

Parable of the Weeds and the Wheat

Homily at St. John of God Church, San Francisco

by

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I want to share with you the story of one of my newest Cursillo brothers, Pierre, affectionately known as the Hulk, who looks like a football linebacker, and gave me permission to tell his story. In 2007 he was living in Oakland, addicted to crack cocaine, selling it on the streets, and homeless. He was arrested and remembering what his mother had once told him, he prayed to Jesus for help. He was a third strike candidate, looking at 25 years to life, even for a minor infraction, but “God softened the heart of the sentencing judge” and three days after his arrest, he was released “to show the world what God can do.” Immediately a friend hooked Pierre up with a driving job in Martinez and he checked himself into the Concord Homeless Shelter just minutes away from his new job, where he lived for a year. In March 2010, unemployed, depressed, and reverting back to his crack habit, he began his stay at Diablo Valley Ranch Drug and Alcohol Treatment Facility. In four months he graduated with many certificates and awards, honored later with a one year sobriety bracelet and alumni of the month in April 2011. This past June 13th he had his first interview with the Concord Shelter for a new job as a relief counselor. He would be working and serving at the very **same** place he was a resident 3 years ago. And he needed a vehicle to fulfill this obligation. His driver’s license had been revoked, as he had to pay a final \$150 of a \$600 traffic ticket. The shelter told him to come back when he had his license. The next day, out of the blue, a friend helped him pay the last portion of his ticket. He passed his driving test, got his temporary driver’s license with the promise his card would be in the mail within 7 weeks. Two days later, he had his 2nd interview with the Shelter, produced the required driver’s license, and got the job. That Saturday in the mail his permanent driver’s license arrived, a bureaucratic miracle if **ever** there was one. The following Monday he sent out an email asking his Cursillo friends to help him acquire a car. Two days later, two members of the team **gave** him a 1996 Dodge Grand Caravan, now dubbed the Jesus Van. Not only could he drive to and from work, but he could transport other people to and from Cursillo groups, Narcotics Anonymous meetings, church, and Diablo Ranch events. The vehicle first had to be retitled, insured, and registered in order to drive. Oh, it also needed mechanical attention. He had no money to deal with any of these necessary details and with no car, he would have no job. He swallowed his pride and sent out another email for help. Through the generosity of his Cursillo family, especially the rector, \$400 was deposited into Pierre’s bank account, more than enough to register and insure the Jesus van. As Pierre wrote me, “God is good all the time. As soon as I think God can surprise me no more, my breath is taken away again. I’m in awe of God’s amazing love!”

This amazing love of God is also the theme of our parable of grace along with its strange allegorical interpretation of final judgment and punishment. Most biblical scholars believe this interpretation grew out **of** and had meaning **for** Matthew's church undergoing persecution and then was later attributed to Jesus. I'm going to focus Jesus' hopeful parable of **mercy** rather than Matthew's dark interpretation of condemnation. At the heart of this parable is the idea of turning weeds into wheat, like Pierre, who was a weed transformed into wheat, during the course of 4 long, difficult years. The Middle Eastern darnel weeds, described by Jesus, in their early stages so closely resembled the wheat that it was impossible to differentiate one from the other. Eventually when both had grown for awhile, you could distinguish one from the other, but by then, their roots were so intertwined, the weeds couldn't be removed without tearing the wheat out with them. Isn't it the same with us? I don't know about you, but there are times when I am wheat and other occasions when I feel like a weed. There's **always** some of both in **each** of us. It's so easy to see the weeds infesting our world around us and it's so hard to see the weeds sprouting inside us. Yet, they are there! The slaves in the field sensing something was wrong wanted to correct "the problem" by pulling up the weeds right away, similar to our technologically sophisticated society where we want a quick fix to every dilemma, such as a phone app. But the householder recognized that one doesn't usually root out evil and corruption in the midst of life without destroying some good as well. Perhaps that is why we are warned in the parable **not** to pass judgment. If we do, we may mistake some weeds for wheat and some wheat for weeds! This reminds me of a man who had stopped, waiting for the traffic light to turn green. When the light changed, he was distracted and didn't budge. The woman in the car behind him honked her horn. He still didn't move. She began pounding on the steering wheel and blowing her horn non-stop. Finally, just as the light turned yellow, the fellow in the first car woke up and drove through the light. The woman in the second car was beside herself. Still in mid-rant cursing, she heard a tap on her car window by a police officer. "Lady, you're under arrest," he said. "Get out of the car. Put your hands up." He took her to the police station, had her fingerprinted, photographed, and put into a holding cell. Hours passed before the officer returned and unlocked the cell door. "Sorry for the mistake lady," he said. "But I pulled up behind you as you were blowing your horn non-stop and loudly cursing out the fellow in front of you. I noticed the stickers on your bumper. One read, "Follow me to Church." The other, "What Would Jesus Do?" So naturally, I assumed you had stolen the car." We nervously laugh because we've all probably acted in a similar way as this woman. Yet if **we** have trouble aligning our beliefs with our actions in our **own** lives, why would God turn over to **us** the task of judging the lives of others? Thank heavens we aren't in charge of weeding each other's field because there are some people I know, would love to weed me of everything that irritates them and vice versa! Not only Christians, but the Church itself needs to get out of the judgment business. Its record, whether it be the Crusades, the Inquisition, burning witches, denigrating

