

**FIRST PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH
305 EAST MAIN STREET
DURHAM, NC 27701
PHONE: (919) 682-5511**



“Solutions: Part 1”

**A sermon by Marilyn T. Hedgpeth
16th Sunday in Ordinary Time (Year A)
July 23, 2017**

Isaiah 44: 6-8; Psalm 86: 11-17; Matthew 13: 24-30

Hey, there are weeds in my grass!

The Parish Associate at my husband’s church, Bill Chappell, a 1952 Duke graduate and rabid sports fan tells a football story that took place in the early 50’s, when Wake Forest College was a small Baptist school just up Tobacco Road from their ACC rival, Duke. Months before a scheduled meeting of the two teams at Wallace Wade Stadium, as the fields were being groomed for the upcoming grid-iron season, a group of wily Wake Forest students decided to conduct a covert caper under the mantle of darkness, sewing seeds of rye grass on the Duke football field among the already-planted Bermuda grass. Harmless, and invisible to the naked eye, right? Well, it did go largely unnoticed as summer faded to fall, and football teams took to their fields. But as cooler weather and that first bite of frost turned the Bermuda grass its characteristic tan color while the insurgent rye grass retained its defiant greenness, there on the Duke turf for everyone to see, from one end of the field to the other, were the capital letters in rye, “WF.” And as Bill tells it, there wasn’t much anyone could do about it, except chuckle. “You couldn’t pull up the grass that spelled ‘WF,’ he said, “because it would destroy the whole field, and the ‘WF’ imprint would still be there, even as bare turf.” Bill still laughs about it, and thinks it is one of the best pranks he’s ever seen.

But was it a prank, or was it vandalism? And what *do* we do when the weeds of others begin to infiltrate our fields, and it’s not funny?

Hey, there are weeds in my grass!

I was both horrified and intrigued in late May, when the Los Angeles home of NBA Superstar, LeBron James, was vandalized. Even towards someone of his stature, even on the night before the seventh game of the NBA finals pitting his Cleveland

Cavaliers against the Golden State Warriors, someone or someones, had the audacity *or the hatred*, to spray paint a racial slur on the outside gate of the James' home. LeBron's immediate reaction was a desire to hug his children, and speak with his young sons about that racial slur and about racism.

But what parent wants to have to have that conversation with their children? And what person wants to be treated like a weed? At a press conference the following day, the visibly-shaken LeBron said, "No matter how much money you have, not matter how famous you are, no matter how many people admire you, being black in America is tough. We have a long way to go for us as a society and for us as African-Americans, until we feel equal in America. Racism will always be a part of the world . . .," he said. (And) "Hate in America, especially for African-Americans, is living every day."

Then, referring to that iconic hate crime, the lynching of 14-year-old Emmett Till in 1955, and the subsequent decision by Till's mother to hold an open-casket funeral to bear witness to the racism and brutality directed toward her young son, LeBron said, "I can't be home to see my boys, and my little girl is too young to actually understand it right now . . . so it is kind of killing me inside." "However," he added, "My family is safe . . . and if this incident keeps the conversation about racism alive, then I'm okay with it." (<http://www.npr.org/sections/thetwo-way/2017/06/01/531023588/hate-is-living-every-day-lebron-james-says-after-racist-graffiti-incident>)

Was this incident a prank carried to an extreme, or was it vandalism meant to hurt? And while my reaction to the rye/Bermuda caper was to chuckle, my reaction to this black/white episode of overt racism is one of queasy disgust.

Hey, there are weeds in my grass!

I recently have been reading a biography of the wonderfully compassionate Eleanor Roosevelt, one of my all-time life heroes. If anyone ever had a heart for all of God's children, and for the least of these, it was Eleanor. However, I learned while reading that her sensitivity to the plight of German Jews, when Hitler became chancellor in 1933, just 35 days prior to the Roosevelts moving into the White House, her own sensitivity was impeded by a deeply ingrained strain of anti-Semitism within herself, also prevalent among many others in the United States. As you know, Hitler considered the Jews to be *bad seed*, blaming them for Germany's economic distress, and therefore curtailing their human rights immediately upon assuming office. And when those threatened Jews began seeking asylum in other countries, Hitler confiscated their property, art, jewelry, bank accounts and businesses, thus denying them the financial resources to immigrate.

