
Dear M: Welcome to the World! Do not be afraid.

A sermon by the Rev. Canon Julia Mitchener
The Eighth Sunday after Pentecost: Proper 11 – Year A

Here is the world. Beautiful and terrible things will happen. Do not be afraid.

These are the words of the late Frederick Buechner, author and Presbyterian minister, words I first read in a college class about a billion years ago, words that kept coming back to me this week as I prepared this sermon. Words that kept coming back to me, too, as I began a letter to the newest member of the Mitchener clan born in North Carolina on Monday. Curiously enough, the sermon and the letter ended up being one and the same. So here they are:

Dear M,

Welcome to the world! Beautiful and terrible things will happen. Do not be afraid. You know nothing of fear right now, thank God. There is only goodness in your life—the familiar beat of your mother’s heart, the adoring gaze of your dad, the warmth and coziness of your swaddle, the unique and inexplicable smell you will come to know simply as “home.” One day, though, you’ll become aware of something else. You’ll toddle into the living room to find that the dog—your very best friend—has gotten hold of your favorite stuffy and has torn it all to shreds. At the ball park, where thus far you’ve experienced only high fives and drippy popsicles and entire innings in the outfield spent admiring a bed of ants—one day, at that very same ball park, when you trip and fall on your way to second base, instead of helping you up and telling you everything’s all right, someone will shout at you, wondering how you could be so clumsy. And that’s just for starters. As you grow older and become aware of the world around you and learn to empathize with other people’s suffering and begin to feel your own losses more acutely, the pain of life will sometimes take your breath away.

How can this be? How is it that things can go so wrong? How can a world that contains such joy and beauty and goodness also hold within it unspeakable sadness and suffering and evil?

People have been asking these kinds of questions since the beginning of time, M, and, as far as I can tell, no one’s ever answered them satisfactorily. It’s not for lack of trying. All the great teachers and philosophers and religious leaders through the centuries have done their best to address what is sometimes called “the problem of pain.” Even Jesus—especially Jesus, who spent a lot of time with hurting people—Jesus talked about the stunning strangeness of sadness and suffering and evil, too. He told a story once about a man who woke up to find a huge mess in his field. The man had sowed only good seeds there and so was expecting a beautiful and bountiful harvest of wheat. But one day, the man’s farm hand went into the field to discover that someone had scattered some bad seed around and that all these ugly and potentially dangerous weeds had sprung up and were threatening to ruin everything.

When the farm worker saw the mess, he ran straight to his boss. What should he do? Should he rush in and rip all the weeds out? Would that make things better? Would that erase the pain over seeing this beautiful field plundered by someone else’s cruelty? Would that free his spirit from the vise grip of anger that wouldn’t allow him to think about anything else, not even the golden wheat still glowing in the rising sun?

Now bear with me for just a minute here, M, while I go off on what may seem like a tangent. That’s something a number of us in your family are good at, by the way—I won’t name any names (Uncle George), but we Mitcheners know how to stretch out a story. When I was a child, there was this fabulous new invention called a Weed Eater. The Weed Eater was born out of one man’s frustration that whenever he used his lawnmower to try to trim the weeds that grew around the trees in his yard, the mower cut into the tree trunks. The bark got pulverized and went all over the place, leaving lots of ugly naked spots around the bottom of the trees. And so

this guy invented the Weed Eater. It used—ha!—it used the same design as those buffers inside a car wash to get rid of the weeds without hurting the tree trunks. For the first decade or so after they were introduced, Weed Eaters were all the rage. There was a man who lived down the street from my family who had won “Lawn of the Month” more times than anyone else in the history of Forrest County, Mississippi. Mr. Smith used his Weed Eater constantly, at all hours of the day and night. Rumor had it that Weed Eater could run on its own, that even when Mr. Smith was asleep in his bed, it could turn itself on and go zig zagging around the yard, rooting out the weeds while avoiding the tree trunks.

But I digress. Suffice it to say, there were no Weed Eaters in Jesus’ time. If you were going to try to pull up any of the weeds that had sprouted in your field, you had to be careful. For in your efforts to rip out the weeds you might rip out some of the wheat, too, and then your grandmother couldn’t use it to make her delicious yeast rolls. Which is why, when the farm worker in Jesus’ story wants to just tear all those hateful weeds to smithereens, the owner of the field tells him to leave things be for a while, to take a good deep breath and see what happens.

Well, it’s a weird story, huh? Most people aren’t sure what to make of it, even though Jesus (or one of his followers) tries to explain. I don’t know about it either, but I do know this: There was a house that I used to pass everyday on my way to and from work. This house was infamous for having a yard that was a complete disaster. There were a few scraggly rose bushes and some hydrangeas and azaleas tucked over into a corner, yes, but these were almost completely obscured by the ridiculous number of wildflowers and volunteer plants that had sprung up and taken over every other inch of the lawn. Like countless other people, I drove by this house and wondered, *What the heck happened here?* Until a day when I found myself up to my neck in weeds. By that, I mean that I, too, was a total mess. Like that yard, I was a mess. You see, that morning, I had baptized a child who was dying of cancer. When I picked up this little boy to pour the water over his head, and anoint him with oil and proclaim that he was marked as Christ’s own forever, I didn’t know where to look: at the angry red surgical stitches where his golden curls should have been or at the faces of his parents that radiated this gorgeous rush of love I’ve only seen a few times in all my life. It was hard to drive home after that, but I did. I got into my car, and when I reached the intersection by the house with the front yard full of weeds, the sun was low in the sky the way it gets in the late afternoon in September, and, I swear, M, that yard was radiant. For a moment, everything was transformed. I can’t explain it, but it was something about how the fading sun hit that ridiculous tangle of plants. Seeing how the mess was still there but that it didn’t destroy the beauty—it saved me that day, M, no kidding. It saved me. It reminded me that there is a goodness in this world that can never be uprooted. We get glimpses of it every now and then, glimpses of something we’ll one day enjoy in full.

This is what the Apostle Paul is talking about, I think, when he says that “now we see through a glass darkly, but then face to face.” Don’t ever underestimate the strength you can draw from even the tiniest peep through a dark glass or from a ray of light passing over a field full of dandelions. Those are weeds, by the way. Dandelions are weeds, but on an early June day with the sky a cloudless Carolina blue and the grass a soft emerald carpet, they’re also sheer magic. When you blow on them . . . well, just try for yourself and you’ll see.

You’ll see that in the end, it’s the love and the beauty and the goodness that win. If you pay attention—if you don’t let yourself get mired down by bitterness over the weediness of this world—if you pay attention, you’ll see the mercy and the joy and the healing, too. You’ll see the wheat, and you’ll taste it. I hope you’ll taste it often at the table of our Lord. In the end, it’s the love that wins.

Speaking of the end, it’s time for me to stop. Otherwise, you won’t be the only one who’s taking a nap. We love you, M. Most importantly, God loves you. God loves you with a fierce and relentless love that will never let you go. Which is ultimately the only thing that matters. Welcome to the world, buddy. Beautiful and terrible things will happen. Don’t be afraid. Amen.

Your Aunt Julia