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It's my favorite time of year here in Pasadena, the really green, beautiful time of the end of winter when citrus fruit is perfectly in season. Citrus is so ubiquitous here that even the most abandoned and forgotten spaces are studded with bright and cheery hues of lemons, limes, oranges and grapefruits. It is a time of year where nature is unabashedly generous. It is truly astounding how the trees are so heavily laden that one person or family cannot possibly consume or preserve the harvest alone. Hoarding is not an option—the fruit will not keep for long periods of time without drying out, molding or rotting.

Citrus season is just for a short time, and so enjoying the fruit must be done quickly, so we can't help but share it. Giving citrus fruit doesn't involve any of the usual hang-ups or reservations about being generous—it requires no financial commitment, has no commercialization attached or sense of obligation or guilt. We are instead inspired, maybe nudged, to be generous by the bounty of nature—whether it's a bushel of lemons next to a mailbox in our neighborhoods with a makeshift sign or a special delivery to our coworkers or friends. Through absolutely none of our own effort, nature makes us in turn both generous givers and grateful receivers. All we have to do is pay attention to nature's rhythms and be willing participants in sharing nature's bounty.

Across the country, there are foragers and gleaners who see themselves as stewards of nature's generosity year round. These are not farmers per se, as no human hand or machine set any seed in motion. A modern devotee of Euell Gibbons 1970 field guide to foraging *Stalking the Wild Asparagus*, Brooklyn forager [Ava Kim](#) leads groups in Prospect Park, discovering amongst the discarded remnants of urban life a fertile ecosystem where oyster mushrooms, mulberries, and dozens of species of edible greens thrive. Each season brings its own harvest. With a motto of “reap where you did not sow,” fifth-generation horticulturalist Nance Klehm was the subject of a recent documentary entitled [WeedEater](#), which showcased her off-the-grid urban living here in Los Angeles and urban and rural Illinois. Klehm practices what she preaches, subsisting on only what the land provides in what she calls “spontaneous vegetation.” She says:



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Spontaneous vegetation are plants that grow where we did not will them to grow. They are mostly immigrants whose original seeds travelled in the pockets of humans. These seeds produce plants that thrive where domesticated plants don't in soils too poor, too dry, too acid or too alkaline i.e. urban soils. Mostly these plants that make up the bulk of inner city areas are called 'weeds.' They colonize cleared sites quickly and remain wild and domesticated. They improve soil, create habitat and many are edible and/ or medicinal. Wander open lots, sidewalk cracks, alleys, train tracks and expressway embankments to find ingredients for your morning omelet, your afternoon tea or this evening's soup. To name a few examples of these spontaneous vegetation- is lamb's quarters, a super green in the spinach family. There is the groundcover chickweed in the carnation family and the purifying burdock. There is the flowering yarrow and the hearty and persistent dandelion, entirely medicinal.

Ralph Waldo Emerson once said "And what is a weed? A plant whose virtues have not yet been discovered." But not everyone sees weeds so positively. Talk to any gardener in the congregation and you will perhaps hear of a silent battle being waged against these persistent plants, especially after the heavy winter rains. Weeds are the subject of a well-known parable in the book of Mark called the "parable of the Wheat and the Weeds," which takes this gardener's battle to the level of good and evil--- and you can imagine which kind of plant is sainted and which demonized.

The parable of the Wheat and the Weeds" is one of the New Testament parables called the "growth parables" which are rich in personal spiritual insight as well as a provocative and unusual vision of what Jesus called "the Kingdom of God." Many New Testament scholars believe this vision was not of a future time, but a reversal of the present political and social inequality--- what we Unitarian Universalists would call the beloved community here on earth. Theologian C.H. Dodd calls a parable a "metaphor or simile drawn from nature or common life which grabs the listener by its vividness or strangeness and which leaves sufficient doubt about its precise application that it teases the mind into active thought." Let's listen to Matthew 13-30, the parable of the "Wheat and the weeds."



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Jesus put before them another parable: “The kingdom of heaven may be compared to someone who sowed good seed in his field; ²⁵ but while everybody was asleep, an enemy came and sowed weeds among the wheat, and then went away. ²⁶ So when the plants came up and bore grain, then the weeds appeared as well. ²⁷ And the servants of the householder came and said to him, ‘Master, did you not sow good seed in your field? Where, then, did these weeds come from?’ ²⁸

He answered, ‘An enemy has done this.’ The servants said to him, ‘Then do you want us to go and gather them?’ ²⁹ But he replied, ‘No; for in gathering the weeds you would uproot the wheat along with them. ³⁰ Let both of them grow together until the harvest; and at harvest time I will tell the reapers, Collect the weeds first and bind them in bundles to be burned, but gather the wheat into my barn.’

Parables, as C.H. Dodd alluded, are these short stories designed to make us think hard, and to question what we know as true. I’m curious about what this parable stirred up for you. What is fascinating about this parable to me is how Jesus illuminates our human wish to control and manage growth. We often prefer growth to happen in an ordered way—through a cycle of tilling the land, planting seeds, watering and tending. But growth is a process that is mysterious, isn’t it? We can plant the seeds in our lives for our hopes and dreams and yet growth has its own path. And when things are growing in the garden of our lives, we can’t often tell just by looking what the outcome of such growth will be, nor do we look for the virtues of the weeds. The magnificent minister and theologian Howard Thurman spoke to this in a sermon about these growth parables:

Can you make yourself short or tall?

Can you make your hair grow?

Or is this the kind of universe where somehow you can garner up enough of pure desire and great singleness of mind, that you can hold that desire and singleness of mind at



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dead center until at last the most stubborn and unyielding aspects of your life or the life of the world will take the objective shape of your inward desire? The process of growth and development and unfolding is an inscrutable process. What does that mean? It means that ... the only thing I am responsible for doing is to be sure that to the limit of my power I do the elemental cooperation: I see that I do not block the process. Even though growth is a process, it is invisible, it's involved in the vitalism of life, yet it's bound by certain laws: there is a time of reaping, and when the reaping time comes, then you know the difference between the wheat and the weeds.

Today, let us sow the seeds of growth, in our lives and in our congregation, but let us discover what is already growing wild and to name it virtuous—not to be discarded but to be treasured and savored. Let us with our pledges today let us plan diligently for the future, yet also be open to what unplanned and nourishing goodness is waiting for us. Let us hearken back to the citrus trees of our Southern California landscape—lush, abundant, heavy with fruit beckoning to be shared—let us harness the power of our natural generosity, letting our giving be as bright and joyful as an orange in the wintertime.

Blessed be, and Amen.