

Tamworth City Uniting Church

Worship on 19th July 2020



As you enter this time of worship please acknowledge the custodianship of this land by the Gamilaroi peoples - the traditional owners of this land and pay respect to their elders – past and present.

Call to Worship

As many people as are led by the Spirit of God
have become children of God.

**O Lord, you search me and know me,
you know when I sit and when I stand;
should I fear I am far away, you know all my thoughts.**

You did not receive from God a spirit of slavish fear,
but a Spirit of adoption enabling us to cry “Abba! Father!”

**O Lord, you hedge me around with your love,
and lay your hand upon me.**

Such knowledge is too wonderful for me to grasp,
it is so high that my mind can never grab hold of it all.

**The Spirit bears witness with my own spirit
that we are indeed, children of God**

Song *For the fruits of all creation*

For the fruits of all creation, thanks be to God;
for his gifts to every nation, thanks be to God;
for the ploughing, sowing, reaping, silent growth while we are sleeping,
future needs in earth’s safe keeping, thanks be to God.

In the just reward of labour, God’s will is done;
in the help we give our neighbour God’s will is done;
in our worldwide task of caring for the hungry and despairing,
in the harvest we are sharing, God’s will is done.

For the harvest of the Spirit, thanks be to God;
for the good we all inherit, thanks be to God;
for all wonders that astound us, for the truths that still confound us,
most of all, that love has found us, thanks be to God.

Tis 168 Frederick Pratt Green. Copied under CCLI Worship Licence No. 604439

Prayers

Generous and loving God,
we thank you for the patience you show us, caught up as we are in an ignorance
that we do not always recognise,
and in complicity with evil that we do not readily face.
Thank you for the saving love of Jesus who embraces us no matter what happens.

There are many occasions when -
we are foolish and impetuous, but you do not leave us,
we are rebellious and stubborn, but you do not leave us,
we are selfish and arrogant, but you do not leave us,
we are anxious and faithless, but you do not leave us,
we are indifferent and prayer-less, but you do not leave us.

We thank you, gracious God, that though in this world we are often forced
to compete with each other for many things,
it is never so with your inclusive, redeeming love.
Your forgiveness is never withheld from any individual
who turns to you in repentant faith.
Thank you for including us today.
We pray in and through the name of Jesus Christ.
Amen!

Hear God's words of grace to you through Christ:
'Your sins are forgiven!
Thanks be to God!

Song *You are before me Lord, you are behind*

The Psalm set down for today is Psalm 139:1-12, 23-24. The words of this song pick up
some of the thoughts expressed in the psalm.
You might like to take the time to read the set passage as well.

You are before me, Lord, you are behind
and over me you have spread out your hand;
such knowledge is too wonderful for me,
too high to grasp, too great to understand.

Then where, Lord, from your presence shall I go,
and from your Spirit where, Lord, shall I fly?
If I ascend to heaven you are there,
and still are with me if in hell I lie;

and if I take my flight into the dawn,
or if I dwell on ocean's farthest shore,

your mighty hand will rest upon me still,
and your right hand will guard me evermore.

Search me, O God, search me and know my ways;
try me, O God, my mind and spirit try;
keep me from any path that gives you pain
and lead me in the everlasting way.

TiS 87 Ian Robertson Pitt-Watson. Copied under CCLI Worship Licence No. 604439

The Gospel *Matthew 13:24-30, 36-43*

²⁴ Jesus told them another parable: “The kingdom of heaven is like a man who sowed good seed in his field. ²⁵ But while everyone was sleeping, his enemy came and sowed weeds among the wheat, and went away. ²⁶ When the wheat sprouted and formed heads, then the weeds also appeared.

²⁷ “The owner’s servants came to him and said, ‘Sir, didn’t you sow good seed in your field? Where then did the weeds come from?’

²⁸ “‘An enemy did this,’ he replied.

“The servants asked him, ‘Do you want us to go and pull them up?’

²⁹ “‘No,’ he answered, ‘because while you are pulling the weeds, you may uproot the wheat with them. ³⁰ Let both grow together until the harvest. At that time I will tell the harvesters: First collect the weeds and tie them in bundles to be burned; then gather the wheat and bring it into my barn.’”

