
The gift of weeds in our life
Chapel in the Park United Church
July 19, 2026
by Rev. Dr. Paul Shepherd

Based on Matthew 13:24-30, 36-43

It must be summer. Once again we have a sermon title that probably sounded great months ago. But today - it has to actually make sense. “The gift of weeds in our life”. What does that mean? Aren’t weeds bad? Aren’t weed something we work hard to eliminate?

So lets start with the basics. And the most basic question must be ... what is a weed?

Often, we think of weeds in the garden. Vegetation. So let’s start there. Help me out here.

[image: dandelions]

Are these weeds?

(ask people to give their opinion)

[image: corn stalks]

Are these weeds?

(ask people to give their opinion)

So you think that dandelions are weeds and corn is not. Well, you are probably right.

[image: dandelions in crack]

When we see dandelions growing through a crack in a driveway, I think we will all agree that dandelions are weeds. But what if we had a crack in our driveway and corn grew there?

[image: corn in crack]

Is corn now a weed? I thought we just agreed that corn was not a weed. What is going on here?

In truth, there really is no such thing as a weed. Whether or not something is called a “weed” depends on our context. Which means, it depends on our attitude. Because the functional definition of a weed is either a plant that we do not want at all. Or

it is a plant that we don't want in the place that it happens to be.

So weeds are not weeds based on their nature. Weeds are weeds based on our expectations, our attitudes, our desires. Which seems a bit unfair to the plants themselves if you want my opinion.

As a simple example, I grew up thinking that dandelions were weeds. Which we used to kill with chemicals. But when I was a teenager, many families from Italy moved into our neighbourhood. They harvested the dandelions - for wine and for salads. To my Italian-Canadian neighbours dandelions were not weeds. They were free food! The idea that dandelions are weeds is just a belief that I grew up with.

We cannot discuss weeds without coming fact-to-face with our desires. Our expectations in life. And weeds are anything that deviate from our wants and expectations. This of course goes far beyond plants. Consider other "weeds" in our lives. For many people the pandemic felt like a weed. Some of our current social unrest might feel like a weed. You yourself might have a physical or mental condition that feels like a weed in your life. You might be in an emotional space that feels like a weed in your life.

So what is the gift in those weeds? Good question. And we will come back to that. But first, I want to discuss the story in Matthew. Because on the surface, the story is about weeds. Sort of. But not really. Come to think of it not at all.

[image: wheat and tares]

I'm sure we all know that classic story, often called "the wheat and the weeds", or sometimes "the wheat and the tares". What do you make of that story?

On the surface, the story as written is about good and evil. The wheat represents the good, and the weeds represent the evil. The wheat and the weeds grow together. And Jesus suggests leaving the weeds where they are in order to avoid damaging the wheat. However, at the end of time, angels will be able to separate the wheat from the weeds.

Sometimes, we read this story in a way that says that we cannot separate good from evil ourselves. Mainly because each of us carries good and evil within. We covered this idea on June 21 this year. Here's a brief recap.

[image: stoning]

Jesus explains this in the story in John 8 where people are gathering in order to

stone a woman who was caught in an adulterous act. And as the people are preparing to stone the woman, Jesus says, “let anyone among you who is without sin be the first to throw a stone at her.” And of course, no-one throws a stone. Because no-one is without sin. Each of us carries good and evil, so they cannot easily be separated - at least not while we are still alive. And that message is also what we hear in the parable of the wheat and the weeds.

But I want to suggest there is a deeper meaning embedded in this parable. And that deeper meaning is revealed if we simply read a bit more of Matthew. The lectionary cut out the juicy bit because it gave us the parable of the wheat and the weeds - skipped 6 verses - and then came back for the part where Jesus explains the parable of the wheat and the weeds to the disciples. And while that is very logical, we need to ask ... what did the lectionary cut out?

[image: mustard field]

The lectionary removed two short stories, collectively called “The Parables of the Mustard Seed and the Yeast”. Here they are:

“Jesus told them another parable: ‘The kingdom of heaven is like a mustard seed, which a man took and planted in his field. Though it is the smallest of all seeds, yet when it grows, it is the largest of garden plants and becomes a tree, so that the birds come and perch in its branches.’ Then he told them still another parable: ‘The kingdom of heaven is like yeast that a woman took and mixed into about sixty pounds of flour until it worked all through the dough’.”

When we read those three parables together, we have parables about weeds, mustard, and yeast. And those three items were chosen intentionally because they would have carried meaning for Jesus’s audience. All three items - weeds, mustard, and yeast - carried negative associations in Jesus's world. They were to be avoided.

Mustard was considered a weed - something you were not supposed to deliberately plant in a garden because it spreads and takes over. Jesus is being very provocative here. Jesus is saying that the kingdom of God shows up like a weed. Uninvited. Uncontrollable. Uncultivated. And yet, it grows into something that supports life. In this story, a weed is not an invader in your garden that you have to grudgingly

deal with. A weed is God's preferred method of showing up!

