

**This is July 19<sup>th</sup>, 2020...the 7<sup>th</sup> Sunday after Pentecost, 2020**

I am Pastor Mary Jo Laabs. On behalf of our family of faith here at Community United Church of Christ in Medford, WI, welcome to this time of Worship!

It is our mission here to serve, to pray, to love, and to hold true to these words:

“No matter who you are or where you are on your life’s journey, you are welcome here.”

If you know someone who would appreciate receiving a paper copy of the weekly messages, please call me at 715-351-0450

**Community Needs:** Last year, we, as community UCC, decided to partner with 4 other local churches in the “Community Mission with Jesus.” Since January 1, 2020, this mutual "mission" in the community of Medford has paid out over \$5000 to assist people with various needs. Funding comes from grants & gifts of money from generous donors in the community and from the churches that participate in this mission. Many thanks to the members and friends of our church who have personally helped by giving “needed” items, by being there on "moving days" and by giving gift cards and monetary donations! Our funds are getting low and there are new “needs” every day. I am asking you today to look into your heart, and if you feel so moved to give a monetary donation to this much-needed work in our midst, please write your check to “Community Mission with Jesus,” and send it to Community UCC, 510 E Broadway Ave, Medford, WI 54451 Many thanks!

We will begin with this “Call to Worship”

One: We come to worship God, not to boast in ourselves.

**All: Our wisdom, our might, out wealth- all these are gifts from a loving God.**

One: If we must boast, then let us boast in this:

**All: That we come as hungry children; hungry to know the will of God; eager to listen for God’s word of hope and joy; ready for it to enter and change our lives; willing to hear and become God’s story of faith; hopeful that others might find its comfort and strength.**

One: God creates and it is good. God comes and shares the common lot of humankind in Jesus Christ.

God acts with steadfast love and righteousness.

**All: In these things, God takes delight. Come, let us worship God.**

Today’s scripture is taken from the Gospel of **Matthew 13:24-30, 36-43**

It is taken from The Message Interpretation of the Bible.

<sup>24-26</sup> Jesus (He) told another story. “God’s kingdom is like a farmer who planted good seed in his field. That night, while his hired men were asleep, his enemy sowed thistles all through the wheat and slipped away before dawn. When the first green shoots appeared and the grain began to form, the thistles showed up, too. <sup>27</sup> “The farmhands came to the farmer and said, ‘Master, that was clean seed you planted, wasn’t it? Where did these thistles come from?’ <sup>28</sup> “He answered, ‘Some enemy did this.’

“The farmhands asked, ‘Should we weed out the thistles?’ <sup>29-30</sup> “He said, ‘No, if you weed the thistles, you’ll pull up the wheat, too. Let them grow together until harvest time. Then I’ll instruct the harvesters to pull up the thistles and tie them in bundles for the fire, then gather the wheat and put it in the barn.’”

*“The Curtain of History”*

<sup>36</sup> Jesus dismissed the congregation and went into the house. His disciples came in and said, “Explain to us that story of the thistles in the field.”

<sup>37-39</sup> So he explained. “The farmer who sows the pure seed is the Son of Man. The field is the world, the pure seeds are subjects of the kingdom, the thistles are subjects of the Devil, and the enemy who sows them is the Devil. The harvest is the end of the age, the curtain of history. The harvest hands are angels. <sup>40-43</sup> “The picture of thistles pulled up and burned is a scene from the final act. The Son of Man will send his angels, weed out the thistles from his kingdom, pitch them in the trash, and be done with them.

They are going to complain to high heaven, but nobody is going to listen.  
At the same time, ripe, holy lives will mature and adorn the kingdom of their Father.

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**The title of my message today is:** “Weeding 101”

Pray with me: Merciful God, you love every creature, every plant and weed that grows upon this earth, every planet, sun, moon and star. We often get the idea that we are the best; that people who look like us and think like us are the best. Forgive our narrowmindedness and our tendency to separate the wheat from the weeds. Instead, guide us to learn from Jesus how to treat everyone as equals, to spend less time judging our neighbors and more time helping them. We offer to you our humble thanks and praise for your help each day and for loving us just the way we are. Amen.

Paul, in his letter to the Romans 12:2 (as Interpreted in The Message) wrote this to the young church in the first century: “Unlike the culture around you, always dragging you down to its level of immaturity, God brings the best out of you, develops well-formed maturity in you.”