³⁶ Then he left the crowds and went into the house. And his disciples approached him, saying, “Explain to us the parable of the weeds of the field.” ³⁷ He answered, “The one who sows the good seed is the Son of Man; ³⁸ the field is the world, and the good seed are the children of the kingdom; the weeds are the children of the evil one, ³⁹ and the enemy who sowed them is the devil; the harvest is the end of the age, and the reapers are angels. ⁴⁰ Just as the weeds are collected and burned up with fire, so will it be at the end of the age. ⁴¹ The Son of Man will send his angels, and they will collect out of his kingdom all causes of sin and all evildoers, ⁴² and they will throw them into the furnace of fire, where there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth. ⁴³ Then the righteous will shine like the sun in the kingdom of their Father. Let anyone with ears^[a] listen!

Message

Those of you who are gardeners will know that it is not necessary to plant weeds – they appear of their own volition - and, despite our efforts to eradicate them, they keep appearing.

Just think of the hours that some of you spend weeding your lawn for clover, or weeding your garden beds before planting annuals. And despite these efforts the weeds still come up and we wonder at their resilience. We can echo the servant in the parable who said:

‘Master, did you not sow good seed in your field? Where, then, did these weeds come from?’ But what was the response of the landholder when his servants wanted to pull the weeds out? He said to them, ‘No, in gathering the weeds you would uproot the wheat along with them. Let them both grow together.’

Sometimes it is difficult to distinguish between weeds and other plants. I know that most gardeners are loathe to let amateurs weed their garden in case they pull up the wrong things. But, as someone asked at our Zoom Gathering last Sunday: ‘What IS the definition of a weed?’ I once heard that a plant is a weed when it’s in the wrong place. (If I hadn’t prepared most of

this sermon before I was reminded of this on Sunday morning – I could have used an entirely different approach!!)

But what does this parable mean for us.

It's not just a story about wheat and weeds or being a good gardener.

Most parables have many layers of meaning and this one is no exception. A few days ago I was having a conversation with a colleague about this parable. Part of what follows, comes out of that time together and the rest out of time thinking about it over the ensuing days.

These thoughts are by no means definitive, but I hope they get you thinking.

Over my time in ministry - particularly at times when a congregation, or a denomination seems to be tearing itself apart over some particular issue, I have heard comments such as the following made:

“How come people in the church don't behave more Christianly?”

“Why aren't people in the church able to get along peacefully and lovingly?”

“Why is it that the way people treat each other in the church so often seems to be at odds with what you experience outside the church?”

“You'd think the church might be one place where you'd experience the unconditional love and encouragement that Jesus spoke about, so why is everyone behaving so badly?”

Ever heard anything like that?

Or, have you ever asked yourselves those questions?

In this parable we hear a similar sort of question.

Master, that was good clean seed you sowed in the field wasn't it? Where then did these weeds come from?”

We might say that the gospel writer was addressing this story to people who were asking the same sort of questions as us.

As is so often the case in the parables of Jesus, there is something of a shock in the response Jesus gives.

We are expecting advice on how to get rid of the problem, but we don't get it.

Instead, we are told that we had better learn to live with the problem or we will end up becoming the problem.

So how do we interpret what this parable might be saying about the sort of people we are and the sort of situations we face at times: in this church and in every church?

What we need to recognize is that the presence of pettiness, differences of opinion, differences of background and understandings is inevitable in every congregation.

One reason is given in this parable, but it is not the only one.

That is, that where the Messiah sows good seed, an enemy will be sure to be trying to sabotage it.

That enemy always reserves his or her best efforts for the places where love and peace and justice are most threatening to break out, so the more a church endeavours to follow Jesus, the more the enemy will seek to infiltrate them with the seeds of bitterness and rivalry.

And I am not thinking about that enemy as being an extra person here. I think we can understand the enemy to mean what happens to us as we allow thoughts of selfishness and judgement to swamp the Spirit's work in our lives. It's when we, as individuals, always want what we want, rather than considering the whole community of faith and where God's Spirit might be leading us. It's what happens when we, as individuals, see some people as being of less worth than others, when we fail to listen and when we put others down.