Likewise, Jesus says that the kingdom of God is like leaven. Throughout the Hebrew Bible leaven is consistently used as an image of corruption and contamination.

Jesus's choice of weeds, mustard, and leaven is the point. Three parables in a row where the vehicle for the kingdom of God is something that the local people would have thought of as impure, invasive, forbidden. And yet, Jesus says that is how the kingdom of God arrives. That is how God shows up. These parables from Jesus challenge the entire religious system of purity culture. The kingdom of God is NOT about whether people are clean or unclean, or who is permitted and who is forbidden. All are welcome in the kingdom of God.

[image: wheat and tares]

So what does all this have to do with us? Let's return to where we started this discussion. So what is the gift of the weeds in our own lives? Or to rephrase it. What is it that we can learn from the weeds in our lives?

In the parable of the wheat and the weeds, the servants were told to not pull up the weeds because that would also damage the wheat. That issue was not that the servants could not tell the wheat from the weeds. The issue was - why did the servants need to decide right now. The servants were told that they must live without sorting the plants right away. They must live with uncertainty.

And let's be honest, we do not usually like uncertainty. We usually want to judge quickly and move on. Not live with uncertainty. But the kingdom of God requires us to live with a certain amount of uncertainty. The issue is not that sometimes things that look good turn out to be evil or that things that look evil turn out to be good. It's that unknown things are unknown. Unknown things - people or situations - also develop over time. Being judgemental too fast can lead to poor decisions.

[image: quote below]

As Voltaire said, "Uncertainty is an uncomfortable position. But certainty is absurd".

Consider the pandemic. Many people have told me that was like a weed in their life. We were isolated. We missed our family and friends. It was terrible, right? Yes, but

the pandemic also led to new opportunities. Personally I got a much better appreciation for the fact that many people felt very isolated even before the pandemic. Many of us learned to use video, audio, and technology in new ways. I suspect that without the pandemic forcing Chapel in the Park to hold services online, we would not be online today. And the many people who join us online today would not be able to be with us now.

That is not just a nice story. Our brains do not grow new pathways by confirming what they already expect. Our brains grow when they are handed something unfamiliar to work with. The pandemic, for all it took from us, gave a lot of our brains exactly that. That is exactly what we get from unplanned weeds too.

As I said earlier, we cannot discuss weeds without coming fact-to-face with our wants. Our expectations in life. And weeds are anything that deviate from our wants and expectations. So one thing we learn from the weeds in our lives is that we learn about ourselves. We learn about our expectations and desires. When something irritates you, use that irritation to learn something about yourself. What is it about you you personally ... that makes you irritated by a particular weed?

[image: jung quote below]

Carl Jung said, "Everything that irritates us about other [people] can lead us to an understanding about ourselves".

Let me give you some examples. Think of a sibling - maybe one who, every time the family gets together, manages to bring up something you did wrong twenty years ago. Or maybe it's not a sibling. Maybe it's your adult child who never calls first, and when you call, they respond with a text. Or your spouse who leaves the cupboard doors open, every single time, for forty years.

That irritation is real. But it's also information - not about them, but about you. Maybe the sibling's comment stings because some part of you never stopped needing your family's approval. Maybe the unanswered call bothers you because it touches something about how connected you feel to people you love. Maybe your reaction to the cupboard door is not actually about the cupboard door.

None of that excuses anyone's behaviour, of course. But it does mean we have a

choice every time that irritation shows up. We can decide that Uncle Bob is simply insufferable and leave it there. Or we can let Uncle Bob teach us something about ourselves that we did not already know.

When faced with a weed in your life, do you criticize the weed? Or do you take advantage of the opportunity to learn more about yourself?

[image: wheat and tares]

One other gift of weeds - almost by definition - is that weeds push us outside our comfort zones. Without weeds in our lives, we could live our lives calmly and safely hidden behind the barrier we call our comfort zone.

But do we want to live there? Do you really want to live your whole life within your comfort zone? Because staying always inside your comfort zone will ruin your life.

If we do not exercise our muscles, they atrophy over time. And the same thing is true with our minds. If we never go beyond our comfort zones, our comfort zones actually shrinks over time. So things that were once on the edge of our comfort zone - over time - become something that is now beyond our comfort zone.

Weeds are helpful to us because they force us to go beyond our comfort zone from time to time. We do not need to be heroic. We just need to take positive steps every day. After all, a good life is just a series of good days. And our best days come when we learn what we can from the weeds in our lives.

What irritates you in life? Try to hear that irritation as an invitation to learn more about yourself and who you want to be. After that, you can laugh at the weeds that used to upset you.

Jesus said that we need to live with the weeds in our lives. The only question is how we choose to live with them. Embrace the gift of the weeds in your life.

Amen.