“Oh, if only this were true,” writes Rev. Lillian Daniel in a devotional this week. She continues, “I would like to think that God is always bringing out the best in people, but sometimes it seems like people act their very worst around God.”

Do you know anyone who fits that description? Think of someone who has betrayed you, someone who has lied to you, or someone you wish you would never have met. If we lived in a fairy tale and could snap our fingers and make him or her or them disappear from our lives, who would it be? Truth is...this is no fairy tale, but it sometimes sounds like we might be living in the parable that Jesus told in today’s scripture.

What does the parable of the weeds bring to your mind? Maybe just the surface value of “picking weeds” reminds you that *yours* are outgrowing the flowers and vegetables in your garden. “Is this one a hybrid rose or a wild rose?” “Is this one a carrot, some lettuce or a weed?” Even after many years of gardening, some weeds just start to look like they belong there, don’t they?

You might be thinking about picking weeds being a back-wrenching work. Did it ever occur to you to just whack down all the tall weeds and the plants and then just plant some black plastic and rocks?? It would be easier that way. But, then, those lilies and tomatoes and the occasional wildflower or self-starting dill would be missing. And what would the bees do? Sometimes, just allowing the weeds to grow right along with the perennials and annual flowers, forms a lovely flowerbed.

What else does this parable of the weeds and the wheat bring to your mind? If we look a little deeper now and see the weeds and the wheat *as people*, what do you think of? Before your mind wanders in all directions, this is what Michael Green, a British Theologian, says about the parables that Jesus tells.

“Parables are signs of protest. Parables are not meant to pat us on the back, but to give us a kick in the pants. They are not intended to comfort us, but to challenge us and change us. Parables speak out against the status quo. Parables are demonstrators waving signs of protest, speaking out against our ways of thinking, our traditional ways of experiencing and obeying God, our spiritual institution.”

For some reason, the parable of the weeds and the wheat brings to my mind making new friends when I was a young child, and how my mother would say things like, “You can’t play with her, she lives across the street.” I often wondered if it really was *the street* that was the problem, but dare not ask. And, it leads me to daydream about deciding who would be my life partner in later life. Quite a bit of weeding was necessary before the “match made in heaven” appeared on my doorstep with a bouquet of daffodils!

Let’s face it, we, as human beings, are quite preoccupied with who’s “in” and who’s “out.” Forming relationships is a lifelong, time-consuming, sometimes heart-wrenching work. If we had no friends, no spouses, no partners or no work colleagues, something of great value would be missing.

So, let’s take a mental inventory of the people we have known, both the weeds and the wheat. If you hadn’t known the “weedy, thistly” ones, the journey of your life may have been different, true...but, those bad experiences have made you more resilient. That bad temper made yours more compassionate. That unscrupulous one made you the honest person that you are. That mistreatment, that hurt, that discomfort at learning truths too late...worked itself out for good. Is this how God brings out the best in us?

Reach your arms up, as though you were trying to touch the ceiling. Reach, and stretch. Now, reach out in front of you and imagine reaching out to someone that you care about. If you are with that person, reach out and touch your fingertips. And now, bring your arms back and fold them into a cross over your chest and imagine being closer to our Living God who is present with you in this very moment!

Listen to the words of the prophet, **Isaiah 43:18-19**:

This is what GOD says,  
the God who builds a road right through the ocean,  
who carves a path through pounding waves,  
The God who summons horses and chariots and armies—  
they lie down and then can't get up;  
they're snuffed out like so many candles:  
"Forget about what's happened;  
don't keep going over old history.  
Be alert, be present. I'm about to do something brand-new.  
It's bursting out! Don't you see it?  
There it is! I'm making a road through the desert,  
rivers in the badlands.  
Wild animals will say 'Thank you!'  
—the coyotes and the buzzards—  
because I provided water in the desert,  
rivers through the sun-baked earth,  
drinking water for the people I chose,  
the people I made especially for myself,  
a people custom-made to praise me.

God is not a vengeful, grudge-holding God and does not keep track of all of the times WE, ourselves have been the weeds and the thistles. The scripture says that the weeds are all those "who do evil." Are you a little uncomfortable with that? Well, we are not exempt from doing bad things. If we say we are without sin, we deceive ourselves. It is so much easier to think of someone else who has done an evil thing. Murderers? Rapists? Adulterers? Thieves? Does evil include fibbing on your tax returns count or cheating on a test? How about gossiping? And what about the bullies and the racists? What about those who ignore the needs of their neighbors, of the children, of this good earth? We do not have to read very far in the Bible to learn of the evil things that people have done for 1000's of years.

