

Weeds & Wheat: Both/And *Not* Either/Or

The Parable of the Weeds Among the Wheat

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

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This being the Bible Belt, you've probably seen or at least heard of the bumper sticker that proudly declares, "God said it; I believe it; That settles it!" Given that approach to scripture, how do you think the parable we just heard from Matthew 13, commonly known as the Parable of the Weeds Among the Wheat should be interpreted?

Let me make this even a bit easier, using an interpretation found in the Bible itself. Interestingly, if you jump down to verses 36-43, there is an **allegorical explanation of the parable's meaning**. Allegory takes a specific word or phrase and explains how it *should* be interpreted. Like, "This means that." Here it is.

"³⁶ Then Jesus left the crowds and went into the house. And his disciples approached him, saying, 'Explain to us the parable of the weeds of the field.' ³⁷ He answered, 'The one who sows the good seed is the Son of Man; ³⁸ the field is the world, and the good seed are the children of the kingdom; the weeds are the children of the evil one, ³⁹ and the enemy who sowed them is the devil; the harvest is the end of the age, and the reapers are angels. ⁴⁰ Just as the weeds are collected and burned up with fire, so will it be at the end of the age. ⁴¹ The Son of Man will send his angels, and they will collect out of his kingdom all causes of sin and all evildoers, ⁴² and they will throw them into the furnace of fire, where there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth. ⁴³ Then the righteous will shine like the sun in the kingdom of their Father. Let anyone with ears listen!"

A biblical literalist, even an orthodox Calvinist in the Presbyterian tradition, of which there are some here in Eastern Oklahoma Presbytery, has no problem interpreting this parable.

Some people will always be weeds who have been planted by the devil that God leaves alone until the end of time when God throws them all into hell.

This reflects **John Calvin's** own understanding of what has been called "**double predestination**". Looking at the sinful ways of others, John Calvin, 500 years ago in Geneva, Switzerland, concluded that **God's sovereignty, God's complete control over what happens in our world, dictates that while God predestines some for eternal salvation in heaven, God must also have predestined, since the beginning of time,**

those who would burn in eternal damnation in hell. This became such a **hallmark of Presbyterianism**, embedded within the Westminster Confession of Faith written in 17th century England, that many to this very day think this is what all Presbyterians still believe. So, you may be pleased to know that officially the Presbyterian Church (USA) no longer considers this a legitimate doctrine to which we must adhere.

But here's where it gets tricky concerning that allegorical interpretation. **Most modern biblical scholars do not believe the allegorical explanation of the parable in the gospel of Matthew were the words of Jesus himself.** Rather, they were from the gospel writer, reflecting a particular theological perspective within the belief system of the community of faith to which he was writing some 40 to 50 years after Jesus' execution. These biblical scholars believe that any allegorical interpretation was *not* the teaching method used by Jesus. Jesus spoke in parables without giving easy answers to their interpretation, instead leaving that struggle up to those who listened to, or later read his teachings.

So, that's just one side of the story. How, then, do those of us on the progressive end of the theological spectrum interpret this parable of the Weeds Among the Wheat? Interestingly, if I had to pick just one parable which perhaps corresponds best to the overall vision and mission here at **College Hill**, it would probably be this one. And this is why: **Its central message is an attitude and position of patience, mutual forbearance, and inclusion as we seek to live together in community. This parable also issues forth a strong edict not to judge, condemn, or exclude others – any others.**

Why? As the parable reveals, we often don't judge correctly. That's something best left up to God, for it is God alone who does the sorting, whatever that might mean or entail. But wait a minute, aren't we quite good at distinguishing what is a weed and what isn't? Do we not all just automatically look around us every day and start labeling and sorting, valuing or discarding? And don't we often do that based on our own personal theological and political perspectives and worldviews? Jill Duffield, former editor of The Presbyterian Outlook reflects upon it this way.

The truth is we are not as good as we think we are at telling the difference between wheat and weed... Our assumptions about what is wheat and what is weed at best alienate us from one another and at worst kill each other.

Jesus tells us to let everything grow until God sorts us out. And God's sorting is often very different than ours... It could be that God has other ideas about the worth of what we deem weeds. It could be that those very weeds might yet be used for good. It might yet be that we really have no idea what is truly of value to God in others or even in ourselves."

