

## "Weeds"

Homily of August 17, 2003

by Fr. Michael Dibble

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In 1952, about four in the afternoon, in a high school (empty classroom at four) John Comiskey was teaching Bernie and me trigonometry. We were taking trig, senior year in high school, and Comiskey was smart in math. He was showing us, on the blackboard, trigonometry. After a while he would turn around and say, "Are you guys getting it? Do you guys get it?" And I lied and said, "Oh, yes, of course." But Bernie said, "Not yet. No, I don't get it.... Not yet.... I need some time. Give me some time."

Today there are a couple of things that need some time that we just heard. We know Our Lord is talking about the Eucharist, you know, the bread and the wine, Holy Communion.... We are going to live forever. But the Jews, like me at that time, were saying, "What is he talking about? Is this cannibalism?" It took some time for even the apostles to figure out, "Oh, this is the flesh of Jesus, the Body of Christ, Communion." And there's another line that was read by the lector a couple of minutes ago. St. Paul says to early Christians (And St. Paul probably was in jail when he wrote this. He was in the slammer! And he is writing to Christians who are facing really tough times.).... And Paul wrote, "Try, try to understand the will of the Lord." Now, my opinion is that Paul was writing that with clenched teeth himself, "Try, try to understand....Here I am in jail again. But try to understand the will of the Lord."

Now, the pastor reminded us last week that we have had five gospels in a row, including today, about Our Lord talking about the Bread of Life. So, I want to step back a little bit, taking bread and trying to understand God's will, and taking bread (wheat). That's a connection, because Our Lord told a story once about wheat and weeds, and trying to understand the weeds of this world. Well, anyhow, you remember the story. You have heard it since you were little kids, but it comes from the mouth of Christ, not some pope or even some saint. Our Lord told this story. It is connected with wheat.

A farmer owned a big field, a farm, and he planted good seed, wheat. But an enemy comes that night and drops weed seed into the ground. And later when the crop comes up, the farmer's employees come to the farmer and say, "Didn't you sow good seed?" The farmer says, "Yeah." "Well, how come these weeds are coming up with the good wheat?" And then the workers say what I would say, "Let's go out now and pull up all the weeds." And the farmer says, "No" in the story Jesus tells. No, because you start pulling up the weeds and you are going to be pulling up some of the good wheat with the weeds. Better let them grow together and then at the end of the harvest, I will do the separating. Now, that story is awfully important for those of us who are constantly "mad" about the weeds, the weeds in the world, the weeds in the Church, the weeds in our own heads, the weeds in our families.... "Let's pull up these weeds!" And God, in the story says, "No. They are inextricably connected sometimes. You've got to let them grow together."

So, I have tried to divide this as briefly as I can into the weeds in thee (And by "thee" I mean other people), the weeds in me (By that, I mean our own heads and hearts.), and the weeds allowed by J. C. (You see, that all rhymes. I don't mean disrespect to Our Lord, but "thee... me... J. C., Jesus Christ.")

The weeds in thee, in other people... OK, story about my family. I told the pastor about a week ago, I promise this is the last story about my family, not about me. I have an infinite series of those, but about my family. When I was sitting out there as a kid at Mass in New York City, and the parish priests would get up, many of them, and talk about their families, all of whom were in a kind of amber glow of burnished nostalgia, reeking of piety and perfection out of Norman Rockwell, and I would sit there gnashing my teeth, because my family was giving a new dimension to the word "dysfunctional." But this is the last one about my own family, about weeds and wheat growing together, and wanting to pull up the weeds.

My father was an alcoholic. My mom died at thirty-two. That's young, but she had TB. In those days, you died young of tuberculosis. So my dad is bringing up my younger brother and me, one sane son and one weirdo! But he is doing it on his own. I mean, we had no relatives. This is right out of Dickens! There really were no relatives on either side. So my father is bringing up these two kids. I was six. My brother was four. And my father was getting "hammered" fairly regularly. So, the good wheat in the parish (And I mean that without sarcasm, very good men and women in my Catholic parish in New York.) said, "We can't let those two little boys grow up with that drunken daddy. We will put them in an orphanage." So, they put my brother and me in an orphanage sixty miles upstate to get us away from that terrible drunken weed, Daddy. He wasn't drunken all the time, but when he went on a spree.... Anyhow, we were there for hundreds of years, ....actually a couple of months. And my father got half-way hammered one Sunday, got in a cab, and got the cab to take him sixty miles upstate in New York, and he arrived at the orphanage, half-hammered. Said, "I want my boys!" And my brother and I ran down this long staircase, and gripped him with passionate love, and hopped in the cab and we held tight to him all the way down the sixty mile ride to Manhattan. And we did all our lives, and he died drunk. But that was the weed from which the little sprigs of wheat did not want to be separated. There was a kind of a passionate affection. He didn't curse or beat us. But good people wanted to.... I would too if I were in that parish. Oh, those two little boys, get them away from that....

In the story Jesus tells, he says, "I'll separate the weeds from the wheat," meaning God, at the end of time. Many times we can't separate them. In a congregation of this size there have got to be some of you maybe suffering the pangs of weeds in your own families, that worry you and harrass you and you would like to slam them when you are not hugging them.

Now, this is the fourth anniversary of my being lucky enough to be in this parish. On a Sunday, when I arrived four years ago, the pastor was pretty much alone, needed some extra help. So, I was lucky enough to get into this.... OK, a priest forty-three years and this is my fourth year

here. And I thought of all the questions I have been asked about weeds and wheat in my priesthood. This is just one priest talking. OK. The number one question (There are two that I have been asked all my life.)... the number one question after over four decades, is not "Could we discuss the intricacy of the mystery of the Trinity?" or questions about the history of the Church. The number one question, maybe because I was a teacher for so long, was "How do I get a relationship? How do I get Myrtle to go to the prom with me?" Or, if it is Myrtle, "How do I get Bruce Biceps to keep dating me when we go to college?" I haven't dated myself since the eighth grade! But these kids would be coming to the priest on the campus about their love affairs. I think they took one look at the face and said, "He understands rejection!"