The parable today shows us that God's infinite patience and grace enables us to move on with the crucial business of loving one another. We shouldn't spend another sleepless night coming up with an answer to who is "in" and who is "out."

Oh, and I would say that Jesus not so kindly is telling us to make sure that we're not the weeds.

Let's take this as a challenge: **Do not act your worst around God.** My friends, God is right here, right now. So, let's try to be our brightest and best today and every day.

Let no thistles and weeds choke out the love in our hearts!

Oh God, Master Gardener, we trust you to let the gardens of our lives be properly weeded. We promise to try harder to do our best to love you, to love creation, to love the children and to love one another.

Let us spend a few moments in silence looking back in our minds at the days of this past week.

Was I trying to separate the weeds from the flowers in the garden of my life?

Or, was I the weed in relationships, in meetings, at Walmart, at the gas station?

Spend a few moments asking forgiveness, with every good intention to do better.

**Breathe in clarity.      Breathe out impatience.**

O God of endless beauty, we who live on your land marvel at your great gifts to us. We give you thanks

for these warm days of summer. Let the fields of corn, the wildflowers in the woods, the weeds in the sidewalk cracks, the thistle in the grass... remind us that we each are equal in your sight. Remove from us that which keeps us from realizing that you are near.

We lift to you those whose lives have been changed because of harsh words and discrimination, loss of work and work restrictions, hatred and slander, dishonesty, betrayal, and broken vows; storms, floods, fires and explosions, accidents.

We lift our prayers to you for those who are in need of healing at this time, as we name them out loud or hold them in our hearts. We lift our prayers for those who are living with the COVID virus and struggling to heal. Hear our prayers for those essential workers who are in risk of being infected by the virus each day. We pray especially for the scientists who are working diligently to find a vaccine; for physicians, nurses, CNAs and all those who work in hospitals and medical facilities. Tune our ears to listen to that small voice of yours that speaks to our hearts, encouraging us to help keep one another safe and healthy.

We pray for our President, for our Governor and all leaders in every state. Gracious God, guide them in the decisions they make and in the words they speak. Let them act unselfishly to uphold liberty, justice and compassion for all. Gracious God, we give you thanks and praise this day, for all the many blessings we have received... as we pray in the name and in the words of Jesus:

Our Father, who art in heaven, hallowed be thy name, thy kingdom come.

Thy will be done, on earth as it is in heaven. Give us this day, our daily bread, and forgive us our sins, as we forgive those who sin against us. And lead us not into temptation but deliver us from evil.

For thine is the kingdom, the power and the glory forever. Amen.

**Hymn #473: "What a Friend We Have in Jesus"** [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Vlv0zzKs\\_rY](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Vlv0zzKs_rY)

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1. What a friend we have in Jesus, all our sins and griefs to bear!  
What a privilege to carry everything to God in prayer!  
O what peace we often forfeit, O what needless pain we bear  
All because we do not carry everything to God in prayer!
2. Have we trials and temptations? Is there trouble anywhere?  
We should never be discouraged; take it to the Lord in prayer!  
Can we find a friend so faithful who will all our sorrows share?  
Jesus knows our every weakness; take it to the Lord in prayer!
3. Are we weak and heavy laden, cumbered with a load of care?  
Precious Savior, still our refuge- take it to the Lord in prayer!  
Do your friends despise, forsake you? Take it to the Lord in prayer!  
In His arms He'll take and shield you; you wilt find a solace there.

**Offertory:** The message today encourages us to listen to our hearts more closely. Let us not ignore God's nudges to care for creation, to care for our neighbors, to care for the children! We, as members and friends of this church family, are committed to minister to one another and to the world around us.

Thank you, to all of you whose various gifts have enabled Community United Church of Christ to faithfully serve.

**Benediction:** Go out into the world in peace. Have courage.

Hold fast to what is good. Return no one evil for evil.

Strengthen the fainthearted. Support the weak and help the suffering. Honor all people.

Repeat after me: God is good. All the time.

This hour's worship has ended, let our service carry on.

