Jesus told them another parable: “The kingdom of heaven is like a man who sowed good seed in his field. But while everyone was sleeping, his enemy came and sowed weeds among the wheat, and went away. When the wheat sprouted and formed heads, then the weeds also appeared.

The owner’s servants came to him and said, ‘Sir, didn't you sow good seed in your field? Where then did the weeds come from?’ ‘An enemy did this,’ he replied. ‘The servants asked him, 'Do you want us to go and pull them up?'

'No,' he answered, 'because while you are pulling the weeds, you may root up the wheat with them. Let both grow together until the harvest. At that time I will tell the harvesters: First collect the weeds and tie them in bundles to be burned; then gather the wheat and bring it into my barn.’ ”

Then he left the crowd and went into the house. His disciples came to him and said, "Explain to us the parable of the weeds in the field."

He answered, "The one who sowed the good seed is the Son of Man. The field is the world, and the good seed stands for the sons of the kingdom. The weeds are the sons of the evil one, and the enemy who sows them is the devil. The harvest is the end of the age, and the harvesters are angels.

As the weeds are pulled up and burned in the fire, so it will be at the end of the age. The Son of Man will send out his angels, and they will weed out of his kingdom everything that causes sin and all who do evil. They will throw them into the fiery furnace, where there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth. Then the righteous will shine like the sun in the kingdom of their Father. He who has ears, let him hear.

Last Sunday five teenage boys near Orlando, Florida watched a disabled man, Jamel Dunn, drown in a pond. Not only did they not do anything to help him or call 911, an extremely disturbing video surfaced showing the teens cursing and laughing as the 32 year old man calls for help and eventually drowned. Perhaps some of you are aware of this event. On the video one of the teens can be heard shouting “Get out the water, you gonna die.” Another yelled to the man “ain’t nobody fixing to help you, you dumb (expletive).” As the man kept screaming for help the teens did not call police, and as he eventually submerged under the murky water for the last time, you could hear on the video a teen laughing, “Oh, he just died.” The group then fled the park. Mr. Dunn’s body was not found for five days.

I know you are as shocked as I am with that type of behavior. So totally cold, uncaring, evil. The only offense the authorities can charge the teens with is the misdemeanor of not reporting a
death. No one needs to tell you we live in a sick world. You read and watch the news and sometimes you shake your head and wonder how can people be so cruel?

As I was reading through today’s Gospel lesson I couldn’t help but view this Parable, the Parable of the Weeds and Wheat through the lens of an evil and sick world. I find myself reading many of the biblical texts with that lens, especially ones such as this parable that affirm the reality of both good and evil in our midst.

As people of faith, how should we respond to the obvious presence of evil in the world? It is there. What is our response to be? What should good people do about bad things?

Although you won’t find this specific question anywhere in the Gospel of Matthew, it is that question, or one very much like it, that lies behind the parable of the wheat and the weeds in chapter 13. What should our response be to evil?

Jesus had a response. We heard about this response in today’s parable. “A Farmer had a field. . .” Jesus began. Yes, there was a field ready to produce good grain, but in the night an enemy, by some covert process, came and sowed weeds among the wheat and thus threatening the crop. It is a nasty little case of agricultural terrorism.

When the weeds appear the slaves of the Farmer come to him and say, “Master, we’ve got a problem. Weeds are among the wheat. Do you want us to go out and pull up the weeds?” This seems like a logical response, but the Farmer gives them a very different command.

“No,” he says; “for in gathering the weeds you would uproot the wheat along with them. Let both of them grow together until the harvest.” At harvest time the reapers can, “Collect the weeds first and bind them in bundles to be burned, but gather the wheat into my barn.” The Farmer encourages a level of patience from his workers that they may not have expected.

Last Sunday I told that we need to pay attention to the surprise in these parables, to those places where expectations are turned upside down? What was surprising about the person sowing seeds last week wasn’t that 75% of the seeds sown didn’t produce anything, what was surprising was the some did! And they produced a bumper crop.

What you would expect from the master in this story is the response, “Yes! Pull the weeds out as quickly as you can. Get that stuff out of my field!” But that is precisely what you do not get. But saying instead that the weeds and wheat should grow together until the harvest, when both will be dealt with. It seems Jesus is committed to preserving the weeds until the wheat is fully developed.

If this story really is a story about evil in the world and God’s response to it, then what Jesus is saying is that God doesn’t have any immediate plans to uproot all the evil among us. God doesn’t have any desire to rush to judgment, preferring instead for nature to take its course. God’s plan, for now, is to let it be.

[CONGREGATIONAL RESPONSE]
Two reasons seem to emerge for why Jesus says wait: First, when the servants volunteered to pull up the weeds, the master said, “No, for in gathering them, you would pull up the wheat too.” The type of weed that is sown in this story is a very specific kind. It is known as “bearded darnel,” you have also heard it called “tares.” An annual grass with long, slender bristles that looks very much like wheat.

By the time the wheat and the weeds were distinguishable, the roots of the wheat and weeds were so entangled that it was not possible to weed out the tares without uprooting the wheat. It was essential to let them both grow together until harvest time. In a frenzy of weed-pulling, you would yank up the good along with the bad. In other words, you would do more harm than good.

American are finding out that weeding out the evil of terrorism is not as simple as pulling out these rogue terrorists groups from among the wheat. Getting rid of terrorists may also destroys the wheat - collateral damage.

I find it very difficult to do the moral mathematics of how many lives sacrificed make a war worthwhile. Can we really say how many dead soldiers make a battle worth fighting? Is 3000 too many? What about 10,000? We can’t even count the Iraqi, Syrians, and those in Afghanistan dead. Hard question.

