

*Long ago in a little village, there was a rich man who never gave a penny to anyone --whether it was a family who had lost their home in a fire or a poor widow who could not afford to bury her husband or new books needed at the village school, always his answer was the same: "Go away and do not ask me for money again!"*

*After awhile people in the village didn't even call him by his name; they simply called him "The Miser."*

*Now in the same village, there was a shoemaker. He was not only a very cheerful and friendly man, but he was very generous too. Any time that he heard someone in the village was in need he helped immediately. No one was ever turned away empty-handed from his door.*

*One day, The Miser died. The only people at his funeral were the rabbi who presided and the shammass, the caretaker of the synagogue who dug his grave. They buried him on the far side of the cemetery next to the wall; a place usually reserved for paupers.*

*As the days passed, the rabbi heard some disturbing news about the shoemaker. "He is no longer giving alms to the beggars" complained one man. "He has refused every charity that has approached him," said another. And since the shoemaker was a member of the rabbi's congregation, he decided to go ask him what was wrong.*

*When the rabbi asked the shoemaker why he was no longer giving, the shoemaker said, "Rabbi, did it never occur to you to wonder how it was that a poor shoemaker could give so generously?" The rabbi looked down, "uh...well...no..." The shoemaker continued, "Many years ago, the man you called The Miser came to me with a huge sum of money. He asked me to distribute the money to anyone in need and he replenished it monthly. He said to me, 'I want to give without people making a fuss. I don't want them dedicating a window to me in the synagogue or putting a plaque on the bima.' Now he is dead and the money is gone too."*

*The rabbi left the shoemaker's house, quiet and thoughtful.*

*The following sabbath, rabbi told the villagers the story and after the service, they all walked to the grave of the Miser and prayed. And years later, when the rabbi reached the end of his life, he asked to be buried near the fence, next to the grave of the man known as The Miser.*

We are not very good sometimes at discerning the truth about people...we are quick to jump to conclusions. Or to use the language of today's parable, we are not very good at telling the difference between the weeds and the wheat.

Now in case your attention wandered during the Gospel reading and you were wondering if it might actually be bearable outside to do some yard work this afternoon, here's a recap of the parable: Jesus compares the Kingdom of Heaven to a landowner who sows good seed in his field but one night while everyone is sleeping, an enemy comes and sows weeds among the wheat. When the wheat comes up and bears grain, the weeds come up too. The landowner's servants when they see the weeds, ask him, "Didn't you plant good seed in this field? How did the weeds get here?" When the master explains that an enemy has done this, the servants ask "Do you want us to go pull them up?" And the landowner says no, because in pulling up the

weeds, they may also destroy the wheat. Let it grow together until the harvest, at that time I will tell the harvesters to gather up the weeds into bundles first so that they may be burned and then gather the wheat and bring it into the landowner's barns.

Now the weeds that Jesus is talking about here are not just dandelions bedeviling your begonias -- the word used here in Greek is zizania or in Aramaic, ziwan. Ziwan is nasty stuff. It looks a lot like wheat when it is growing, and it produces grains like wheat when mature. But you do not want to have any ziwan mixed in with your flour for bread! Ziwan is toxic; it can cause dizziness, nausea, diarrhea, convulsions and even death were you to eat too much of it! The only way to guarantee that the wheat crop would be pure was for the grains to be sifted grain by grain; a task usually performed by the women.

The first century hearers of this story would have understood the wisdom of the landowner in telling the servants to wait until the harvest to separate the wheat from the weeds. Not only do the roots of weeds become thoroughly entangled with the roots of the wheat as it grows, but as we heard in the parable of the sower last week, the wheat was not planted in rows; so a lot of wheat be pulled up with the weeds and a good bit of it would be stomped on too -- so it really is wise to just be patient and let the harvesters take care of it...but so often we are not wise....

There are several other parables told in the whole of Chapter 11, and Matthew adds the comment that Jesus always used parables in his teaching in fulfillment of the words of the prophet...but I think Jesus also used stories because he knew that we tend to remember them even when we forget everything else. Here is a story that I remember:

More than 20 years ago now, I heard Dr. Glenn Hinson speak at Richmond Hill. Dr. Hinson had been teaching church history for over 30 years at Southern Baptist Theological Seminary when he came into the cross-hairs of the fundamentalists who were trying "weed out" those church leaders and professors who were in their opinion too liberal. He stayed under the radar for about four years, until one of the fundamentalists made the public statement, "God Almighty does not hear the prayer of a Jew". Dr. Hinson could not keep quiet; not only was this not true from a Biblical standpoint, but this statement disenfranchised everyone from Abraham to Jesus himself. From then on he was brought up on charges of heresy that were always dismissed, only to be brought again the following year. Dr. Hinson said that he realized after 12 years of being under continuous attack at Southern Seminary, he had become so embittered that he knew he had to leave. He said "I realized I was becoming like the very people who had been attacking me." To use the metaphor of the parable: He left because he felt he was in danger of becoming a noxious weed.