I encourage you to ponder those words this week. But I've gotten ahead of myself, for there's a bit of historical agricultural information we need in order to more fully understand and interpret this parable. So, here's a quick botany lesson. Just as we have certain weeds that we can easily recognize and identify because of their familiarity in our yards, gardens, and fields here in the Tulsa area, **wheat farmers and others in ancient Palestine knew exactly the specific kind of weed Jesus was referring to in his parable.** The weed in question is called **bearded darnel**. Darnel, a type of rye-grass, is a very clever weed. It doesn't stick out like a giant thistle would in a vegetable garden, or those dandelions in a well-tended yard of grass. **The twist is that this**

particular weed looks so much like wheat as it grows, the two are almost impossible to distinguish from one another. This is the crucial point. It's not until each plant goes to seed, just before the time of harvest, that you can tell the difference between them by the color of their grain. But **the roots are so intertwined that the darnel can't be separated out without tearing the wheat out with them.** Both, therefore, must be left to grow together until the time of harvest.

Eventually, the wheat and this weed must be separated because the grains of darnel not only have a bitter and unpleasant taste, they are slightly poisonous. That would make for a very bad loaf of bread. And, so labor intensive was this task of separating the seeds that according to 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, as did Matthew's original audience when they read his gospel.

Let's take a moment to look at good and evil. If you ask people, then and now, if they can tell the difference between good and evil, most would be quick to say they could. Therefore, **Jesus' suggestion that the two can be almost indistinguishable from one another is absolutely shocking. Yet, that hasn't kept us from trying to do the sorting ourselves.** It's the age-old syndrome of trying to determine and judge who's in and who's out – who to include and who to exclude from *our* community. It's obviously a game that Christians, and certainly our polarized nation itself, have never gotten tired of playing. And yes again, it's a game we all play.

The point of Jesus' parable, however, is that it is not only next to impossible, but also even destructive to even try to achieve a "pure" church, let alone a "pure" society or world. 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." And notice, **in the weeding-out process we usurp God's role in determining good and evil in some kind of an absolute and definitive way.** (By the way, that's what Adam and Eve tried to do by eating the fruit from the Tree of Knowledge of Good and Evil. And we know what happened to them.) So, just in case we need reminding, the heart of this parable reminds us that **we are not God.**

Now, and this is very important, all of this does not mean that we passively sit back and become victimized by evil or become tolerant of sinful or unjust behavior. The point is that sometimes attempts to pluck up weeds can cause more harm than good.

Finally, let's switch gears now just a bit and look at all of this from a different interpretive angle. **There are an increasing number of Christians who self-identify as universalists, as I do of myself. By the way, that's the first time I've publicly declared that from the pulpit. Universalism is the belief there is no eternal punishment in hell because God's grace is greater than all our sin, therefore God will eventually draw all of creation to God's self.**

Therefore, we can look at the field in which both weeds and wheat grow together not only as the church or the world, but also as individual people, like you and me. Is it not true that both good and evil dwells within each of us? Only the spiritually arrogant and self-righteous would claim to be a weedless field. As theologian **Paul Tillich** wrote in his work entitled *Systematic Theology*, "Every life process has the ambiguity that the positive and negative elements are mixed in such a way a definitive **separation of the negative from the positive is impossible**: Life at every moment is ambiguous." Or, as famed psychiatrist **Carl Jung** put it, **we all have a shadow side.** We need to acknowledge that **good and evil will always be intertwined within each of us –**

at least on this side of eternity (which the parable refers to as the 'harvest'). **The sorting that will take place, then, isn't of certain people, but rather the removal of the weeds within us, leaving just the wheat.** Perhaps, then, we should follow the teaching in this parable and **stop judging ourselves so much.**

Reflect this week as to how this particular parable of Jesus can inform your own efforts as it applies to what to do about the weeds in and among your life, our community life, our society life. Perhaps **it all begins by acknowledging we, as individuals, as a community of faith, and as a society, are part wheat, part weed, and wholly reliant on the grace of God's inclusive love and forgiveness.**

We are both/and not either/or.

Amen.

Resources:

Thomas Long, *Matthew*,

Adam E. Eckhart, *Feasting on the Gospels*

Morgan Guyton, "Who does God weed out?", patheos.com, November 11, 2012.