

Homily for July 19th, 2020 – 16th Sunday in Ordinary Time

Have you ever wanted to say something biting to someone, but at the last minute decided against it, and later on were really glad that you showed some restraint? Did you ever label someone as an enemy only to discover, with the passage of time, that same person as an ally? Did you ever want to cut someone out of your life, but you did not and were glad you did not burn what would later become an important bridge in your life? These readings, especially the Parable of the Wheat and Weeds are like those scenarios.

A few years ago, I participated in an M.R.O.P. (Men's Rite of Passage) retreat outside of Fresno, California. The weaver (retreat master), as well as other members of the team, dropped many pearls of wisdom on my lap during the five day we were together. However, on an afternoon, while flipping burgers on the B.B.Q., I struck up a conversation with another retreatant, a young man who was originally from Down Under. He mentioned two thought-provoking questions that his spiritual director back in Australia wanted this young man to carry with him. These were the questions: Where are you going (in life)? And who are you taking with you? It is important we each ask ourselves these questions and ask them in that order. If you start with simply asking who is accompanying you in life, chances are you will simply surround yourself with buddies. These buddies may be leading lives that are not going anywhere, and so will be of no value to you as you discern where you are going. But if you are



serious about where you are going in life, you will gravitate towards people who will be useful on the journey. If at first you first do not ask yourself where you are going in life, you will attract only people who think like you do and who tell you what you like to hear. These people, as good as they are, can only build up your ego but never your true self. It is not their fault. They are simply not

equipped to take your true self where it needs to go.

At this point what you need is a true friend, a goad to push up against. That person is someone who is compassionate, caring, patient, yet brutally honest especially when honesty is called for. Or to put it both Biblically and non-Biblically at the same time--you need a few weeds and not just people who are on weed! Without a few "weeds" in your life, there is little chance of you ever growing into your true self. Good friends, good goads, are like sandpaper. Sandpaper both smooths surfaces that are too rough and roughens surfaces that are too smooth. When we are too smooth, when we are taking life for granted, we need a goad, much like sandpaper, to roughen us up a bit. We have all experienced "coasting" where we are hardly experiencing prayer, God, life or the needs of others. Personally, I think COVID-19 is acting as the world's collective goad.

Goads are annoyances that provoke you into action or reaction. Life would be much easier without them. We never ask for goads in life, but they always seem to find us. Life has enough challenges without deliberately seeking more. Goads challenge us to grow even, and especially, in ways we would prefer not to. When we do not ask for goads in life, God still gives them to us.

This reminds me of a couple of things Fr. Richard Rohr says when he writes, "Every day I ask God for one necessary humiliation." He is asking for a goad, something to butt up against so that he does not get a fat head. He also says, "All spirituality is known only in the rear-view mirror." In other words, we never realize the role weeds or goads are playing in our lives until we look back and have come through a situation intact and maybe even better because of a goad. But let's face it, in the middle of a crisis, we just instinctively want to get rid of everything that looks like a weed-- and the sooner the better!

Not only can people act as goads but experiences, too, can fill the role of necessary goads along life's journey. I knew a man who concluded, after looking in the rear-view mirror of his life, that struggling with alcoholism for many years was the best thing that ever happened to him. He had to resign himself to living with wheat and weeds before he could come to a place of honesty and acceptance, a place where he had to learn to call on God's grace.

I knew a woman who lost both breasts to breast cancer and later was able to say that the (weed of) cancer was the best thing that ever happened to her. It brought her to an acceptance of what she could do, what she could not do, and what God's grace always wanted to do in her life. Cancer was the necessary

goad that allowed her to see and appreciate life in a way that living without cancer could never have done.

While we would not want to wish weeds in anyone's life, and while we would not want to wish alcoholism or cancer on anyone, these two people became two of the most compassionate people I have ever met, especially in the way they dealt with other people dealing with alcoholism and cancer. So, sometimes the weeds, the goads, initially have to be allowed to grow in your life until they teach you some truth. Sometimes weeds (goads) are not people but circumstances in life like I just described. I remember, a few years before I was ordained, bargaining with God in prayer. I was telling God that I would be happy to go anywhere except to work with prisoners and mentally challenged people. That was my prayer. But the Spirit was praying in me with sighs too deep for words, and those sighs are what God heard instead of my verbal prayers. And so, I ended up working in a prison for 11 weeks and living at a L'Arche community. These were the weeds, the goads, I was avoiding, but the very places God was leading me for my personal growth. In looking in the rear-view mirror of my life, I realize now, it was in these two fields that I grew most as a person.

A little story about the necessity of weeds, goads that call us to grow. Gurdjieff used to have a spiritual community in the early 1900s. In the spiritual community of Gurdjieff which he led in France, an old man lived there who was the personification of difficulty, irritable, messy, fighting with everyone, unwilling to clean up or help at all, and no one got along with him. Finally, after many frustrating months of trying to stay with the group, the old man left for Paris. Gurdjieff quickly followed him and tried to convince him to return. But it had been too hard, and the old man said, "No!" At last Gurdjieff offered the old man a big monthly stipend if only he'd return. How could he refuse? When he returned everyone was aghast. And on learning that he was being paid, while they were being charged a lot to be there, the community was up in arms. Gurdjieff called them together and after hearing their complaints, he laughed and explained: "This man is like yeast for bread. Without him you would never really learn about anger, irritability, patience, and compassion. That's why you pay me, and that's why I hire him!" (from master storyteller John Shea).

Where are you going? Who are you taking with you?

Fr. Phil