women, maligning gay and lesbian people, is abysmal. The only one who can truthfully judge any person and read our hearts is Jesus Christ.

Aren't we grateful that God is patient and merciful, giving Pierre and us time to work things out, change our mistakes, and make things right, instead of weeding us out immediately when we fall. God is **so** generous that the weeds are given a chance to produce good fruit like the wheat, with God willing to wait for us to turn things around. Yet in spite of our best efforts, we find the weeds of sin still present in our lives. We all move from moments of enlightenment and integration into scattered and broken actions and reactions. We think we are in tune with the divine spirit, able to bring love into the situations of our life. Then our buttons get pushed, old tapes are replayed. A parishioner in another church told me once, "My husband went on a prolonged retreat and when he came back he was loving, considerate, and kind-hearted, that is until his mother came to visit." When we fail, we feel humiliated, brought back to the realization we have not progressed as far as we thought. As part of God's grace, we are given time to change, even a lifetime, if we feel we are too much like the weeds and not enough like the wheat. Like Pierre we might have been lost, but through the love of God and the warm support of our faith communities we can start anew. We are repeat offenders and so we must become repeat repenters!

Jesus' message is that the seedlings of goodness may have to grow in the same field with the weeds of selfishness, but those seedlings will eventually yield a huge harvest. In the parable the weeds do not threaten the wheat, but instead the threat comes from how **we** react to the weeds. When the householder tells the slaves to let the weeds grow, the Greek word for "let" is the same word used in the Lord's Prayer and elsewhere for forgiveness. So the real translation is forgive the weeds growing. Since we can't always tell the potentially fruitful from the potentially destructive, let us not judge them, but forgive them, to let them grow together. We are to focus our energies on growth and encouragement, rather than condemnation and weeding. The great news is that the good seeds of God's reign will **grow** no matter what evil surrounds them. We can trust God has planted good seeds in our lives and they are growing as we speak, even when some days all we see looks like weeds. Perhaps we should all wear the bracelet that reads PBPWMGIFWY: Please Be Patient With Me, God Isn't Finished With Me Yet.

Our gospel teaches that God sees us at our best and worst, when we are filled with weeds as well as wheat, yet **never** rejects us, loving us **totally** for the messy tangled gardens we are. Our mission is to resist being choked by the weeds near us, to spread the good news of God's mercy that we've received to everyone, not just those we think are worth the effort, but especially to so-called sinners, outcasts, untouchables, the marginalized who desperately need it. We must not reject the unlovely and the unloveable; we are to love them into wholeness, as opposed to the attitude of a woman parishioner in another congregation who observed, there was nothing wrong with her church that a few Christian burials couldn't cure! Since we often can't distinguish the weeds from the wheat, we are

to plant seeds of good will and kindness everywhere we can and nurture every glimmer of goodness wherever we find it. Like Pierre, some of those weeds will turn out to be wheat and only God knows which ones! And if we feel the need to take out the weed whacker, let us use it **only** on ourselves to dig out any weeds that prevent us from having a closer, more loving, and trusting relationship with Jesus. The Gospel assures us that we are **now** and **will** continue to be set free from our weedy existence by God's unconditional acceptance and transformed into faithful wheat. This God who takes our breath away never gives up on us and is always rooting for us, cheering us on to fulfill our potentials and bring forth a rich bountiful harvest of charity and compassion. And with God's patient, forgiving, and generous love, we will do it... yes, my sisters and brothers in Christ, **we** will do it!