

Infestation
“Ignore the weed. Nurture the good.”
Matthew 13:24-30

Second in the series: Stuck in the Mud (growing faith in God’s garden)

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The Center

A number of years ago The Wall Street Journal ran a story about a mom in Illinois who reached the breaking point with her kids. She had cooked a pancake breakfast for them. I can picture it: a platter stacked high with hot, steaming cakes, sausage and bacon, hot maple syrup, orange juice and milk – all set neatly on the table ready for a morning feast.

Imagine the aroma rising from the kitchen. But the kids didn’t so-much as roll out of bed. She went up to their rooms once, twice...five times and they still didn’t bother to get up ‘til they had to scramble for the bus. The feast she prepared was all packed away in Tupperware and stuffed in the refrigerator; everything: a leftover.

The kids returned home from school that afternoon to find a note. It said, “Mom’s on strike. Cooking, cleaning, doctoring, baking, and driving services are all immediately suspended.” They looked for her all through the house and couldn’t find a sign of her until they extended the search out-of-doors where they found her sitting in a tree refusing to budge until they pitched in and showed some gratitude.

Their first move was to cook dinner and promise to be nice. This wasn’t good enough and she wouldn’t move .

They realized that they had to do something more convincing, so they baked a batch of her favorite brownies and brought a plate to her with the following new contract:

- They would pitch in whenever help was needed
- They would act their ages, not reverting to age five
- They would not smart off
- They promised to come when called the first time
- They agreed to their station in life: they were the kids, Mom and Dad would be the parents
- They would give and take on an equal basis
- They would ask permission before doing something
- They would not hit or hurt anybody.

This proposal was floated up the tree at 11:30 p.m. At a midnight a contract was reached. Mom came down.¹

Matters shouldn't have to go so far. Homes should not have to be places where mothers have to unionize, fathers have to beg for cooperation or, for that matter, where children are compelled to overextend themselves to earn parental love or pride.

We need our homes to be places where children know they are safe and loved and worth a mint simply because they are who they are. Our homes should be places where parents are...get this: honored.

Yet, for all the books that provide blueprints for productive parenting and fulfilling marriages, we are given no guarantee such families can be crafted. In the end, even the ideal family will have its moments: kids will act up, spouses will disappoint...moms may have to go on strike.

Christ at the Center

In the gardens of our families, there will be weeds. In fact, in God's family there will be weeds.

"The kingdom of heaven is like this," Jesus says; and then he tells this story about a farmer who planted good seeds in his field; but an enemy slipped in at night and messed up the crop by sowing seeds of tares among them. Then as the plants grew and it became evident the weeds were among the wheat the owner and the farm hands could see they had a problem. They had an infestation.

It's a dilemma. What do you do when you spot weeds cropping up in your gardens or your children or even yourself?

I think most of us are inclined to just yank them out. See the dandelion in the garden, grown huge almost over-night. I like to get out that weed puller with the fork at the end of a seven inch shaft. Push it down along the root line, rocking it back-and-forth. Then push down hard in one direction, pull out the tool, get my fingers around the base of the leaves, pinch and pull. And it's so satisfying to see the long tape root emerge, dangling from the rest of the weed...until I look down on the ground and see the young tomato lying on its side.

Collateral damage...or is it simply a defeat of my purpose?

How do you get rid of the weeds without endangering the delicate young vegetables in your garden? How do you root out the poisonous stuff in your kids' lives without damaging the good things that are starting to form within? For instance, what do you do about an error made by a little boy or girl that was generated by healthy creativity?

What do you do in your own life when you see the weeds begin to sprout?

Maybe Jesus used the image of wheat and tares on purpose. The tares he described were probably darnel – a weed that looks a lot like wheat. That the field hands could identify them when they were young shows they must have really known their plants. But darnel isn't a good thing to mix with a harvest. Bread infested with darnel will probably make you intoxicated, listless, immobile. Not a good thing. But wheat is not planted in rows. It blankets the field. Try to pull up the tares and you would endanger the plants you want to protect.

Better to wait until harvest – soon enough to separate them.

Some weeds can poison the crop: you have to root them out right away. Just like there are all kinds of things that do need to be rooted out of our children's lives – nipped in the bud before they take hold and strangle the growth of the good within. Extreme measures are needed when you see evidence of drug use, for instance – that's obvious. Yank out the weed and then repair what other damage was done.

