

Matthew 13:24-30, 36-43

He 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 slaves 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 slaves 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.’”

36 Then he 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!

GRASS AND WEEDS

Do you know how you know when you’re getting to be an old man? You become obsessed with growing grass.

I admit it. I’m getting old. I have begun to obsess over my grass. I want my grass to be neater and healthier than any grass in the neighborhood.

Don’t ask me why. I’m just that way. It’s an old man thing.

And this past spring I achieved my goal. I trimmed my lawn to the perfect height. The grass really was greener in my yard. People would walk by and comment on how good the lawn looked. I beamed with pride.

But, then the dry season came. The cinch bugs also came from the “so-called” lawn of the foreclosed house next door. Bare spots and crabgrass began to appear in my perfect lawn.

I’ve tried everything. I’ve pulled up the offending weeds but that just leaves bigger bare spots. Some parts of my lawn refuse to accept water no matter how many of those little holes I punch in the ground as I try to aerate the soil.

I have fertilized. I have applied multiple pesticides and fungicides. I have over watered and under watered.

I have prayed. I have pronounced judgment on the lawn next door ...on more than one occasion!

Nothing has worked.

I sometimes wonder if I should just pull up all the grass and start over.

Those of you who are also lawn obsessed know how I feel. We who are lawn obsessed will pay any price and bear any burden to have a lawn that is the envy of the neighborhood.

But, after reading today's parable I wonder if I should take a different approach. Maybe I should just let the weeds grow with the grass. All of us who live in Florida come to that solution sooner or later don't we?

Hey, the weeds are green. Wild grass is still grass. After all, St. Augustine grass is not even native to this part of the world. Let's just let those native grasses grow. Who's to say what's a weed and what's grass?

To quote the Beatles, "There will come an answer. Let it be."

THE PROBLEM WITH WEED PULLING

But, those of us who are set in our ways have a hard time letting anything be. That's true when it comes to lawn care, and that's true when it comes to the church. We think that it's all up to us. If we don't fix it won't be fixed.

But, sometimes in our zeal all we do is make things worse.

Last week we talked about the fact that Matthew's gospel was written for a community that was undergoing traumatic change. The temple in Jerusalem had been destroyed. God's people had been scattered all over the ancient world. Followers of Jesus were being persecuted. Distortions of the Christian faith were threatening to eliminate it before it even got started.

It certainly seemed like an enemy had sowed some weeds in God's perfect garden. What could these early Christians do in the face of such opposition?

One answer would be to fight back. They could pull up the heresies that threatened to tear them apart. They could fight back against those who persecuted them. They could fight fire with fire.

But, there is a problem. When you try to destroy the weeds, you tend to destroy the wheat as well. That's what the Master told his slaves in the parable for today. If they tried to pull up the weeds they would also pull up the wheat.

(By the way, there are some commentators who think that there was a kind of weed in those days that looked a lot like wheat. The accepted practice was to let the weeds and wheat grow. When both were mature it would be easier to separate the weeds from the wheat and destroy them.)

But, we don't need to speculate about ancient farming practices. The spiritual lesson seems to be clear.

We need to reserve judgment in the church. In our zeal to destroy the heretics we lose the love that made us a community of faith in the first place. In our desire to pull up the weeds we can inadvertently destroy God's messy garden.

That's why Matthew included this parable in his gospel. He wanted the community of faith to remember what Jesus said about evil and justice.

He wanted the community of faith to remember that the justice of God did not depend upon what they could say and do.

The justice of God comes in God's good time. When the time is right God will judge.

But, until that time the best thing we can do is just let it be. Trust God instead of our own judgment.

SEEDS AND WEEDS

Today's parable is another parable about how the kingdom of heaven works. In this case the kingdom of heaven is compared to someone sowing good seed in a field.

Jesus gives us the interpretation of this parable. The sower is God. The good seeds are the children of the kingdom. The field is the world.

The good seeds produce a bountiful crop. But, there is a problem.

An enemy, the devil sows bad seed in with the good seed. And that produces a crop that is tainted. There are weeds in God's garden. Evil has infiltrated the world and evil has infiltrated the community of faith.

William Willimon tells a story about his first church. Thank goodness it was a Methodist Church. He said that he had just graduated from Yale University and had decided to attend graduate school at Emory while he served a small church as pastor. He was ready for ministry ... he thought.

His first charge was a rural church in Georgia that went by what he called “the totally inappropriate name of ‘Friendship Methodist Church.’” When he arrived at the church for the first time he noted a padlock on the door. A lay leader, “a man so named because he laid carpet in Smyrna” told him that the lock belonged to the Gwinnett County Sheriff.

It seems the sheriff had locked down the church after a particularly difficult meeting. He said,

“People started ripping pews out of the floor and carting off stuff they had given to the church.”

They finally called the sheriff who locked up the church until the new preacher could come and sort things out.

And I thought my first church was bad!

There have always been weeds in God’s garden, and the weeds make some people anxious. People often leave the church because it has too many weeds. They say, “We think the world of Jesus. We just can’t stand his friends.”

The poet Shelley put it this way,

“I could believe in Christ if he did not drag behind him that leprous bride of his, the church.”

TODAY’S WEEDS

The sheriff might not have to come to our church and padlock the door, but conflict in the church today is real and deep. We disagree about everything, and we especially disagree about who is in and who is out when it comes to the kingdom of God.

Some of us say, “Those conservatives have sown weeds in God’s garden.” And others counter, “ No, you’re wrong. It’s those liberals who have introduced crabgrass into God’s perfect lawn.”

