

Weedy People

In the late 50s and the early 60s (in the last millennium), there was a Spring ritual on the farm where I was raised. And it involved me! The ritual was this: With me in tow, Daddy would follow our eight milk cows out into the cow pasture. He would look through the fresh growing grass and exclaim, "There it is. Jimson weed is starting to grow. Get out your hoe, boy, and start digging the Jimson weed up. We don't want Bossy and Reddy and the other cows sick from trying to eat it. Make sure you get every last one. You know how they blend in and the cows might not notice what they're eating and get bloated!"

Jimson weed is very toxic. It's a member of the Nightshade family and you might remember how Agatha Christie used it to poison folks in her novels. Jimson weed was originally called Jamestown weed, harkening back to 1676 when British soldiers were in town to suppress the Bacon Rebellion. The British soldiers used the plant as a narcotic and endured an eleven day stupor. And being a good Virginia boy, living not far from Jamestown, Spring time would find me out doing my duty - digging up these weeds.

In the parable I read from Matthew, you can understand why the workers wanted to grab their hoes and dig up the weeds that were growing in the wheat fields. The weeds were "tares" or "darnel" and they were very invasive. And early on, these weeds looked like the new wheat. Being hard to tell them apart, the parable explains that it is best to let them grow together until the wheat is harvested. At harvest time, the weeds can be separated and burned. So, the Master Story Teller is saying, "don't pull the weeds! Even if an enemy put them there. Evil is very real in this world. But you are not the judge and jury. You never know until the end." God is the one who decides who is evil and who is not. Who gets burned and who doesn't! God is the Big Daddy in charge. As it says in the Isaiah text, "I am the first and the last; besides me there is no god. Who is like me? Let them proclaim it, let them declare and set it forth before me . . . Is there any god besides me. There is no other rock; I know not one."

The twelve disciples needed to hear this message. They certainly made up the inner circle of Jesus. When they looked out and saw the crowds listening to Jesus tell his amazing stories, they probably felt a little miffed. "After all, who are all these 'weedy people' out there in the crowd anyway? They are not his followers. They're just hanger-ons. We are his followers! We are the greatest in the kingdom of heaven.

One of us should be on his left hand and one of us on his right hand! And children . . . little children . . . let them be gone.” You remember, right, that’s when he set a little child among them? But they probably didn’t get it, because it’s only human nature to want to pull the weeds!

I’m thinking about two “weedy people” this morning. The first was named John Newton. You know him as the writer of “Amazing Grace.” It is estimated that “Amazing Grace” is sung in public at least ten million times a year. Its lyrics are older than the Declaration of Independence. It was penned by John Newton for his New Year’s service in little Olney, England in 1773. But long before this, he could have been discarded, pulled up like a weed, thrown away by those who had given up on him.

After all, John Newton had dumped his childhood faith that he had learned at the feet of his mother. So, in 1736, at the age of eleven, he went off to sea, completing six voyages over the next six years. And not only could he cuss like a sailor but he could brawl with the best of them. In 1744 he deserted his post in the Royal Navy but was eventually caught and demoted to a common seaman. What a loser! After this he became enamored with the “transatlantic slave trade” as an easy way to make big bucks and after years of slave ship work, he became a slave ship captain himself. But this “wretch”, this “weedy person” had a radical conversion, became a Church of England clergyman and for the rest of his life, worked tirelessly to abolish the slave trade in England. He died nine months after Parliament abolished the slave trade throughout the British Empire.

As a clergyman in Olney, England, his ministry was deeply influenced by his former wretched state and he gave himself wholly to other “weedy people.” One such person was named William Cowper. Cowper was a complete mess. If there ever was a weed that needed to be dug up from the ground, Cowper was such a weed. Maybe even a Jimson weed! He had severe fits of depression, had several close calls with death by suicide and spent several years in an “insane asylum.” But John Newton never gave up on this parishioner of his. Reverend Newton knew what it meant to experience “amazing grace, how sweet the sound, that saved a wretch like me.” And he wasn’t about to give up on another weedy person.

Newton knew that William Cowper was a good poet, maybe even a great poet (and that turned out to be the case). He received great criticism for giving so much of his time to this “weed,” especially when Newton convinced Cowper to write a hymnal with him. He did it! They did it! If you want a cool copy of this hymnal containing 348 hymns, simply called the “Olney Hymnal, you can pick up a copy at the “Cowper and Newton

Museum” in Olney, England, a small town about fifty miles north of London. It’s bound in red material to give a distinctive appeal and will stand out in your bookcase.

But to make it simpler for you this morning, turn with me to hymn number 30 in the pew hymnal and follow along as I read aloud the first and last stanzas of one of my very favorite hymns, written by this “weedy person,” former suicidal and insane asylum resident, named William Cowper:

“O God, in a mysterious way, great wonders you perform,
You plant your footsteps in the sea and ride upon
the storm. Our unbelief is sure to err and scan your
work in vain; You are your own interpreter and you
will make it plain.” By the way, he also wrote hymns
that are on numbers 739 and 800.

And let me intrude a little bit into our lives and just say this - I bet some of us have looked a little weedy at times: maybe the kid who talked way too much in class or the one who was too shy to say anything; or maybe the kid who got dropped from the team unceremoniously; or the one who made a really bad decision on whom to marry; or the one who blew a great job opportunity; or whatever it might be. We weedy people. Thank God, someone did not dig us up with an old hoe!

My Daddy died in 1969 so he never got to learn what could be accomplished by that Jimson weed he had me dig up every Spring. I was taking a ninth grade art class and I once told him that my teacher said a woman out in New Mexico paints Jimson weed flowers and one she painted in 1932 sold for quite a bit of money. He simply said, “that’s crazy!” I often wonder what he would have said if he had learned that this same painting sold for 44.4 million dollars at Sotheby’s in 2014! Don’t dig up those weeds said the Master Teacher. Let God sort it all out. You are not the judge! You just live in his “amazing grace” and keep on planting the good wheat. AMEN!