But Jesus' parable emphasizes that you can often use patience and gentleness for the better result.

Mothers are good at that. So are dads. So are Sunday school teachers. Motherhood sometimes extends beyond the roles of the nuclear family. I remember when I was about four I saw another kid throw a temper tantrum. I can't remember ever seeing a display like he put on before. I don't know what brought it on – I can't remember it if I ever knew. But I still recall watching him laying face-down in the middle of the floor, flailing his arms and legs, pounding the floor with his fists and kicking it with his feet, wailing and crying up a storm. For the effort, he generated a great deal of attention. I had no idea you could do such a thing. It was a new idea.

I think it was the next Sunday I was back in the class playing with a wooden model of a church building. Something happened and it broke into a few different pieces. I

suppose I thought I would be in trouble and so, wishing to distract adult attention from what I thought was a crime I had committed, I seized upon the idea of throwing a tantrum like the one I had seen a week or so before.

As I recall, I received no such attention. Rather, when I tired of the display and gave up the act, the teacher held me on her lap, pieces of the model church in hand. She said, "Let's see if we can put this back together." And we did.

She ignored the weed. She nurtured the good.

I wonder if that's what the mom did when she went on strike. 'Kind of left the kids to figure out on their own what *they* needed to do to take their own responsibility and make things work. They had to wind up *owning* that contract.

The garden store I mentioned last week, where they test the soil and recommend how to amend it, has an expert we consider our garden guru. We heard that he's retired from a career of advising farmers all over the state; and his knowledge is remarkable. He's coached us on how we need to keep our soil for healthy, abundant vegetables in an organic garden. One time I asked him, "What do I do about the weeds?"

"If you take care of your soil," he said, "you'll have hardly any weeds to pull."

Back to last week's message: you have to take care of the soil. It not only produces healthy plants; it also guards against the infestation of weeds. There are so many essential activities out there for us and for our children. I understand the pressure. You don't want any chance to be missed.

But perhaps the best safeguard against weed infestation – for yourself as well as your kids – is to work on the soil, the grounding.

Seek first the kingdom of God, like Jesus said.

Because if belonging to God in Jesus makes the best ground for a life to grow, maybe the most important thing is to cultivate that relationship. Let it define you; help it to define your kids. Then you learn how to be weed-resistant in the first place. And when you don't get it right you'll know how to handle it.

Harvest

When I was planning our first trip to Florida I got hooked by the idea that we should set up our tent and camp in the Everglades. I floated the plan to Laura who, you might not be surprised, asked, "Aren't there alligators down there?"

You might also not be surprised that I replied, "Aw Laura, they're more scared of you than you are of them."

"Not likely," she said; and that was that.

So I settled on planning a night in the tent on an island in the Gulf, off the panhandle of Florida.

It was late in the day as we neared the island and she asked again, "Are there going to be alligators?"

It was a weed that somehow cropped up in my garden: deficient of facts, I resorted to logic.

"No, Laura. We're going to be camping on a small island surrounded by an ocean. Alligators are fresh water animals; they don't like salt water; so there won't be any on the island." It made sense to me.

We got to the campground on the island as night fell. We pitched our tent in the dark. Later we went to bed. It was just as I imagined it: a cool coastal breeze moved about us. Stars shone through the tent's windows as we drifted off to sleep – lulled by the sound of ocean waves thundering on the shore.

Morning came and we took a walk on the road, which looped around our campsite, taking us just behind the tent where we saw a fresh water pond. Though a stand of trees had shrouded them from our view, we were camped practically on its shore. Stuck in the middle of its shallow water, a sign was posted:

CAUTION!! ALLIGATORS!! NO SWIMMING!!

I hate it when I'm wrong. A weed within.

Laura didn't say too much about this. Good sport, for one thing; gentle and forgiving. She's like that, as so many wives and mothers are. My weed didn't have to be yanked out.

Love like that crowds out our weeds with the wonder of God's love.

And patience.

That's what Jesus did: making the fields of our homes and our church and our lives all the better for growing the best for the harvest.

¹ Robert Berner, "Tired Mothers of the World, Unite!" *The Wall Street Journal*, October 20, 1997. B1.