

Don't Pick the Weeds

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Rev. Frank Allen

First Presbyterian Church, Kissimmee, Florida

Matthew 13:24 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.’”

Matthew 13:36 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!

WEED CONTROL

It was my job to pick the weeds out of the flower garden. Unfortunately, I couldn't tell the weeds from the flowers. So, I'm afraid some flowers were picked along with the weeds.

My wife gently admonished me concerning the error of my ways. And she said,

“Don’t pick the weeds anymore. Leave that to me.”

Mission accomplished. No more weed picking for me.

My father used to take pride in our rather large lawn. But, as he got older the weeds got the upper hand. When I suggested that he spray the lawn to kill the weeds, he said with a smile, “If I killed the weeds, I wouldn’t have anything green left.”

He had a point, and I suspect the same could be said for many of our lawns. If we killed the weeds, we might not have much left. So what’s a person to do?

I have my own theory. I let the weeds grow right along with the grass! Instead of cutting the grass low to minimize the look of the weeds, I wait until the grass and weeds grow tall. And then I cut the grass with my lawn mower set at the highest level. The grass is strong at that higher level and will even choke out the weeds ... at least to a certain extent.

But, in order to do this you have to be patient, you have to cut the grass more often, and you have to be willing to leave the weeds alone.

As some of my neighbors have proved, any attempt to get rid of the weeds by scalping the lawn will assure you of a yard filled with nothing but weeds!

You have to be careful when it comes to weed control. Sometimes in our attempt to get rid of the weeds we destroy the flowers and the grass.

WEEDS AND WHEAT

Today’s parable teaches us something similar. In this case we’re talking about weeds and wheat. It truly was hard to tell them apart. The particular weed that Jesus was talking about not only was entwined with the wheat; it also produced a seed that could be poisonous. It was truly an evil plant.

The weed in question is called the bearded darnel. During the early stages of its growth the bearded darnel looks exactly like wheat. And this weed wraps itself around the wheat so that if you try to separate the weeds from the wheat at this early stage you end up destroying your crop.

That's why the householder in today's parable tells his servants not to pick the weeds. If they tried to pick the weeds, they would probably destroy the wheat.

The servants needed to wait until harvest time. Then the difference between weeds and wheat will be obvious, and they will easily be able to bundle up the wicked weeds and burn them in the fire.

But, for now the servants need to be patient and wait for the harvest.

A PARABLE ABOUT THE CHURCH

This is a parable about the church. What happens when the evil one sows bad seed in God's garden? How do we respond to deadly weeds that threaten the very life of God's people?

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?

Weeds threatening to destroy the harvest were a problem in the early church, and it continues to be a problem for the church today.

There are still weeds in the church. There are wolves in sheep's clothing. There are false prophets and false Messiahs who look like the real thing but are in fact deadly to true faith. Kenneth Haugk, the founder of Stephen Ministry refers to such people as antagonists in the church.

But, no matter what we call them ... antagonists, wolves, false prophets or weeds ... they are a reality in the community of faith. Jesus' parable acknowledges this hard truth.

So, what are God's people to do today in the face of this threat? How can we separate the wheat from the weeds?

One answer would be to fight back. We can pull up the heresies that threaten to tear us apart. We can fight back against those who persecute us. We can fight fire with fire.

But, Jesus tells his disciples that this is not the way. You can't pull the weeds because if you do the wheat will be destroyed as well.

Today's parable suggests that we need to be careful. In our attempts to weed God's garden we can inadvertently destroy the good crop.

When we think about the history of the church, this problem is easy to see. Often in an attempt to separate the wheat from the weeds the church has been very destructive and judgmental.

How can we stand against evil without becoming judgmental and destructive?

THE REALITY OF EVIL IN THE CHURCH

First, we need to honestly acknowledge that there is evil in the church. Bad seed has been sown in the church in every age. Not everyone who claims to be a Christian is truly a follower of Jesus. Jesus predicted as much. He said that not all who call him Lord are a part of the kingdom.

Almost every day there is a news story about a pastor or church leader who has done something awful. Down through the years many terrible things have been done in the church because Christians have looked the other way in the face of injustice.

It's very important in such cases to confront that evil directly and take steps immediately to right the wrong that has been committed. This is especially true for those of us who are leaders in the church. It is our responsibility to protect the flock from false teachers.

We take this very seriously in the Presbyterian Church. A large portion of the Book of Order is dedicated to church discipline. This part of our polity describes in great detail procedures designed to prevent immoral and unjust behavior from destroying the church.

THE PROBLEM OF BEING JUDGMENTAL

But, having said that, we need to make sure that in our judgments we do not become judgmental. We take into account our own imperfections. We too are sinners. And our judgments are often tragically wrong.

Jesus said that sometimes we attempt to remove a splinter from our neighbor's eye without realizing that we have a log in our own eye! We need to remember that all our judgments are temporary and quite often they are very flawed.

In my opinion, societies based upon a certain theology, so called theocracies almost always tend to be repressive. It doesn't really make any difference if the theology is Christian or Islamic or Jewish or whatever.