The enemy, in this parable, is not from outside the community. The enemy is in fact within the community – within us, working mischief in subtle and life-threatening ways

A second reason, is that places that hold forth the promise of healing and renewal will attract those who are the most damaged and unstable. Whilst it is certainly true that the Christian church promises to be a place in which people can grow into the ways of love and mercy and

justice, if the church is also fulfilling its mission of drawing in more of the unloved victims of our society, then it can expect to also be constantly finding within itself the passive or not-so-passive expressions of hurt that are going to be present in those who have been battered by life. But I don't want us to categorize each other, for the truth is that there is something of each of these things in all of us.

We all bring our past with us. And for some of us that past means we bring pain and hurt. For others it means we bring acceptance and love. At times, during my life within the church I have been willing to respond to Christ's call wholeheartedly. At other times I have found it difficult and have resisted and have kept that resistance hidden. I don't think I am unique in this.

And so there may have been times when we fail to be wholehearted in our loving and instead sow seeds of fear, of discouragement, of judgmentalism and of selfishness.

But of course, being human, we always find these things much more recognisable and offensive in other people than in ourselves!

And, being human, whenever that ugliness rears its head and we witness acts of pettiness and lovelessness within a congregation, the temptation is to seek to weed it out.

We want to get rid of those people or things we perceive as infecting the community with their attitudes and actions.

We want to take action, to make room for the good wheat of love and mercy and justice to grow and flourish without being challenged and choked by these noxious weeds.

On the surface, this seems well motivated. Our desire could be said to be brought about by our passion for justice, our passion for love, our passion to be as Jesus wants us to be.

But this parable says: "Don't! Don't even try!"

There are three reasons implied in what it says. The first is that any weeding that is to be done is not our job, but God's.

The second is the likelihood of being completely mistaken. The weed described in the story is a common grass that looks a lot like wheat. The good wheat and the weed are often difficult to distinguish from one another. And given that we are all something of a mixture of each, no wonder. The violence of our attempts to weed out evil are almost inevitably misdirected.

And the third reason, is the danger that any attempts to weed out the problem people or problem things will actually uproot and harm the innocent. No matter how well-motivated and appropriately targeted we think our weeding is, there is the danger that it will do as much harm to the innocent as to the deserving. And there is also the danger that things will escalate and our attempt to destroy the evil in our midst becomes an evil in and of itself.

And when this happens, it shows us again just how clever and devious the work of evil is. When the seeds of fear, of intolerance of selfishness, and judgmentalism are sown within us they, in turn, lead us to start destroying one another.

We can be duped into thinking that our weeding can be done in the name of all that is good and right. Just as the servants in the parable would have seriously damaged the whole crop in their misguided weeding, so we get conned into doing our weeding in the name of righteousness and, in the process, wreck all the good that is happening.

Just one final comment.

I am not saying that we give free reign to the pettiness or selfishness that can at times take hold of a community of faith.

We are not called to pretend that the wheat and the weeds are no different.

We are not called to refrain from calling for repentance and change.

But we *are* called to refrain from attacking what we think might be weeds.

Unless we read this passage in Greek, or read a commentary which draws our attention to it, there is something that we can miss.

It is the Greek word at the start of the farmer's instruction when he says, "Let the wheat and the weeds grow together." It is that word "let" or "permit" or "allow". The same Greek word also means "forgive".

This is not just a passive ignoring of the problem. It is an active naming and forgiving of it. And most importantly we are called to actively forgive, to accept one another – with all our differences, to love one another without conditions and to encourage each other in our journeys of faith and discipleship.

One way of reading this parable is to understand that the means to get rid of the pettiness and nastiness that often happens in our congregational life, is not through the violence of weeding, but through the grace of courageous forgiving and accepting. – both ourselves and others.

Let's allow the weeds and the wheat to grow together until the harvest, and when the harvest comes, we may find that we have a whole lot more wheat and a whole lot less weeds than we thought.

And even if that doesn't happen, let's leave the judgment to God.

