

Gardening 101 would tell us to pull up the weeds as quickly as possible in order to allow the desired plants to flourish. And the gardeners I know certainly consider weeds the enemy, seemingly sprung up overnight. But Jesus' parable is not about horticulture. It is about the kingdom of God; life lived with Jesus at the center and basking in God's unconditional love and mercy.

Jesus' parable of the wheat and the weeds is fairly straightforward. Wheat and weeds, the good and the bad, coexist, thrive even, until the harvest, the end-times, when God alone will separate the wheat from the chaff. The explanation the disciples ask for may, in fact, have come from the early church which was plagued by a number of false prophets proclaiming their own, and not so accurate, message in Jesus' name. This may be "the enemy" which if left unchecked will choke out the authentic gospel message, the litmus test from which we know from Bishop Curry is, "if it is not about love, it is not about God." The enemy which at the end of time will be thrown into the furnace of fire with great weeping and gnashing of teeth. This probably evokes for us God's judgment, but not now, not until the end time.

So, the wheat and the weeds coexist in the great garden of humanity, the good, the bad, the marginal, the broken, the heartbroken. All equally given a chance to grow and thrive. Perhaps a chance to change, find redemption, no matter what kind of soil we are or whether, on a good day we are wheat, but more often some kind of weed.

God sows seeds indiscriminately, broadly, generously, because there is, in God's kingdom, in God's garden, always hope, always potential, always possibility for us to live into the image of God in which each and every one of us was created. None of us is a lost cause. None of us will be defined solely on the basis of what we did on our very worst day. Such is the grace and promise of God's mercy.

In 2011, my daughter-in-law directed, and produced an award-winning documentary called *The House of Suh*. In it she told the story of first-generation Korean-American Andrew Suh, aged 19, who shot and killed his sister's boyfriend, harangued by his sister who claimed he was not only abusive to her, it was he who had brutally murdered their mother years ago, and who now demanded Andrew avenge both to honor his familial obligation. It is a nuanced account of a troubled family facing the psychological complexity of cultural assimilation. I continue to find it one of the most striking stories of redemption, of a life turned around, of good coming out of bad, I have ever heard.

Iris grew up in Chicago and attended the same church as Andrew and his family. Everyone who knew Andrew, described as a perfect son, and everyone knew what had happened. At some point one of Iris' friends began writing to Andrew in prison and eventually the two of them went to the prison to visit him. As a Korean-American herself, Iris became intrigued with his story and how their Korean culture and strict family loyalty played a part in his fateful decision to murder. Oftentimes what seems black and white can be colored by shades of gray.

The murder was wrong. But what Andrew, who up until then had been a student at Providence College, did with his life in prison feels remarkably right to me. And that is where the story of redemption takes hold. Had it not been for Andrew's generosity of spirit an elderly Korean man, a

new inmate, would have never been able to negotiate life in prison. Andrew was his translator, accompanied him to doctor's appointments, looked out for him, and even shared his cell. Andrew mentored a number of prisoners, stayed in touch with his church, guiding other young Korean immigrants attempting to live with one foot in their native culture that demanded allegiance to family first and the other in their new-found home in America with its new and puzzling culture, through letters.

Andrew's sentence was ultimately reduced and then through a new Illinois law was granted retroactive sentencing credit for rehabilitative programs. He left prison at age 50 and continues to mentor in his community. Had the weed been ripped from the human garden at first sight how could this life have evolved more closely, I believe, into the one God created.

God is patient. God is generous. God is merciful. God does not ascribe merely to the principles of horticulture, but instead to that of unbounded, generous, unfailing love. And when we feel ourselves, our lives, to be more weedlike than not, isn't that just what we need most from God. We don't want our entire life defined by our worst day, our worst act, but by our best. We trust God to know the difference. That is God's mercy. That is our redemption.

The bible makes it clear there will be judgment, God's judgment. We will answer for what we did on our worst days. But I truly believe God will also celebrate our best – and even now is giving us space and time to grown into them, and into the very image of God in which each and every one of us was created. This is life with God at the center, kingdom life, the life which Jesus has come to show us, one where we love God with all our hearts, souls, minds, and strength, and love our neighbors as ourselves, no exceptions. The life we are striving to live, wheat and weeds alike, in God's beautiful garden of humanity.