Who’s the devil? How can we tell the weeds from the wheat, the crabgrass from the St. Augustine?

That’s the big question in the Presbyterian Church and in many other churches today. Just as it is with political parties in our country we have special interest groups who want to tell us how to vote! They want to help us distinguish between good and evil, the weeds and the wheat.

And if we don’t agree with their analysis, then they say that we must be weeds too! Do you see why the Master wanted his slaves to wait on plucking up the weeds?

Weed plucking can be very destructive to the kingdom of God.

Now don't misunderstand.

Weeds and wheat are not the same. Tolerance is a virtue, but that does not mean we will tolerate anything. It does not mean that there is no difference between good and evil.

Weeds are destructive, and wheat is nourishing. God is not mocked by the evil in this world. This passage clearly teaches us that there will come a time when God will judge the living and the dead.

We say that we believe that each week when we repeat the Apostle's Creed don't we?

But, that time of judgment will be God's time and not our time. And it will be God who will judge and not us.

RELIGION VERSUS FAITH

When we read the Bible we see clearly that religious zeal did not always lead God's people to faithful action.

In the Old Testament we learn that God's people could not see how their mistreatment of the poor, the oppressed, and the immigrant was an affront to God. They thought that God was on their side because their theology was orthodox.

But, orthodox theology does not negate policies that promote injustice. God judged their faithless ways.

And remember that Jesus' greatest adversaries were the religious leaders. The people who knew God's Word by heart and studied it constantly led the opposition to God's Son. In the end it was the religious people who crucified Jesus.

We often misunderstand what this means. We speak disparagingly about what "those Jews" did to Jesus. But, the Jewish religious leaders really did love God. They took God's word seriously.

And yet they made the mistake of substituting their own judgment for God's judgment. And sometimes they got it wrong. Sometimes they got it tragically wrong.

The history of the church teaches us that premature judgment continued to cause more harm than good. In the name of Christ we have fought wars, and persecuted people. In some cases (in the case of Muslims and the actions of the Crusaders for example) we continue to live with the historical consequences of those actions.

And we have done all this in the name of someone who said that we should love our enemies and do good to those who persecute us! Pulling weeds prematurely can indeed be very destructive to the kingdom of God.

THE POWER OF GOD'S GARDEN

We live in a world that is “weed obsessed.” If it isn't bad news it's not news. In a weed-obsessed world everyone seems to be saying, “What's this world coming to?”

We've all said it. But what do we do about it?

This parable doesn't teach us to ignore evil and injustice. We learn in the Bible that God desires justice and compassion. God judges those who ignore His commands.

But, the Bible also teaches us that God sometimes turns weeds into wheat. We can't change the leopard's spots, but God can. The story of God's grace is often the story of how God uses a very flawed person, a weed if you will, to advance the cause of the kingdom.

For example in the New Testament book of Hebrews there's a roll call of faith, a sort of honor roll of those who did God's will down through history. But, the honor roll has some surprising names.

For example, one person list in that honor roll is a woman named Rehab. Do you know what Rehab did for a living? She was a prostitute.

She seemed like a weed, but God turned her into a rose. Not only did God use her to help his people make it into the Promised Land; God also saw fit to include her in the royal family line that eventually led to the birth of someone named Jesus.

There are other weeds in God's messy garden.

God used a drunken and lewd Noah. He used Abraham and his squabbling family. He used a murderer by the name of Moses. He used a lustful and mostly corrupt king by the name of David. He used a man named Paul who was determined to destroy the Christian faith before it had a chance to get started.

I know. We're used to thinking about the characters in the Bible as heroes. And yet they often acted like weeds with their self-serving and unjust ways.

But, God was able to use them anyway. He was able to turn evil to good.

If we had met some of these people before God changed their lives we might have wanted to pluck them up, to say that they had no part in God's kingdom. But, we would have made that judgment without knowing the whole story.

I don't define a saint as someone who is perfect or even near perfect. A saint is a weed that God chosen to use for the work of His kingdom!

I believe that the warmth of God's grace can melt the coldest heart.

God's messy garden can produce some very good results in the end.

You can never tell the weeds from the wheat until God judges at the end.

THY KINGDOM COME

And at that final judgment the Bible tells us there may be some surprises. Some that we thought were weeds turn out to be wheat. And some that we thought were wheat turn out to be weeds.

But, no matter who turns out to be what, the Kingdom comes. His will is done.

Robert Capon makes this point when he says that the enemy doesn't have any real power. The wheat is in the field. The Kingdom is in the world.

But, he adds, the enemy "can sucker the forces of goodness into taking up arms against the confusion he has introduced, to do his work for him. That is why he goes away after sowing the weeds. He has no need to hang around.

Unable to take positive action anyway—having no real power to mess up the operation—he simply sprinkles around a generous helping of darkness and waits for the children of light to get flustered enough to do the job for him." (Parables of the Kingdom, p.102)

I know. Gardens need to be weeded and evil needs to be faced with courage. But, Jesus is thinking long range here. In the end the weeds will not take over the garden.

When people ask, "What is this world coming to?" we have an answer. It is not an answer based upon what we see on the evening news. It's an answer based upon God's Word.

The world is coming to a God of grace and a God of glory. The world is coming to One revealed in Jesus.

The Bible tells us Jesus is coming again to judge the living and the dead. Jesus is coming again with life everlasting.

The Creator of heaven and earth has promised a new creation. And in that new world (unlike the world in which we live) the weeds do not take over the garden. In the end there will be a great harvest.

God give us the faith to trust in the Lord of the harvest.
Amen.