Song *Help us accept each other*

Help us accept each other as Christ accepted us;
teach us as sister, brother, each person to embrace.
Be present, Lord, among us and bring us to believe
we are ourselves accepted and meant to love and live.

Teach us, O Lord, your lessons, as in our daily life
we struggle to be human and search for hope and faith.
Tach us to care for people, for all – not just for some,
to love them as we find them or as they may become.

Let your acceptance change us, so that we may be moved
in living situations to do the truth in love;
to practise your acceptance until we know by heart
the table of forgiveness and laughter's healing art.

Lord, for today's encounters with all who are in need,
who hunger for acceptance, for righteousness and bread,
we need new eyes for seeing, new hands for holding on:
renew us with your Spirit;
Lord, free us, make us one!

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Prayers of the People
(Prepared by Margaret Cupitt)

May God, who gives patience and encouragement, help us live in complete harmony with each other, as is fitting for followers of Christ Jesus; Then all of us can join together with one voice, giving praise and glory to God, the Father of our Lord Jesus Christ; accepting each other just as Christ has accepted us so that God will be given glory. (Romans 15:5-7)

We stand convicted Lord—convicted that our passion to get a job done quickly often takes precedent over our calling to love people well. Rather than enjoying the diversity of

perspectives, insights, and emotional wiring in others, we endure it at best and resent it at worse. Rather than heeding Paul's words to "accept each other just as Christ has accepted us" we often want or expect people to see and do things our way.

Father, we are so glad you are the God who "gives patience and encouragement," because we need both. We need patience to enjoy and accept the rich diversity of people and perspectives that surround us – where we live, work, and play.

God of all creation, you hold the depths of the earth in your hands.

Fill our souls with your wonderful love and light.

Give us strength and courage to reflect that love and light in the world.

Let us never shrink back from who we are in you or hide our light inside ourselves. Renew in us a sense of joy, painting the dark shadows around us with your light, your love and your salvation.

Hear us today as we pray for a world too often darkened by hatred, evil, power and greed; Refugee families struggle to live day by day. Others are continually anxious about a roof over their head and where the next meal will come from. Others worry about how to pay mortgages, school fees and other expenses. And the many pressures under which families live will surely affect their relationships with one another. Frustration and anxiety can often lead people who are frustrated and anxious to speak and act disrespectfully to one another. Words are said and actions taken that leave wounds and feed further disrespect

May we not only love but accept and enjoy each other. May Your love, joy, peace, and patience be at the heart of our relationships with one another, along with Your kindness and goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control May we love and accept one another just as we are, not waiting for change or perfection. May Your love, joy, peace, and patience be at the heart of our relationships with one another, along with Your kindness and goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control.

Deliver us from mindless quarrels and destinations that lead us nowhere, but away from You.

Free us from divisiveness, and melt our hardened hearts to love, not hate, and to heal, not debate.

Open our eyes to see others as You do—with godly potential and value. We share the pain and anguish of those who have had to flee from their homes, countries and livelihoods, who risk their lives, desperate for a new start free from fear and war.

May they see your light, feel your strength and power and know the truth of your promise that we shall not be overcome by the dark shadows of life or the darkness of human nature. May we encourage each other, and build one another up in every circumstance this we pray in His wonderful name Amen

Song *Father, Lord of all creation*

Father, Lord of all creation, ground of being, life and love;
height and depth beyond description only life in you can prove;
you are mortal life's dependence: thought, speech, sight are ours by grace;
yours is every hour's existence, sovereign Lord of time and space.

Jesus Christ, the Man for others, we, your people, make our prayer:
let us love as sisters, brothers, all whose burdens we can share.
Where your name binds us together you, Lord Christ, will surely be;
where no selfishness can sever there your love we all may see.

Holy Spirit, rushing burning, wind and flame of Pentecost,
fill our hearts afresh with yearning to regain what we have lost.
May your love unite our action, nevermore to speak alone:

God, in us abolish faction, and through us your love make known.

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Blessing

As you leave this time of worship
may you know the presence of God with you in everything.
May you experience Christ walking beside you at all times.
And may you be aware of the Spirit – calling you, encouraging you,
challenging you and leading you into new places of growth and service.
Amen!