This week the last five soldiers who survived the Japanese attack on Pearl Harbor were recognize by the President at the White House. The honor they received is appropriate. The Japanese began the war with an attack on Pearl Harbor that killed 2,500 people, mostly military men. In response the United States dropped a bomb on Hiroshima, Japan and three days later on Nagasaki killing 250,000 people, mostly civilians, women, children, and the elderly. The war ended with those bombs. The weeds were pulled out but at what cost? Hard question.

Two weeks from today is the anniversary of that bombing. Our moral thinking is flawing if we think we can ever come up with a number lives lost that justifies a war. I believe whether we are for or against a war we must struggle with this important question.

Walter Wink in his book Engaging the Powers begins with the question: “One of the most pressing questions facing the world today is, how can we oppose evil without creating new evils and being made evil ourselves?” “How can we oppose evil without creating new evils and being made evil ourselves?”

On 9/11 around 3,000 were killed by an evil attack. What has been our response to weed out the terrorist?

This seems to be the question that Jesus is posing to us with this parable. Yes, somehow there is evil sown among the wheat, but how can we respond to it before the harvest without creating the new evil of tearing up wheat along with the weeds? Even if we think the cause is just, have we done too much collateral damage to the wheat?
I pray, and you pray that one of these days, all the evil in the world is going to be gathered up into bundles and destroyed. It may not be today, says Jesus, it may not be tomorrow, but one of these days it will be dealt with. In the meantime, we have to be patient and accept the fact that we live in a world full of weeds and rather than trying to pull up every plant that looks vaguely suspicious, leave the sorting up to God.

I want to suggest a second reason Jesus says wait on the weeding. I believe it is his way of implying a level of distrust in the ability of these slaves to properly identify and separate the weeds from the wheat. Sometimes it is hard to tell the difference between the good and the bad, and sometimes, in pulling up what you think is a weed, you may in fact be pulling up wheat.

I purchased my house from friends, two Episcopal priest who were meticulous gardeners. When I moved in they presented me with file folders that listed each plant along with instructions on their care. They included the blueprints from the landscape architect that designed their yard. The yard was absolutely beautiful. I was so proud of it. Their children were grown and gardening was their form of relaxation and brought them much peace. When the Fall came I noticed that there were these, what I thought were weeds growing in the middle of the massive bed of myrtle, which was the ground cover for much of the front yard. Assuming they were weeds I quickly pulled each and every one of these weeds. One plant escaped my busy hand and to my surprise beautiful Fall flowers emerged. I later learned that they had intentionally planted with three seasons in mind and those so called weeds were not weeds at all. If I had been patient and let them stay I would have soon discovered their beauty. And to make matters worse, I noticed that in the areas where I pulled up those plants grass grew.

It is hard to wait. Over the centuries the Church has often focused more on weeding than planting or tending the garden. Perhaps some of the darkest time in church history was when they were passionate about weeding. Crusades were organized to drive out the infidels from Jerusalem. Inquisitions rooted out heretics. Women accused of being witches were thrown into fire like weeds to be burned. Those who were deemed bad seed were excommunicated and cast out of the church into utter darkness. Structures had to be set up to decide who the weeds were. Even today denominational fights over who is in and who is out.

In every generation something always had to be done to clean up the field. Some are judged harshly for being too radical, others for not being radical enough. Some are condemned for not caring for the poor, others for caring only for the poor. Years ago some Christians condemned Martin Luther King Jr. as a rabble-rouser and a troublemaker. Some Christians denounced Dorothy Day because she did some writing for a socialist newspaper, and missed her great Christian work on behalf of the poor.

Even national legislation has supported this effort of weeding out those we think might wish us harm. Jesus makes it clear that such judgment is reserved for God alone and not those who would pretend to claim God’s authority.

Let me assure you that the point of this parable is not that Jesus is going to go easy of the weeds. No, Jesus is trying to teach us is to leave the judgments to him. He knows that we are
consistently off the mark when we try to make an accurate assessment of the moral character of a friend or a neighbor, and so he suggests we put our energy elsewhere.

A seminar leader recently showed a class of government workers a series of pictures. The pictures began with a view of a person’s face, and then broadened the view to reveal the person’s entire body. It was only when the entire picture was seen that the class could make anything approaching an accurate judgment.

The first picture showed the face of a grizzled man, scowling and straining. He looked to be member of a motorcycle gang, perhaps gripping the handlebar of a chopper. But when the entire picture was revealed, it became clear that he was a maker of customized wheelchairs for the handicapped, and he was pushing one of his creations.

Picture two showed the face of a lovely woman with a beautify smile. She appeared to be a flight attendant or a hostess at an upscale restaurant. But when the view was expanded, what the class saw was an exotic dancer, ready to do a pole dance. We don’t have the whole picture, says Jesus.

We also read in verse 29 that the overarching concern of the Farmer is for the health of the wheat, not the destruction of the weeds. It would be wise for us is to put our energy into being good wheat, instead of trashing the weeds around us.

This week my neighbor and I were admiring the weeds in our grass. He said that he was “nurturing diversity” and was going to let it be. I like that “nurturing diversity.” I wasn’t as patient as he and I went to the hardware store and bought “weed and feed.” I was determined to get rid of those weeds. Then I was preparing for this morning’s message and remembered what the wise gardener told me the summer that the most effective forms of weed control is to maintain healthy grass. Healthy grass is extremely competitive and will crowd out most weeds all by itself. If your lawn is healthy, you shouldn’t have to dig out many weeds at all.

So I guess it is time to throw away the weed killer and get the fertilizer. We are part of a witness team and we are all called to care for God’s garden, weeds and all.

In a world filled with weeds, perhaps the best strategy is a simple one, Leave the weeds to me, says Jesus. You just worry about growing up as wheat.