

July 19-20, 2014
16th Sunday of Ordinary Time

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HOMILY FOR JULY 19-29, 2014

When Dustin Hoffman was approached about playing a woman in the movie, “Tootsie,” he is reported to have replied that he would, if he could be convincing. So, the costume department dressed him as a woman; he thought he looked interesting, but then he said: “Now make me pretty.” The costumers replied that that was as good as it got. Hoffman paused and reflected on this. He wondered how many times he had passed up interacting with interesting people because they did not appear to measure up to society’s standards for “interesting” people.

Today’s Gospel cautions us against pre-mature judgments about what is good and what is bad. Some things are obviously bad and don’t even have the slightest appearance of good. These we take from our midst, but leave judgment to a lenient God. However, with ordinary weeds, it’s a different story. I attended a seminar on garden weeds a few years ago. I learned that the definition of a weed is any plant we don’t like. I think that most of what we consider “weeds” may be what our culture has taught us are “weeds”: the high school dropout whom we support with our taxes; many think of the immigrant children as weeds, taking resources that we could use for “our own” children. In life, most of those whom we consider “weeds” are those who we perceive as drawing upon our material resources – as if we are not related to every other person on earth – especially the children. We need to examine why we as a culture, as a church, could possibly consider any other living person a weed.

As we know, parables don’t offer us answers; they ask us to think outside the box. They ask us to question our assumptions and not to presume that we always know, immediately, what is good and what is bad. They ask us to hold on to our certitudes lightly. Some of our certitudes probably could be named judgments. We not only know what is best for ourselves, but what is best for others, also. For example if we have a certain way of managing our households, we may think others would be better off if they followed our way of doing things.

Letting weeds and plants grow together applies to the practice of our faith, also. When I was nineteen years old, and after twelve years of Catholic schooling, I knew, absolutely, right from wrong. I knew that it was wrong – even a mortal sin – to attend church with my protestant mother on mother’s day. I knew she would be better off as a Catholic. Although I questioned Sister, I knew it was wrong to do so. I knew absolutely that when my widowed father married a person who had been divorced, it was the worst thing that could happen to him, and I prayed incessantly that he would see the light.

Well, I'm old, now, and I wonder how life would have been different if I had not spent so much time trying to kill the weeds and had allowed them to grow with the "good" plants without trying to pull them out. After all, they grew despite all my efforts. I never succeeded in pulling out what I presumed were weeds, and I thank God. They all turned out to be plants.

My mother's faith nourished her; I grew to know that questions could be the work of the Holy Spirit, and my father's remarriage was a blessing to him and to our family. Although it all turned out well, in retrospect, life could have been even better if I hadn't spent so much time trying to pull up weeds that were really beautiful flowers, making premature judgments.

I think it is similar with the church. There are obvious things in our church, like pedophilia that we can't allow to grow. But that is not like any ordinary weed, it is poisonous and kills. But many things, we just have to live with, at least for a while. We have to allow the more conservative aspects of the church to grow along with the more progressive, being open to the good that is there, and the excess that is perhaps in our own position. We need to realize that institutions as old as the Catholic Church change slowly, and although we may bristle under restrictions that are supposedly the will of God – like not admitting women to ordination, we know we are graced by the church's sacramental outlook on life and the liturgy as well as its urgings for us to reach out to the marginalized.

We could take a leaf from the image of God, presented in today's first reading, that of a mighty God who judges with clemency. We need to judge ourselves with clemency. Julian of Norwich, a 14th century English mystic, tells us that in heaven our sins will be our badges of honor! That is certainly thinking outside the box, but it makes sense. Our focus needs to shift from our sinfulness to the infinite mercy of a lenient God.

Yes, we may be the most powerful nation on the planet, but we rarely judge with clemency. On the other hand, Pope Francis, a powerful religious leader, seems to be taking serious the portrayal of God that joins might with leniency. Pope Francis rarely condemns and then, only when there is absolutely no ambiguity, no chance of mistaking plants for weeds.

I have practiced yoga for a long time. At my last yoga practice, our instructor demonstrated how we must hold all things lightly and I think it applies to our parable. When he held the music bowl tightly and struck it with the stick, we heard a heavy thud with no resonance. When he held the music bowl very lightly and struck it, it reverberated with intense resonance for many seconds. We were able to receive the resonance deep within our bodies.

Let us hold our positions and certitudes lightly so that when they fall or when they remain, we hear a beautiful resonance in our lives.

Nancy C. Ring