

What To Do With These Weeds?

The Parable of the Weeds Among the Wheat

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

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How familiar are you with this parable from the Gospel of Matthew, commonly referred to as The Weeds Among the Wheat? It's one with which I hope we all become quite familiar, for it provides a powerful lesson on how to live together as a community of faith. Why? Because, its central message is one that calls not only for tolerance and mutual forbearance, but also issues forth a strong edict not to judge, condemn or exclude others. And here's the twist, as will be explained in a moment. **We mustn't condemn others because we often don't judge correctly. That's something best left up to God.**

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 that was 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 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. 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 would in a vegetable garden, or a dandelion in a carefully manicured yard of grass. Rather, it looks so much like wheat as it grows that the two are almost impossible to distinguish from one another. This, as we shall see, 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.** The scriptures often tell us that it is by the fruit that people bear that determines the good from the bad. **But by the time of harvest, 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, 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. But so labor intensive is this task of separation 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 look at good and evil. If you asked people then (and now) if they could 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. Evidently, however, it appears the lesson contained in this parable is unknown to or simply ignored by **many in the Christian family of faith who are bound and determined to weed out those people who they would judge as evil**, or

perhaps as an abomination. There's not a single mainline denomination that doesn't have its share of good-meaning folks who see it as their God-given task **to "purify" the church.** And if they can't, they leave and start a new denomination. That's how the Evangelical Covenant Order of Presbyterians (ECO) got started after our denomination allowed the ordination of LGBTQ persons of faith, and later affirmed marriage equality.

The gospel writer Matthew was obviously aware that the church in his day was also involved in this same process of so-called "purification." It's the age-old syndrome of trying to determine and judge **who's in and who's out.** It's obviously a game that Christians have never gotten tired of playing. And while some play it more fiercely than others, I don't think I'm out of line in suggesting that there is an element of it in every congregation.

But wait, you ask, don't we have a responsibility to distinguish, classify, and know what is right and what is wrong, what is good and what is evil? Weren't most of us taught that as Christians we should actively try to eradicate evil and wickedness from our midst, including in our institutional systems? Isn't this what it means to work for justice? That's what I use to believe and live by. But as I'm sure everyone in this congregation today fully realizes, and has perhaps experienced first-hand, this eventually and naturally leads to the trap of trying to determine whether other individuals, or even more broadly other types of people, are "wheat" or a "weed."

The Christian Church, throughout its history, continues to fall into this trap. **But the point of Jesus' parable 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 that in the weeding out process we usurp God's role as determining good and evil in an absolute and definitive way. Guess what, we're not God.

This parable dramatically emphasizes the necessity of an attitude governed by tolerance, mutual forbearance, patience, and forgiveness. **It necessitates inclusion, not exclusion. This is the very model of how we are to live together in community.**

Certainly, you have heard Jesus' words in the gospel of Luke, "Do not judge, and you will not be judged; do not condemn, and you will not be condemned. Forgive, and you will be forgiven." Referring to the weeds among the wheat, Jesus tells us, "Let both grow together." **Now, 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.

In the Gospel of Matthew this parable is immediately preceded by the Parable of the Sower, which we looked at last week. When read together, perhaps the lesson is we, **as a community of faith and as followers of the ways of Jesus, should concentrate our efforts and resources on sowing seeds, not on weeding out.**

And then there's this. Though not specifically referenced in the parable itself, **what if we 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 also lives and grows within each of us? Only the arrogant and spiritually self-righteous would claim to be a weedless field. As Paul Tillich wrote in his *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." The famed psychologist Carl Jung would also most likely have approved this particular interpretation of this parable. Jung explored the nature of the unconscious 'shadow' that lives in each soul. 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').

So perhaps we should follow the teaching in this parable and stop judging ourselves so much. Since perfection is simply not possible, perhaps we should apply Jesus' words from Luke inwardly. "Do not judge yourself, and you will not be judged, do not condemn yourself, and you will not be condemned. Forgive yourself, and you will be forgiven."

This parable frees us from the burden of having to "play God" and set things right all by ourselves. We must have faith that God will do that. This implores us, then, not to launch any fearful and destructive inquisitions, crusades, or extreme vetting that can lead to ripping up the good through some puritanical zeal to weed out those whom we think we can determine as evil.

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

Amen.

Resources:

Thomas Long, *Matthew*,
Adam E. Eckhart, *Feasting on the Gospels*