

# The Dangers of Weed Control

## *The Parable of the Weeds Among the Wheat*

Matthew 13:24-30  
College Hill Presbyterian Church, Tulsa

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July 27, 2014

Weeds. I'm not a big fan of weeds. They not only spoil the beauty of a field, yard or garden, they steal nutrition from crops, grass or flowers, sometimes to the point of choking them out. Weed control, therefore, becomes very important. Today's Gospel reading from Matthew 13, commonly known as the **Parable of the Weeds Among the Wheat**, has a lot to say about weed control. And some of it will surprise us.

Even though this parable sounds simple enough to us, people living in the first century would have been much more familiar with the agricultural imagery used by Jesus. In other words, in order to more fully understand The Weeds Among the Wheat we first need a quick botany lesson.

Just as we have certain weeds that we can easily identify because of their familiarity in our gardens and yards here in the Tulsa area, wheat farmers and others in ancient Palestine knew exactly the specific kind of weed that Jesus was referring to in his parable. As it turns out, this small bit of information provides the key to a proper interpretation of this parable.

The weed in question is called darnel, more specifically, bearded darnel. **Darnel is a very clever weed.** It doesn't stick out like a giant thistle bush would in a vegetable garden, or a dandelion in a carefully manicured lawn, or the vast variety of things that grow in abundance each spring in what constitutes my yard. Rather, darnel, a type of rye grass, **looks so much like a wheat plant that the two are almost impossible to distinguish from one another as they are growing together.** This, as we shall see, is a very important point. It's not until each plant goes to seed just before harvest time that you can tell the difference between them. But by that time **their roots are so intertwined that the darnel weed can't be separated out without tearing the good wheat out with them. Both, therefore, must be left to grow together until the time of harvest.**

Eventually, however, the wheat and this weed must be separated because the grain of darnel not only has a bitter and unpleasant taste, it is slightly poisonous. And so labor intensive was this task of separation that according to a Roman law it was actually a crime to sow this weed in the wheat field of an enemy. People in Jesus' day understood all these things when he told them this parable. They would have understood, then, at a very practical level, that **the wheat represents good, and the weed, evil. But here's the huge twist. According to Jesus, the two may be almost impossible to distinguish from each another, at least until they go to grain – until they bear fruit.**

That revelation would have shocked Jesus' listeners, and that's what should shock us today. For wouldn't you agree that most people, including ourselves, could claim that they are pretty good at distinguishing between good and evil? Given that, **throughout history many in the Christian family of faith have been bound and**

**determined to weed out those people and things that they judge as evil, or as an abomination.**

Despite recent strides within our own denomination to live in peace and unity with one another, there continues to be a weeding out process by those within the Presbyterian Church (USA) who seek to “purify” it according to their definition of what is pure and clean, and what is not. And yet, all who are ordained in our denomination have taken a vow to uphold the “peace, unity, and purity of the church.” How do we do that in a non-destructive manner? That continues to elude us.

Here are two striking examples of purification through weeding out that I came across just this week. There is an extremely conservative organization within our denomination called the **Presbyterian Lay Committee**, which publishes a paper they call *The Layman*. They sent out a mailing this week in response to the decisions that were made at this year’s General Assembly of the PCUSA. **In connection with the decision to allow Presbyterian pastors to officiate at marriage ceremonies of same-gender couples where it is legal** (as former pastor here at College Hill, the Rev. Radford Rader, will be doing this very evening in Illinois at the marriage of former congregation members Charlene Bandurski and Pat Beitel), **and in the decision to send out an amendment to redefine the definition of marriage in our church constitution to ‘between two people,’ the Lay Committee writes:**

The General Assembly of the Presbyterian Church (USA) has committed and abomination, is now openly teaching heresy and is in schism. And some within it are apostate.

They provide a definition of **apostate** as “**total abandonment of the Christian faith by those who profess to have accepted it.**”

**Really?** I can think of no clearer example of one group of Christians, in this case fellow Presbyterians, determining who is wheat (them) and who is a weed (everyone who doesn’t believe the same things they do, especially about biblical interpretation). But they go further than that. The Lay Committee adds, “For some, we know, this will be **a clear call to depart and ‘come out from among them’ (2 Cor. 6:14-17)**. Others will be called to stay as a prophetic witness.”

