Author, professor, farmer, and Indigenous ecologist Dr. Jennifer Grenz used to have a strong prejudice against weeds. Much of her work with farmers, students, and in the field of restoration ecology was educating about the harm weeds can cause and doing the back breaking labor of physically uprooting and exterminating weeds. She could be considered a weed expert, dedicated to their eradication for the betterment of humanity and the planet. In her book *Medicine Wheel for the Planet*, Dr. Grenz writes, “Killing weeds can be very gratifying.”

Perhaps gardeners and those passionate about lawn ascetics can relate to Dr. Grenz’s previous dedication to fixing the planet by destroying weeds that invade native areas, gardens, and lawns. It can be gratifying to exercise power by identifying and killing a weed in the pursuit of maintaining a healthy garden, yard, or natural area.

However, in her book, Dr. Grenz humbly describes how her attitude about weeds changed dramatically and evolved into a deeper relationship with the earth and the Creator. Her journey began by questioning the definition of a weed. The official definition of a noxious

weed is “any plant that is injurious to public health, agriculture, recreation, wildlife or property.” But weeds in general are defined as “any plant growing where it is not wanted, not valued, or isn’t supposed to be.” In taxonomy, the biological science of classifying or naming biological organisms, there is no classification for a weed. Because what makes a plant a weed depends totally on someone’s opinion. That means any plant could be considered a weed in one context and a valued crop in another. One farmer explained, sometimes plants from last year’s crop will start to grow with whatever was planted this year, which makes last year’s crop this year’s weeds.

If you ever tour a farm, especially a smaller farm, you might notice not every inch of the farm is neat rows of plants growing in carefully cultivated fields. Farms have these messy, overgrown areas full of what looks like weeds; big overgrown plants with colorful flowers that aren’t produce. And if you look closer, you might understand why those plants are there: they are attracting pollinators like bees and butterflies and other insects that are vital to the pollination of the crops the farmer is

growing. Wise farmers and gardeners know you need both weeds and wheat for a bountiful harvest and a healthy farm or garden.

Like the wise character in Jesus' parable today about how God's kingdom of heaven is like someone who sows good seeds and lets them grow with the weeds. Despite the farming references, today's parable isn't about farming. It's about judgment. That weeds are going to find their way into any field is inevitable. In the parable, the owner of the field didn't seem concerned about the presence of weeds, maybe because however they got there, they were bound to show up sooner or later.

But there are folks in the parable who were very concerned about the weeds. And, like Dr. Grenz who had dedicated her life to eradicating weeds, the workers had a solution to what they judged a problem. However, when they presented their solution of getting rid of the weeds, the owner of the field said no. The owner was content to let the weeds and wheat grow together into a mess, even if they posed a threat.

We can debate the wisdom or foolishness of the owner, but the point Jesus seemed to make is: when it comes to identifying weeds, God

has a different opinion on what makes anything or anyone unwanted. Sometimes out of a desire to control a situation, anyone can be too exclusive, too quick to judge something as bad and miss the beauty and value of what is deemed unwanted, and if we destroy it we might be destroying a gift.

The dandelion taught Dr. Grenz this lesson. Despite the disdain of anyone seeking a lawn free of them dandelions are one of the most useful plants around. Every part of it can be eaten. Dandelions contain more vitamins and minerals than broccoli or spinach. They are companion plants that actually help lawns by bringing nutrients to other plants, and their roots help aerate the soil so it doesn't get too hard. Dr. Grenz also discovered dandelions are a source of herbal medicine that helped her daughter when she was ill and no other medicine could. Right now, many people who are suffering from the effects of lymes disease are finding relief in herbal medicines prescribed by doctors. Seeking relief for her daughter's illness led Dr. Grenz to discover the benefits of other plants like the plantain, another local plant considered a weed, that

I know one person here uses as an effective homemade remedy for burns and bug bites. Thanks to these plants, Dr. Grenz changed both her mind and her practices. Now, when planting seeds for her farm, she plants dandelions and plantain along with vegetable seeds which will all grow together and benefit her and her family. What was an unwanted weed is now valued and appreciated, even considered a gift from the Creator.

Perhaps that is same lesson Jesus was trying to convey in his parable about weeds and wheat; that judgment made in haste or with prejudice is faulty because it can overlook the benefits of God's gifts. Of course, Jesus wasn't talking about plants in this parable, although his message can apply to them. Jesus was talking about people. And we need to be extremely careful about comparing people to wheat and weeds, because we could be making the same mistake as the workers who wanted to get rid of the weeds because they thought they knew which was which.

If we consider the explanation the author of Matthew's Gospel gives this parable, we might like how it makes it easier to understand,

but could still miss Jesus' point that final judgment is not ours to make. We live in a world where there is beauty and wonder and the good seeds of God's love spread all around us in the lives and actions of so many people and at the very same time there is evil, injustice, hazardous smoke in the air, suffering, and harm. And lots of different people with lots of different opinions. It's messy, and not something that can be easily or simply fixed by one person or a small group deciding who is and who is not allowed to live, or which story gets to be told. For those who want a quick, simple, easy solution and final judgment, unfortunately, Jesus said we have to wait and hope for God's judgment. That doesn't mean we can't judge for ourselves what we can or should do in any given situation. Jesus wasn't saying do nothing. We certainly should continue to love and care for our neighbors. But he may have been cautioning us about going too far and taking what isn't ours to take and learn to live with both weeds and wheat. This isn't easy and thank God there are people like Dr. Grenz who can inspire us. In her book she described how she had to learn to let go of simplistic definitions of weeds and to discover the interconnectedness of all plants, and how the

plants she values benefits from the weeds. It's an on-going journey, and others are joining her. Maybe that is what Jesus is asking of us. To learn to let go of simplistic stereotypes and learn to embrace the diversity of people that God seems to value as beautiful and beneficial beings in God's kingdom here on earth. If we can learn to love God by valuing and loving each other instead of fearing and blaming each other that's when we can start to shine with the radiance of God's love and maybe then can begin the work to eradicate harm and cruelty instead of one another.