One of the gifts of my sabbatical—after I returned from Ireland—was the gift of several weeks at home to process all that we had experienced on our pilgrimage. I found that one of the best ways to “process” was to try and pull up what is by all appearances a “bumper crop” of weeds in our yard, our gardens, and even the cracks in the sidewalks.

Those of you who are gardeners may be familiar with Murphy’s first law of gardening: “When weeding, the best way to make sure you are removing a weed and not a valuable plant is to pull on it. If it comes out of the ground easily, it is a valuable plant.” Of course, there is a corollary to that law: “To distinguish flowers from weeds, simply pull up everything. What grows back is weeds.”

In the gospel lesson we just heard Jesus told a simple story about wheat and weeds. “The kingdom of heaven may be compared to someone who sowed good seed in his field; but while everybody was asleep, an enemy came and sowed weeds among the wheat.” When the wheat plants come up, the weeds come up as well. The Greek word for the “weeds” is zizania, which usually referred to a specific weed called darnel. “Darnel” is, according to Wikipedia, an annual plant that usually grows in the same production zones as wheat and was a serious weed of cultivation until modern sorting machinery enabled darnel seeds to be separated efficiently from seed wheat. The difference between darnel and real wheat is evident only when the plants mature and the ears appear. The ears of the wheat are heavy and droop over while the ears of the darnel stand up straight.

The French word for darnel is “ivraie” (from the Latin “ebriacus”, meaning intoxicated). This word describes the drunken nausea that can come from eating the infected plant, which can be fatal. In other words, Jesus’ listeners would have been appropriately alarmed by the facts of his story, but perhaps, even more shocked by his proposed remedy of letting the wheat and the weeds grow up together until the time of harvest when they can be distinguished from one another.

What Jesus advised was not standard horticultural practice. Farmers of his day would remove the weeds from a grain field several times during the growing season. If they didn’t the weeds could choke the growth of good plants and the seeds dropped by the weeds would ensure a bumper crop of weeds in the next growing season. On the other hand, weeding invariably leads to pulling up good plants, too. So what is Jesus’ point in telling this parable? What is he trying to tell us about our lives and the world in which we live?

William Sloane Coffin said, “The worst thing we can do with a dilemma is to resolve it prematurely because we haven’t the courage to live with uncertainty.” Life is full of uncertainty isn’t it? Life is a mixture of good and evil that doesn’t always leave us with good, much less, easy choices.

Good and evil are part and parcel of life, visiting us in unpredictable, unavoidable, and frightening ways. Accidents and disease strike without warning. In our global economy promises of increasing profits lead manufacturers to close plants here and move to locations where labor is cheaper or tax incentives are offered, putting many out of work. Natural disasters destroy property and claim lives. The rise of opioid addiction and gun violence claim innocent victims. In countless ways our lives
can be disrupted by forces beyond our control as well as by our own choices. Jesus reminds us in this parable that faith does not guarantee that we won’t be visited by sin and tragedy. We are living with weeds.

A second point, I believe, Jesus wants us to glean from this parable is how precious each grain of wheat is to the farmer. It’s a familiar theme in Jesus’ parables: the Good shepherd leaves the flock of 99 to find the 1 lost sheep; the woman with 10 silver coins turns the house upside down and can’t rest until she finds the one missing coin; the lovesick, grieving father welcomes home his prodigal son and throws a party to celebrate. In Matthew’s words, “Look at the birds of the air; they neither sow nor reap nor gather into barns, and yet your heavenly Father feeds them. Are you not of more value than they?”

A third point of the parable has to do with relinquishing judgment to God. Our collect that we prayed earlier tells us why. We prayed, “You know our necessities before we ask and our ignorance in asking. Have compassion on our weakness, and mercifully give us those things which for our unworthiness we dare not, and for our blindness we cannot ask.” The parable doesn’t explain why suffering and evil exist. But it calls us to entrust the outcome of life to God who sees all life from a perspective that we cannot.

Our sight and our judgment is always distorted. Alexander Solzhenitsyn wrote, “If only there were evil people somewhere insidiously committing evil deeds, and it were necessary only to separate them from the rest of us and destroy them. But the line dividing good and evil cuts through the heart of every human being.”

Even our best efforts to root out injustice can be influenced by our reactivity to evil done to us, or those for whom we care, or fear of being vulnerable. Righteous anger can easily be a mask for insecurity or revenge. In fact the more certain we are of a course of action to eradicate evil, the more likely we may create more evil. Part of the diabolical strategy of the evil one in the parable who sowed the weeds is reliance on the forces of goodness to do his work, ripping up wheat along with the weeds.

Recognizing how easily our best judgment can be mistaken, I believe Jesus is telling us to value compassion over condemnation. This does not mean that we are not to address injustices when we see them. William Loader writes, “The compassion which is characteristic of the kingdom calls us to look injustice in the face and to feel the pain, to recognize the systems which sustain inequality and exploitation, and to take a stand beside the marginalized.” However, as we do so we are to model compassion even for those with whom we differ, never writing people off.

Loader’s point is underscored by Jesus’ words, “Let both of them grow together until the harvest;...” The Greek word translated as “let” also carries the connotation “suffer” and “forgive”. Isn’t that the way that Jesus modeled for us? He didn’t retaliate or defend himself when arrested and condemned, but absorbed evil in his own body on the cross, praying for forgiveness for those who executed him. He bore this suffering to show us the power of God’s love to overcome evil with good, to bring life out of death.

The final lesson of the parable is that the harvest rests in God’s hands. In the mystery of God’s love we will be judged by the One whose mercy and longsuffering has overcome evil, bringing life out of
death. In the meantime, our task is to do our best to be wheat; to live in God’s garden as faithfully and obediently as possible instead of becoming preoccupied with uprooting “weeds” around us.

Yesterday, thanks to our partnership with Edwins, some of us got a glimpse of the promise of God’s harvest. At a lunch for recent graduates of Edwins we got to hear first hand of the hard work that has led these men and women into jobs in various restaurants around Cleveland. As I listened to their stories and saw the deep gratitude they have for the “second chance” Edwins gave them—and their deep affection for one another—I couldn’t help but think how fortunate that none of those men and women, whom many would consider to be “weeds” at one time of their lives, are connected to my life and the life of our parish. Leaving judgment to God, in God’s good time we may find that what we considered to be “weeds” also have beauty and worth and an important role to play in God’s ecology in which all things work together for good.