

Preached by Carl Rush
Bush Hill Presbyterian Church
Alexandria, VA
July 13, 2008

Matthew 13: 1-9; 18-23
Isaiah 55: 10-13

ROUND-UP READY FAITH

I hope you've picked up the theme already about Matthew and Isaiah talking about weeds growing in places that will choke out that which is desirable. I hope you've already picked up on the idea that the word of the Lord is that seed in truth which makes our lives fruitful, which nourishes in us that which is beneficial—that which can make this world a place where the hungry are fed and the thirsty receive the blessings of God.

When weeds infect a field, or our back yard gardens, it's usually not a pretty sight. And left unchecked, it can be devastating. Weeds represent those life activities which compete with our interests and passions to follow where God is leading. Weeds are all the attempts of the powers of darkness to draw us away from the light. And God's word is that seed of truth in the light which gives us the courage to go out again and live contrary—indeed sometimes even in opposition—to all that our culture is asking us to become. God's word is nourishment. It is represented both by rain and snow, seed, and even bread for the grower.

I wonder if we would admit that life in Christ is a lot like trying to tend a garden. There is toil and there is sweat, but the rewards for those who so invest are amazing. Now not everybody here is passionate about gardening. Not everybody here has a green thumb. But everybody here eats, so gardens are important, whether they are commercial or private; and the positive results of treating the earth does in fact impact all of us. The Jews in Isaiah verse 55 were still in exile and they must have known what it was like to go hungry. Refuges dependent on the hospitality of others—on the abundance of another culture.

And the disciples and the crowd who gathered on the seashore and listened to Jesus preach from a pulpit in a boat were also refuges, but in their own country. It was expensive to live under the Romans. It was oppressive. Weeds were probably more abundant. The temptation to not follow God's plan was everywhere.

OK. Let's be honest. Some of the stuff that grows in our backyard which we call it flowers, if we put those same plants somewhere else, they would be weeds. The beautiful purple things that I see growing in my back yard would have to be pulled up if I saw them in my garden. And so much that the church and faith teaches us is bad for our Spiritual lives can be in fact if kept in check a good thing.

Many of the sins in our lives are because of how we indulge them. How we allow them to take over. Work is not a sin. Work is a good thing. Work is value. But becoming a workaholic is a sin. Did you hear that? Becoming a workaholic is not what we were cre-

ated to become. When all we do is live to work, we are sinning. And we have allowed something else to supplant the priority of God in our lives.

Ambition is a good thing. Drive is to be rewarded and acclaimed and accepted. I like to see ambition. But how easy is it for ambition to become greed. How easy for a good thing left unchecked to become debilitating. When all we have is the pursuit of the next want in our life, we are in trouble.

I've told you the story about doing a wedding early on in my ministry; and to say the least, there was a language barrier because of some cultural differences of a person who grew up deep in a secluded area of the United States. I got to the part of the wedding where I said "... in plenty and in want ..." And the bride said, "What?" I whispered, trying to keep the decorum of this going, "... in plenty and in want ..." "Want," I said. And she said, "Oh—wohnt. Being in wohnt!" "I wohnt some more" How much of our lives is governed by "I want some more," when we already have more than we can care for.

Relationships are a good thing, right? And constructive criticism is a wonderful thing. But how many of us can honestly say when we go about our relationships the top priority is preserving the other person's spiritual well being? We are critical of one another, especially those we love. Isn't it because we want our way? And we would like them to behave the way we would like them to behave. It is less about "I want to help you be where you will be happier." And sometimes that means not saying anything at all. I don't know. I think relationships are one of the most dangerous and subtle ways that we fall into sinful behavior. It's all too easy for words of concern to turn into slander. You pick your own sin. What is that part of your life that is a recurring weed seed, limiting your ability to be faithful. I chose a title that I expect to receive some good natured ribbing about: *Round-Up Ready Faith*.

A plant that is round-up ready is a plant that has been genetically altered to allow it to be sprayed with a herbicide with the brand name "Round-Up" and not be damaged. Now think about it. You've got a whole field of sugar beets and the weeds are rampant so that you can't tell the sugar beet sprouts from the weeds around it. How in the world would you manage that field? And along came Monsanto—remember the Agent Orange people? They discovered that you can take a gene and plant it into a seed source and spray that field with Round-Up and the only thing that dies, the only thing that's damaged, are the weeds. That's a pretty selective herbicide. That's a pretty amazing thing.

Did I tell you that I got a phone call from my cooperative agent this year who said, "Carl, I have some Round-Up Ready soybeans from last year and they're 20% of their original price. Twenty cents on the dollar and you can have Round-Up Ready soybeans. I could see the difference in planting a field with all the weeds gone and only what was desirable left.

Now there's debate, for those of you who are clued in, about this whole genetically altered idea of agriculture. There's some debate about the long-term effects, the same way there was a debate about penicillin use. But this where our analogy breaks down, so don't press too hard. For you see, there is no human behavior, no sin, which will ever be stronger than God's truth. The unique and wonderful ability of scripture to change our lives remains constant. Isaiah said, "It is not an empty promise."

When I was growing up my mother had a habit of quoting that Isaiah passage whenever she wanted to punctuate a correction she was giving me. "And you know, Carl, God's word would not return void. God's on my side. I'm listening to scripture, trying not to be a disobedient boy.

So let me ask you: Where do you spend most of your time? Has your life become hard to penetrate? Like the highways that we spend so much time driving? Is your daily experience more like a rocky patch of ground? Really and truly, how much time do you spend with other people like the people in this room? And how many hours upon hours do we spend with what can be called rocky, difficult people of the culture. Is your daily experience by definition filled with thorny, choking issues? You know, we used to have problems in our lives, but now we have *issues*. Is your daily experience in a social climate which you would really like to escape? Or is your life spent in rich, deep soil—soil like this down to earth community we call Bush Hill Presbyterian Church?

Gary W. Charles in a book called, *A Bold Alternative: Staying in the Church in the 21st Century* quotes one of the people he interviewed as saying, "Church is one of the most hopeful public experiences of life. Watching people come in and realizing that they are well educated and powerful. They have all kinds of things they could be doing with their time, but they are here. And this is where our hope is, individually and collectively."

So what are our choices? Are we helping one another? Are we affirming one another's spiritual gift? Are we showing that enthusiasm for the gospel we once knew and enjoyed is our emotional peace in time? And that we really spent time saying, "OK, Lord, I'm going to church, help me be inspired. And are our relationships the kind that meet our needs and grow love where we are planted?

The word of the Lord, the truth of scripture: we can only know it as we share it with one another. We can't take this book [the Bible] and go into a closet. Come and finally arrive where God wants you to be. Spend that closet time, but then come out and reconnect with the rest of the people. We are indeed the people of God's pasture Let us so live.

Amen.