The second question most asked of this particular clergyman is "What do we do about the weeds that are breaking our hearts, or our family, our parents or our kids, or in our country or in the Church? What do we do about these weeds?" In other words, human suffering, pain. And, as usual, Christ gives this somewhat enigmatic but healing answer. You can't go tearing them up. You might have to let them grow together because they are inextricably tied in with the good stuff.

OK, the second, the "weeds in me," and by "me" I mean you and me, human beings in our head and our heart, the bad stuff. I mean we come from a long line of genetic programming, and there's got to be some bad stuff. The only human who had no weeds was Our Lady, Our Lord and His mother. That's why she has such sympathy for us because she didn't have any of that "garbage" in her. But weeds, weeds in ourselves.... For example, I just read recently they are finally getting around to canonizing, making a saint of, Father Damien. Remember Damien? He was a young priest, just ordained, a Belgian priest. He was sent off to the leper colony because nobody else would go there. They said, "We will send this young priest to the leper colony in Molokai. And they haven't canonized him a saint because he had a big weed! ...What? ...His temper! This is what the people in Rome have been saying all these years: "He had a terrible temper. You can't canonize a man who had such a bad temper." They have his letters. Damien would get so "mad" he should have written on asbestos because his letters were so hot! He was furious! But he was furious at various people, medical commissions in Hawaii who weren't sending him medicine. He was furious at certain Catholic parishes in Hawaii who weren't sending him help: doctors, technology, tools. That's what he got mad at. He never, ever lost his temper with a leper.... "Well, he had this terrible bad temper when he wrote letters." OK. All right. He died. Ever see a picture of Damien just before he died? He was covered with leprosy, and with a cane, staying with the lepers whom he loved.... "Well he had that terrible weed of a temper!"

Another man..... (This is the second and last example about the weeds in me, in us.) was a man who has since died. He was a widower. His wife had died, and his kids were married and gone, and he was still relatively young. And this was not in confession. This was over iced tea one summer afternoon, after his wife died. He said to me, "I got terrible, dirty thoughts. I am obsessed with lust." I leaned forward. That's always such an interesting topic! ..."I am obsessed with carnal images, filthy x-rated movies. My whole mind is this filthy, dirty, porno video

store!" ...Wow! Poor guy. He was really suffering because it made him feel so seamy. But, you know what? He was the most generous man in that little parish when it came to helping other people. He was loaded with sensual, erotic energy. And it couldn't go anywhere. His wife was dead. And he would fix the plumbing in the convent. He helped me set up a sports arena (Me? A sports arena?) for the teenagers. Everything he could do, that terrifically sensual charge, wanting to reach out and embrace. He channeled it into great service. But he was always bothered by his triple x-rated imagination. I am sure when he met Our Lord, Our Lord said, "C'mon in. Your wheat so, so over-compensated for the weeds of your tortured mind."

And finally, the weeds allowed by J. C. Why does God allow all the miseries and gloom? When we finally got to this in the seminary, I'll never forget. I was so glad. "We will now deal with the problem of pain..." I thought, "At last, the biggest question human beings ask about God and His love!" Now, this took three months to study in the seminary and I am trying to squeeze it into a couple of minutes. Basically, God has two purposes for us, two of what they call God's will, His intention.

#1. His positive intention, or will, for you and me is that we are happy, that we are at peace, that we care for people and that they care for us. And, as he says today, we are going to live happily (not bored), happily with Him in heaven. That's His positive plan.

#2. Now He has a permissive plan. That's the weeds. He permits certain evils and miseries, premature baldness and other cataclysms. But genuine sufferings, for some reason, He permits them. Even Our Lord doesn't give a neat answer for that, why God has a "permissive" will. Now that I am living in a small place in California, every morning I thank God for the wheat. You know what I mean. I reach out and I stroke the wall. I do, in my little apartment. Thank you, God, for California! The wheat, the good stuff even since I've moved here. I mean even at Mass, you people say the Our Father as if you are praying, not as if you have a stopwatch, the way they did on Wall Street. You take time. Thank you for the wheat of California, and for the parish that needed my help and all the good stuff! And then I pick up the New York Times and I see all the weeds. Every headline is about a weed.

Couple of days ago, I got a phone call from New York, anonymous, on the answering machine when I got home. (Angry tone of voice:) "HELLO! I'm glad you're not in New York anymore! Click!" I thought, "WHO is that?" I whipped out my classmates' names. Recognize the voice? Only that night when I turned on the radio did I find out there had been this big blackout in New York City, a big WEED! And that is what the person, I hope, was intending.

I told this priest who was dying, in 1999, back in New York, because I went to confession to him every three weeks, I said, "I'm still yelling at God. I'm still mad at God..." And I remember him saying (He's now deceased.) he said, "Just keep talking. Tell God you are glad," we would say, "for the wheat and you're mad about the weeds, but," he said, "the only Catholics I worry about are the Catholics who stop talking completely." You know, to the harvest owner, yell at him, but

keep talking to him. In any event, Our Lord says, at the end of time, he will do all the sorting out.

For the rest of us, the weeds and the wheat are sometimes so tight. But, if you are anything like me, or like Bernie Brennan, 1952 (“Do you get it? Are you getting it?)... “Not yet.... Don’t get it... Not quite yet.... I need some more time.”