Who is the weed? Who is the wheat? The interpretation of the story later by Jesus seems pretty cut and dried.

*"The one who sows the good seed is the Son of Man; <sup>38</sup> the field is the world, and the good seed are the children of the kingdom; the weeds are the children of the evil one, <sup>39</sup> and the enemy who sowed them is the devil; the harvest is the end of the age, and the reapers are angels."*

But we also know that there plenty of people in the Bible who at one time looked like weeds but turned out to be wheat: People like Jacob the trickster who became Israel; Rahab the prostitute who helped the Hebrew people claim the Promised Land; David, who despite committing adultery and murder, remained God's beloved; Peter who denied Jesus but became the rock on which the church was built; Saul the persecutor who became Paul the Apostle... Weeds get transformed into wheat all the time because that is how our God -- who is love -- works.

One day in June, 1991, Michael Weisser, the new Cantor for the Omaha, Nebraska, Jewish synagogue, answered his phone and heard an anonymous voice on the other end say, "You will be sorry you ever moved into 5810 Randolph Street, Jew boy."

Then, two days later, Julie Weisser, the Cantor's wife, opened the package and found a note that read, "The KKK is watching you, scum." The package contained brochures and flyers that claimed that the Holocaust was a lie and that Jews were responsible for America's problems. Police told the Weissers that they suspected Larry Trapp, the Grand Dragon of Nebraska's KKK was responsible for the call and the mail and warned them that Trapp was dangerous, even though he was severely disabled from long untreated diabetes.

In August 1991, Trapp began broadcasting on a local public channel a white supremacist television show. After tuning in to the first show out of curiosity, Michael Weisser called Larry Trapp on the telephone repeatedly and hung up in order to keep Trapp's phone lines busy so no one else could get through; but when he found out that this tactic was not legal, he began occasionally leaving messages on Trapp's answering machine. Michael Weisser left messages asking Trapp why he hated him so much. He told Trapp that Hitler passed laws to kill those who were disabled, those like Trapp himself.

One night, after receiving another phone call from Weisser, Trapp picked up the phone and attempted to yell insults at Weisser who had already hung up. In anger, a few days later, Trapp left a flatulent sound on the greeting of his own answering machine. When Weisser next tried to leave a message, he laughed at the sound and said to the machine, "Sounds like the voice of the Master Race to me!"

The next time Weisser called, Trapp picked up the phone and they began a discussion in which Trapp yelled at Weisser to stop harassing him. Weisser responded by saying that he had no intention of harassing Trapp and asked, at his wife Julie's suggestion, if Trapp needed help getting groceries or anything else, because his legs had been amputated.

The suggestion caught Trapp by surprise. He politely declined and told Weisser not to call again. Weisser told Trapp that he would be in touch.

In the time between August 1991, when Weisser first began calling Trapp, and November, two incidents greatly moved Trapp. First, one of Trapp's former nurses, sent him a letter about God's love for everyone, including him. Later, Trapp was brought to tears after a Vietnamese woman helped him onto the elevator when she noticed he was blind.

On 12 November, Trapp decided to stop airing his show on the public broadcasting station. In an interview about the decision he said that while he was still a member of the Klan, he now blamed the U.S. government for all the country's problems. And then one day, Trapp called the Weissers and said, "I want out but I don't know how to do it..."

Michael and Julie Weisser then went over to Trapp's house to talk to him. Larry formally resigned from the Ku Klux Klan. He then wrote resignation letters to the other hate groups that he belonged to. After these resignations, he began sending apologies to all of the people he had been harassing. He also contacted law enforcement officials in order to give them all the information he had about the Klan and the actions of its members.

During this process, the Weissers brought Trapp to their congregation, cleaned his apartment, and eventually invited him to move in with them when his health began to fail. Even with his failing health, Trapp tried to persuade other Klan members and incarcerated youth to follow his example.

On 5 June 1992, Larry Trapp converted to Judaism at Michael Weisser's synagogue, a building he had previously planned to blow up that very summer. He died three months later, holding the hands of Michael and Julie Weisser.

Our God is a God of transforming love who can turn even the deadliest weed into life-giving wheat. Thanks be to God. Amen.