

Lucia Lloyd's sermon
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Proper 11, Year A

Do you ever get ticked off at the way other people act sometimes? Do you ever get ticked off at the way other Christians act? Do you ever get ticked off at the way other people in your denomination act?

I am grateful for the gospel passage we get today, because it deals with the desire to weed people out. The controversies in the Anglican Communion have come at a high price, and the price may continue to get higher. But I would not want to think we have come through all this adversity and learned nothing from it. The most valuable lessons in life are often taught by adversity, if we are willing to learn them.

I have learned what it feels like to have my faith condemned by other Christians, to be told that I believe a false gospel, to be told that my friends and I need to be weeded out of the Anglican Communion. And my own experience has been nowhere near as intense as the experience of others.

I want to be very clear that Jesus teaches that we are not to ignore or tolerate the oppression of another human being. In his teaching and in his actions, Jesus is fully committed to the dignity and the belovedness of the people that religious leaders tried to weed out. Jesus stood up for the excluded and the marginalized despite the hatred and violence this caused for his ministry.

But if we respond to hatred with more hatred, if we respond to condemnation with more condemnation, if we respond to exclusion with more exclusion, then we begin to follow the path of the demonic, rather than the path of Jesus.

Or as Johnny Carson once put it, "Choose your enemies carefully, because you become like them." This principle operates on all sorts of levels. What is the instinctive response when someone insults you? To insult them. What is a parent's instinctive response when the kids are screaming? To scream at them. What is the instinctive response when we capture a prisoner from a country that practices torture?

And the tricky thing about it is that in some ways we do have good intentions. We do want the church to be pure. We do want the world to be just. We do want our neighbors to be kind. Those are all noble goals. But if we focus on weeding out the

other people who don't act the way we think they ought to, we become as toxic as pesticide.

For every weed we kill, we will see ten more weeds we want to kill. The more we look for impurity the more we will find it. The fact remains that no human is completely pure, no human is completely just, no human is completely kind. Once we start weeding, there is no end to it. We will weed out everyone but ourselves. And although we are reluctant to admit it, the truth is that the things in others that really get us worked up are invariably the issues we struggle with in ourselves.

God is perfect. God's followers are not perfect. And that's okay.

In the end, God will weed out all the evil in the world. And I am thankful that in the end God will pull out the weeds that are growing in my own soul. Until then, God's commandment is not, "Weed out your neighbors." God's commandment is "Love your neighbors." And love your neighbors as yourself.

The purpose of farming is not to eradicate weeds, it is to grow crops. And although heavy use of pesticides and herbicides may solve problems in the short-term, we now have the scientific data to know that it also causes serious damage in the long-term. So Jesus's main message to us is this: get rid of the weed-killers and grow an organic church.

When we grow an organic church, we focus on growing what's good, not killing what's bad. We put our energy into promoting growth and health and fruitfulness. And the wonderful thing is that the organic church that focuses on what's good and thriving and fruitful is actually a lot more fun than insulting, blaming, and condemning. Organic fruit is sweeter. And this is true of all our human relationships. It is easy to scold our children at the times when they are behaving badly, but do we miss opportunities to compliment them during the times they are behaving well? Doing so helps them, and it makes us happier too. It is easy to nag or berate our spouses when they do something annoying, but do we miss opportunities to express appreciation when they do something kind? Doing so helps them, and it makes us happier too. You know from your own experience how nice it is to be appreciated, how much it makes you want to do more good things. And giving compliments and appreciation feels better to the person who does it. It makes you feel so much better than nagging or scolding.

Amy Sutherland talks about this principle in her book “What Shamu Taught Me about Life, Love, and Marriage.” In her work as a journalist, she observed that a 98-pound marine animal trainer could get enormous killer whales to leap through hoops simply by the power of positive reinforcement. Sutherland decides to try the animal trainers’ techniques on her husband, and finds the quality of her marriage leaping out of the water, especially as her husband begins to use the same techniques on her. There are a few times when negative behavior has to be stopped immediately and forcefully, but in the vast majority of cases both animals and humans behave much better when we focus our energy on striving for the good, and celebrating it. A dolphin will do amazing things if you just throw him a mackerel.

And we all have the potential to do amazing things. God knows that you have weeds growing around you. But the important thing is that God has given you an earth full of plenty of soil, and God has given you a sky full of plenty of sunlight. Don’t worry about the weeds. Just sink your roots deep in the soil, and soak up all the nutrients they hold. Reach your leaves up and out into the sky, and bask in the abundant sunshine that gives you the energy to grow and thrive and flourish. Pay attention to the fact that God is showering blessings on you like rain. Remember that some of a plant’s best growth comes when, as they say, manure happens. As you grow taller and leafier, you may notice that some of the weeds under you have simply shriveled up from lack of light, and even the ones that remain feel like less of a threat.

Toxic chemicals will not feed the hungry. Killing weeds can only destroy. But God has given you the power to love. God has given you the power to bear abundant fruit that will feed the hungry. God has given you the power to produce seeds that will sprout into new life in new places and bear more fruit. God has given you everything you need to thrive and flourish, and God will keep giving you sun, and rain, and probably even some natural fertilizer. God has given you the amazing power to take those things and use them to increase the amount of love and joy in the world. Take delight in doing the good things that you were meant to do, as you flourish and produce the fruit of love.