If a certain religious group is put in charge of pulling up society's weeds they almost always end up destroying the wheat as well. They see very clearly the weeds in their neighbor's yard, but they fail to see the fact that their own yard is in desperate need of weeding as well.

I think Jesus understood the danger of making faith into a political movement. Jesus told the Roman governor, Pilate that his kingdom was not of this world.

Jesus told his disciples that his kingdom was not about "lording it over others," having power and control over others.

Instead, Jesus preached a message of grace and freedom. And Jesus preached against a religion that was intent upon policing the morality of the people.

In Jesus' day elaborate and nitpicking religious laws were a heavy burden on the people. In their attempt to weed the garden of society these leaders missed the more important points of God's law.

These blind guides had, as Jesus put it, strained at a gnat while swallowing a camel. More than that, they even found themselves opposing the very incarnation of God's love and law in the person of Jesus Christ.

At its heart God's law is a means of grace. The law is God's way of helping us to live the good life. But, the religious leaders of Jesus' day (like many religious leaders today) insisted on making the law into an instrument of harsh judgment. Their main concern was about who was "in" and who was "out" when it came to God's kingdom.

FINAL JUDGMENT

We will have to wait for the final harvest before the wheat is separated from the weeds. And when that time comes, we will not be the ones who are making the judgment. That is a decision well above our pay grade.

It is God in Christ who will judge. God in Christ will separate the wheat from the chaff, the sheep from the goats.

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. God judges the people God loves in order to save them. God judges us in order to save us.

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.

THE WEED-INFESTED BODY OF CHRIST

Paul in his letter to the Corinthians wrote, “Now you are the body of Christ.” To whom was he talking? He was talking to the church at Corinth.

For eleven chapters Paul had been telling the Corinthians how they had been doing it all wrong. They were messed up in every way possible. They were morally corrupt. Dissension and division marked their community.

But, after eleven chapters of telling them the Corinthians how messed up they were, Paul says, “Now you are the body of Christ.” If ever there was a weed-infested garden, the church at Corinth was it. And yet Paul calls that church the body of Christ.

Paul didn’t say, “You ought to be the body of Christ.” Paul didn’t say, “If you work hard one day you might be able to be the body of Christ.” Paul said, “You are the body of Christ.”

Isn’t it amazing that he could say that about such a weed-infested church? And isn’t it amazing that we say the same thing about us? Despite our unfaithfulness and despite our many flaws we too are the body of Christ.

Sometimes people tell me that they have faith but are opposed to organized religion. I tell them, “Then you should be a Presbyterian. We’re about as disorganized as religion gets!”

I’ve had that opinion reconfirmed last month at the General Assembly. Once again it was a meeting filled with contention over a number of issues. Toward the end of the meeting I wondered if we would ever get rid of the weeds in our church.

As we used to say in West Virginia, “This is a heck of a way to run a railroad.”

But, for better or for worse this is the way God has chosen to bring salvation to the world. First, the kingdom came through the humble man Jesus and now it comes through Jesus’ weed-infested body, the church.

WHAT'S THE WORLD COMING TO?

Today's parable makes you wonder what kind of farmer is so tolerant of weeds in his garden. Maybe it's the kind of farmer who is more interested in growing and cultivation than in weeding and separation.

These days many people think that being religious means separating yourself from the common herd of humanity.

Many people think that the religious are those who are truly righteous and morally upright. Religion is about creating a weed free community or even getting away from human beings all together.

Where do we find God? Some say we meet God on the mountaintop or in those long, lonely walks in the woods.

But, today's lesson suggested that we find God among the weed-infested world. That's hard to believe. The enemy sows seeds of injustice and hatred on a daily basis. No one needs to tell us this.

We see it each night on the evening news ... conflict in the Middle East, in Ukraine, and in the incredible amount of violence that invades our own streets.

No amount of Roundup can kill these weeds. These weeds are too much for us to handle.

But, they're not too much for God.

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 asking, "What's this world coming to?"

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

People everywhere ask, "What is this world coming to?"

The people of faith 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 the God revealed in Jesus.

We will sing about it today when we sing, "This is My Father's World." And the second verse of that hymn summarizes our lesson for today "... though the wrong seems oft so strong, God is the ruler yet."

FAITH AND PATIENCE

Someone once wrote, "The less we are willing to wait, the less we believe in God."

True faith is not expressed in a desire to judge and control. True faith is expressed in patience.

True faith is expressed in a willingness to live with ambiguity. True faith is a willingness to allow the wheat and the weeds to grow together, trusting in the love and justice of a righteous and gracious God.

We know how the story will end.

In the end the weeds will be banished forever. In the end Jesus is coming to judge the living and the dead.

In the end Jesus is coming with life everlasting.
The Creator of heaven and earth has promised a new creation.

But, in the meantime we patiently wait for that new heaven and new earth to become a blessed reality.

We live with the weeds and the ambiguity ... because we have faith in the Lord of the harvest.

Amen.