And, of course, this culminated in *Kristallnacht* of November 9, 1938, which resulted in the destruction of 267 synagogues, the plundering of 7,500 Jewish-owned businesses and shops, the immediate deaths of 91 Jews, and the arrests of more than 30,000 Jews – a thousand of whom would die in Nazi hands over the next few months. And that was only the beginning of what Hitler called “the final solution:” the round up and annihilation of more than 6 million Jews, 1 million Gypsies, and thousands of homosexuals: maximum weed-eating. (Smith, Harold Ivan. *Eleanor: A Spiritual Biography*, p. 130)

Eleanor, often called the conscience of the White House, lamented later that “I could have done more.” But she, herself, was hampered by this latent personal prejudice against the Jews, whom she found to be too powerful, and too influential in finance and politics. As she at one time said, “I realize quite well that there may be a need for curtailing the ascendance of the Jewish people, but it seems to me it might have been done in a more humane way by a ruler who had intelligence and decency.” (Smith, Harold Ivan. *Eleanor: A Spiritual Biography*, p. 126)

And if these life-threatening, life-taking biases disturb me, I can’t help but imagine how they disturb God as well; these ways we continue to treat and mistreat, not love, our neighbors. And just as we cry out often to God in our prayers of lament, “How long, O Lord?,” I imagine God lamenting and crying out right back to us, “How long, O people?” How long will you keep treating my beloved children like weeds? How long will you keep trying to pluck them out? How long will you keep trying to weed-eat them down to the dirt? How long will you keep rounding them up? How long will you continue to try to ground clear them from your lives? For which are the wheat, and which are the weeds, and to who do they all belong?

Over and against our human preoccupation with taunting and teasing, separating, excluding and scape-goating, vandalizing, plucking up, weeding out, uprooting, plundering, even pogromming and genociding, Jesus, the powerfully-gentle one who did and said such wonderful life-giving and life-affirming things, that all kinds of seedy people followed him, and listened when he spoke, tells a story about a realm which certainly is not like the one we are in. Nor is it like one that anyone has ever visited, or even heard about. So his followers ask him, “What is this realm, this kingdom of heaven, like?”

And Jesus replies with a story about a house-master and his workers. These workers are ordinary people, much like us, who start to fret and become anxious when weeds begin to appear in their field of dreams; when evil rye seeds take root and sprout amidst their beloved Bermuda grass. And their initial reaction is a desire to pluck out and uproot the undesirables, in order to restore uniformity to their house-master’s field. But

this house-master, in his or her infinite wisdom, patience and goodness of heart says, “No...let them all be. Let them grow together, side by side. You did not plant them, nor should you pluck them up; do not rush to judgment. Your task simply is to practice great restraint, and to patiently coax and nurture growth only, the growth of *all of them*.” For in this realm, which is not like any one you have ever visited or heard of, there is but one field, and in this one field, there co-exist multiple variants of seed, products of both good and evil – but who can discern which is which? And then, there is one house-master of the one kingdom field, who is infinitely wise and infinitely patient with workers like us, who frets over bio-diversity in the field, because we can’t quite imagine the field of dreams this benevolent house-master envisions. The order of the day, however, is to wait, and to coax maximum growth and encourage the well-being of all; to spend more time on the business of nurture, loving and redeeming, and to leave the task of judging, weeding and harvesting to the Holy Other, when this realm, in fullness, becomes a reality.

Hey, there are weeds in my grass, just as there are flaws in my personality! Our three year old grandson was saying his prayers the other night, and he said the sweetest thing, “Thank you God for giving me friends to run around with on the playground.” And then he topped off his prayer by saying, “And thank you God for giving me people to kick!” Thus we live with the ambiguity of good and evil every day, both around us, but also within ourselves, if we are honest.

Just wait, Jesus, the patient gardener, suggests, for there is room for both weed and grass in the impossible dream and vision of our loving Creator and God, who created you and others like you, as well as others different from you. And perhaps in our patience, we also will be gathered into this kingdom life, and be accepted and embraced just as we are with both our virtues and vices, as beloved children of God. For in Christ, and through the unity of the Spirit, we have been called to one hope, one Lord, one faith, one baptism, one God and Parent of all, who is over all, and through us all, and in all. Amen.
(Ephesians 4: 4-6)

Because sermons are meant to be preached and are therefore prepared with the emphasis on verbal presentation (i.e., are written for the ear), the written accounts occasionally deviate from proper and generally accepted principles of grammar and punctuation. Most often, these deviations are not mistakes per se, but are indicative of an attempt to aid the listener in the delivery of the sermon.