I decided to look up 2 Corinthians 6: 14-17 to see what type of people they are saying ‘faithful’ Christians in our denomination are separating themselves from. The scripture passage, written by the Apostle Paul to the church in Corinth states:

*<sup>14</sup>Do not be mismatched with unbelievers. For what partnership is there between righteousness and lawlessness? Or what fellowship is there between light and darkness? <sup>15</sup>What agreement does Christ have with Beliar? Or what does a believer share with an unbeliever? <sup>16</sup>What agreement has the temple of God with idols? For we are the temple of the living God; as God said, ‘I will live in them and walk among them, and I will be their God, and they shall be my people.’ <sup>17</sup>Therefore come out from them, and be separate from them, says the Lord, and touch nothing unclean; then I will welcome you.”*

**This is no casual judgment of those who seek marriage equality. It is associating those on the progressive side of this issue with “unbelievers,” “lawlessness,” “darkness,”**

**“idols,” and the “unclean.”** In other words, non-Christians. Are we to be thrown into this camp? Really? Again, it's clear to the Lay Committee who comprise the weeds and what should be done about them. And if they can't get rid of the weeds in their midst, then they support self-weeding to remove themselves from the rest of us. This is nothing less than an obsession with purity – purity by their definitions and standards. At this level of weed control, it is in complete violation of Jesus' instructions in the Parable of the Weeds Among the Wheat.

**But our challenge, and it's a tough one, is to not turn the tables and declare ourselves the wheat and the Lay Committee the weeds.** Remember, we are told that we are not capable of distinguishing fully between the two, and are not to attempt to purify the field by pulling out the weeds, for in the process the wheat will be destroyed as well. And to carry this further, **what if we are both wheat? Both weeds?**

Here's another shocking example posted in a blog on the patheos.com website earlier this week by Benjamin Corey. He shares the latest declaration by fundamentalist preacher John MacArthur. And yes, this again deals with the issue of marriage equality, and more specifically with churches that support it, like College Hill. MacArthur writes:

They have no allegiance to the Bible. You go band to every one of those seminaries ...for a century [they] have been deniers of biblical authority, they have no relationship to scripture, they are the apostate church, they are Satan's church.

**So affirming churches, like ours, are Satanic. Really?** Instead of being representatives of evil, I thought we were also the church of Jesus Christ, even though we hold a different theological opinion than the fundamentalists.

Therein lies the trap of seeking absolute purity. **In the weeding out process one usurps God's role as determining good and evil in an absolute and definitive way.** This is much like Adam and Eve's sin of eating from the Tree of Knowledge of Good and Evil – to know the difference as God knows. Many are trapped in the theological conundrum that assumes that if something isn't from God (according to their determination), then it must be of the devil.

**Christians never tire of playing the game of “who's in and who's out,” based, of course, on their own litmus tests and their own biblical and theological perspectives. And let's be honest, we play that game as well, even if we don't use the same condemnatory language.**

This parable calls us to the hard task of living in the tension between determining good and evil. It's still hard for many of us, however, to believe that sometimes the two are difficult to tell apart. It suggests, however, that **we can finally make a determination by the fruit that both good and evil bear.** So let me ask you, does marriage equality bear good fruit in the love between a same gender couple in an affirming mutual relationship? I would answer a definitive YES!

We must remember, however, that **the ultimate separation of that which is evil from that which is good is God's responsibility, not ours.** Therefore, Jesus states in the parable, "No, do not gather the weeds now, for in doing so you would uproot the wheat along with them." **This parable dramatically emphasizes the necessity of an attitude governed by tolerance, mutual forbearance, patience, forgiveness, and a whole lot of effort to seek understanding with those with whom we differ. It is the very model of how we are to live together in community.**

Let me close with a brief reflection on Jesus' words, "Let both grow together." As it turns out that doesn't mean that we passively sit back and become victimized by evil, or become tolerant of sinful behavior. The New Interpreter's Bible Commentary puts this wonderfully into perspective this way:

When the master in the parable forbids the servants to go and weed out the field, this is not to be interpreted as a call to passivity in the face of evil. It is not a divine command to ignore injustice in the world, violence in society, or wrong in the church.

It is, rather, a realistic reminder that the servants do not finally have the ability to get rid of all the weeds, and that sometimes attempts to pluck up weeds caused more harm than good. This is the way it is.

I'd like to ask you to reflect upon this as how it might apply to the current 'weed-control' efforts by the Israeli military to stop Hamas militants in the Gaza Strip from firing rockets into Israel. The effect has been the remarkably high number of Palestinian civilians casualties.

I'd like to ask you to reflect upon this as how it might apply to the current 'weed-control' efforts by Islamic extremists in the Iraqi city of Mosul to force Christians to convert or face death. The effect has been the fleeing of basically all Christians from that city.

I'd like to ask you to reflect upon this as how it might apply to the current 'weed-control' efforts to deal with the refugee/immigration situation concerning tens of thousands of Central America children and youth entering our country. The effect has been to pit ideologies of security and scarcity of resources against acts of compassion.

Finally, I'd like to ask you to reflect upon this as how it might apply to the current 'weed-control' efforts that each of us apply to ourselves as individuals. If you and I are the field in this parable, in which both wheat and weeds exist, how do we live life knowing that efforts to remove what we might mistakenly identify as evil within ourselves might also do damage to the good within.

Weed control is a difficult, and oftentimes a destructive business. How does Jesus' parable inform your own efforts to deal with the weeds among the wheat?

Amen.