

**Judging Weeds from Wheat**  
**Matthew 13:24-30, 36-43**  
**July 23, 2017 – Seventh Sunday after Pentecost**

Last week we considered the Parable of the Sower of the Seeds. Today we have another farming parable – the Parable of the Wheat and the Weeds; and I like this parable. Maybe one of the reasons I like this parable is because Jesus tells his followers not to weed. I hate to weed. I'm generally not adverse to work – home maintenance. I enjoy plumbing, electrical work, carpentry. I tolerate painting, mowing the lawn, and even digging in the garden, but I hate to weed. I've always said, "If it's hard to grow, we plant it and call it a flower. If it grows easily, all by itself, we call it a weed and pull it out." My wife, Ginny, tells me, "No. Weeds are those plants that are invasive, that grow where they are not supposed to grow and take over from the plants that were planted." This certainly seems to be the case in today's parable; and I might note, when we're talking about agriculture, the distinction between weeds and wheat is a little clearer – wheat is a food product, good to eat, and weeds are not.

So here we have the good master planting some good seed, seed that will grow and produce a crop, a crop that will nourish the people. And then, during the night, the enemy, the evil one, sneaks into the field and plants weeds among the wheat. Now, I don't know how realistic this parable is. I've asked myself where one goes to buy a bag of weed seed; and I've seriously questioned if a good farmer would just let the weeds grow among his wheat. But Jesus was a carpenter, not a farmer; and, as he himself later explains, the parable is symbolic, metaphoric – not to be taken literally.

I think the absolute key to the parable is – if we rush into the field and start pulling up weeds we're going to pull up some wheat with it. In fact, we may not even be able to tell the difference between the weeds and the wheat. Biblical historians tell of a plant common in the Middle-East called bearded darnel. They believe bearded darnel may be the plant that Jesus often has in mind when we speaks of "tares". Its roots surround the roots of good plants, sucking up nutrients and water and making it impossible to pull out without damaging the good crop. Above ground, bearded darnel looks exactly like wheat until it bears seed; but its seeds are highly poisonous.

Still, as Jesus later explains, he's not really talking about agriculture in this parable. He's talking about people. So the first thing we see in the parable, the first thing that jumps out at me is – do not judge. The parable highlights the difficulty in judging the weeds from the wheat; but how often are we ready to label some people as weeds and others as wheat. How often we are so quick to judge – You're good and you're not. You're on my side; you're not. You're like me;

you're not. You agree with me; you don't. You're successful; you're not. You're hard working; you're not. You're the wheat; and you're the weed. What's Jesus say? You can't separate the weeds from the wheat in the midst of the growing process. If you start pulling out weeds, you're bound to also pull out some wheat; and because of the difficulty telling the difference, you may also leave some weeds behind.

Friends, all the while I was studying this parable, I was hearing those words from Jesus' Sermon on the Mount. You may remember, way back in January, when we first started our trip through Matthew's Gospel, we stated that the Sermon on the Mount really makes a pretty good instruction manual for Christian living. Well, in the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus says:

"Do not judge, so that you may not be judged. For with the judgment you make you will be judged, and the measure you give will be the measure you get. Why do you see the speck in your neighbor's eye, but do not notice the log in your own eye? Or how can you say to your neighbor, 'Let me take the speck out of your eye,' while the log is in your own eye?" (Matt 7:1-4)

So here, in this parable, we might say, "Do not judge the wheat from the weeds. If to tear up some weeds, you will also rip out some wheat."

But there's another issue when relating to people. . . At various times, we all have those logs in our eyes. Unlike the field of botany, when we're speaking of the behavior of people, I tell you we all float back and forth a bit between being weeds and being wheat. None of us behaves purely as wheat 100% of the time; and I like to think that none of us is purely a weed. How can we judge? How can we rip out the weeds?

Now, when I say that, don't hear me the wrong way. I don't think we should encourage "weedy" behavior. In fact, as I have often stated before, I think we need to speak out against "weedy" behavior. But we need to speak out against the behavior, not against the person; because that person has a little bit of wheat in them; and I believe that person has the potential to grow a good crop of grain.

And this brings me to the second part of our Gospel lesson, that which we might call the judgment. This states that, in the end time, the weeds will be gathered up and thrown into the fiery furnace. Friends, I've stated before that I have some problems with the doctrine of hell. I tend to resonate with the universalist view that God is too good to condemn anyone to eternal damnation. I try to be the best person I can be, sometimes with greater or lesser success. But, I don't seek to be a good person out of fear of hell. I seek to be a good person out of love of God and the people of God.

I have a profound belief in life after death. That belief is based on faith, but not on faith alone. I have personally spoken to people who have had what medical science calls “near death experiences” and they report of wonderful views of what they interpret as the afterlife. I have also held the hands of dying people; and I tell you death is not something to be feared.

Still, I can’t truly claim to know what happens after death. As much as I believe in the goodness and mercy of God, I also don’t believe that heaven is full of sinners which suggests, if a person dies in a truly sinful, evil state, some change must take place, some purification. Our Catholic friends call this purgatory. I note that, while we as United Methodists don’t deny a state of purgatory, we also don’t subscribe to the doctrine; and I’m not going to espouse it here. Let me simply note that the places in the Bible that do tell of a punishment for the evil – a fiery furnace where there is much weeping and gnashing of teeth – those Biblical passages do not tell us that this is an eternal state.

And so, I leave it to you to decide how we interpret the separating of the weeds from the wheat. Let me only say with the utmost confidence, the Great Commandments remain the same. Love God, love your neighbor; love yourself and you too will be counted among the wheat, where Jesus promises that “the righteous will shine like the sun in their Father’s kingdom.”

Praise be to God for the promise of a good crop; in the glories of life everlasting.

Let us pray. . .

Most Holy Lord,  
Make us more accepting.  
Make us more loving.  
Make us less judgmental.  
Lead our thoughts, our words, and our actions,  
that we may love you and all your people.  
Amen.

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