did not really factor in to his life, actions, and dreams—at least not his waking dreams. On that rock pillow, however, God surprised him.

The people of the Ancient Near East viewed dreams as the most common way that God communicated with people. Kings like Solomon later on would offer mountains of sacrifices and sleep in a temple area in order to plead for some dream revelation from the gods. Jacob had no such thought in mind. When God came to him in a dream, however, he believed himself to be in a special place where God was in the habit of visiting the world of humanity.

Jacob was afraid. Thinking himself on another private, self-serving errand, he found that God was interested in his life. He found that God took the initiative to visit him in an unrequested dream. He found that God had a plan for his life, to bless both him and his descendants, even though he had given God so little room in his own life. He was not used to God being part of his life, other than the standard religious formulas of living. Now God wanted something for him in particular, and it scared him like no human threat had ever done.

With fear and trembling, Jacob built an altar, surprised and anxious to be found in God's presence, and uneasy with the fact that God had a plan for his life. Being near to God was not something he was used to. It was obviously not a life variable he could manipulate and control according to his mother's training. He was in a wholly new life situation, and completely unprepared to face it.

Isaiah was pretty clear that *Yahweh* was unique. *Yahweh*, God of Israel was the only God, the only worthy of the title, God. There was no other. There is no other. Israel faced the same struggle as Jacob, seeking to make their own way while ignoring what plans *Yahweh* might have for the nation. Isaiah's words were not the message they sought. They did not like God's direction. They wanted a

different path—one of their own choosing. Like stubborn children, they wanted God to play along with their game and their rules. They didn't want to face the reality that God had a purpose for them.

Maybe that is the problem with weeds and vegetable gardens. We want our own way in life, but it is not productive in the same way God would desire. Instead of placing food on the table, our gardens more naturally produce green vegetation that winds up providing only for itself, as not even the bugs that would assail our vegetables are attracted to the weeds. God wants something more productive from us.

Jesus' parables often take us by surprise, or at least they should. Who leaves weeds growing in the garden (other than your pastor, that is)? According to Jesus' parable, God so desires to harvest all the grain, that he would allow the weeds to grow unhindered, just to be sure no grain is harmed in the weeding.

We want to dig in and get rid of all the weeds. They are in our way. They make it hard to see the productive vegetables growing among all the mess of greenery. God has a different perspective, however. God hangs on with the hope of allowing those good plants that look and act like weeds to have a greater chance to become productive plants for an altogether greater harvest. After all, it is not until the time to harvest that the productivity of the plants can be assuredly determined.

Paul puts it a different way. He tells us there is redemption ahead. Our lives are in need of transformation. Our world is in need of transformation. The suffering in the world in great part is the result of sin. Our greed motivates unregulated consumption of natural resources, the wasting of our environment, and the destruction of the very ecosystems on which we rely. Like Jacob, we manipulate others to advance our own interests, considering them less worthy than ourselves. We live as though God were not really part of our lives. We carry on as though God had no interest in us, while the reality is that we have little interest in God.

The soccer players that were here this last week spoke of recognizing God's reality and interest in their lives. They shared their stories of trying other paths of living until coming face to face with Jesus as more than a story, but alive in our midst. They spoke of their lives being transformed from selfish serving of idols and empty attempts to fill the void in their hearts to finding in Christ Jesus the meaning and fulfillment they truly craved. Like Jacob, they were surprised by God's presence. They were made into new creations by the love and transforming character of Christ Jesus' presence in their lives. In becoming part of Jesus' team on earth, their lives gained meaning, direction, and purpose.

We have a choice to be so much more than weeds. We have a choice to do so much more with our lives than advancing our personal interests and desires. We have a choice to do more than choke out the latent productivity of Christ's presence in our lives and in the lives of others. We can become part of Jesus' productive and reproducing team. We can allow God's unexpected presence and concern for our lives to make a difference for all eternity.

Jacob had a decision regarding his response to God. He came to that decision in fear and anxiety, but he recognized God's presence and care for him. He built an altar to display his recognition of God's presence and desire for his life. He embarked on a new pattern for living that allowed God's presence and will to be part of his journey. What will we do with the fact of God's presence and concern for our lives? Will we become productive in God's garden, or choke out productivity in our selfish abandon?

—*Christopher B. Harbin*