

Wheat and Weeds  
Matt. 13:24-30, 36-43  
June 3, 2018  
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Today we start our summer sermon series on the parables of Jesus. Jesus was a master storyteller and he often used parables to convey deep spiritual truths. Telling a story is a great way to disarm someone – who doesn't like a story? – and open their ears and hearts to hearing important lessons. The parables were often very clear, but rarely easy to live by. You could usually find the lesson in the place where your expectations get upset, where you say, "That's not supposed to happen!" Our first parable is the wheat and the weeds.

Let me tell you a story about Claire. Claire was one of the first youth I met at a church I served during seminary. It was my first real church position, so I was eager to get in there and show the congregation what I could do, while still dealing with the nagging thought that I had no idea what I was doing. I planned a great first gathering and had a deeply profound Bible study and some chocolate chip cookies. This was going to be a life-changing meeting!

Three people showed up. One was Claire. I knew as soon as she walked in the room I was in trouble. Hair dyed black. Black clothes. A look on her face like someone just ran over her dog. I found out later that she was a terrible student in school, hung out with the bad crowd, and listened to loud music that had cuss words in it. Through the whole meeting she just sat there, looking depressed and dejected. She didn't even take any chocolate chip cookies! Inside, I was mad. This wasn't how my ministry was supposed to begin. There was a weed in my wheat.

That's why I relate to the servants in our parable today. When they see that weeds have begun to grow among their master's wheat, their first response is, "Let's pluck them up! Let's barrel into the fields and begin yanking up anything that looks suspicious. That will show those pesky weeds!" But – here's the part where our expectations are upset – their master says, "No, boys, let's wait. If you go uprooting all the weeds, you may damage the wheat, and then all is lost. Let's wait until they mature, and then we'll separate them." The Bible stops the dialogue there, but I know what the servants say next. "What? Leave the weeds in there? How can we do that? They're bad, the wheat is good. It's as simple as that. We need to take a stand, we need to draw the line. We need to say, 'Wheat, you stay, but Weed, you go!'"

That's what we want them to say, isn't it? Because the world is full of weeds. Jesus defines the weeds as "the sons of the evil one." Publicly, I define the weeds as anyone who's keeping me from loving God. Privately, I define weeds as anyone who doesn't live their lives the way I think they should. They cut me off in traffic, they take 12 items into the 10-items-or-less line at the grocery store, they leave their garbage cans out an extra day. I know everyone in here can name a weed or two in your life.

Of course, there are more serious weeds we deal with. Child molesters. Murderers. Corporate con artists. These weeds do more than just look bad, they choke the life out of the wheat growing around them. They hog all the good soil for themselves, not sharing any with the other plants that are clinging to life. They gulp the water while the

wheat shrivels from dehydration. Yes, there are weeds all around us and they deserve nothing more than to be plucked up and thrown away.

I hate to say this out loud, but there are even weeds in the church. Not our church, thank goodness; but I've been in other churches where the pristine field of wheat was littered with crabgrass and thistles. These people complain about everything, they gossip and start rumors, and although they have much, they give little. Can you understand why the servants wanted to get the weeds out of the way? It's hard to be good wheat with all those weeds around.

There's been a lot of that down through the years, efforts to clarify who's a weed and who's wheat. Sometimes that's even done in the name of God, as if God gave us the power to say who counts and who doesn't, and the ones labeled weeds get rounded up and huddled into refugee settlements and concentration camps. Turn us loose with our spiritual machetes and there's no telling who we'll chop down in the name of Jesus. We all have the dangerous capacity to assume we know the mind of God and the hubris to act on it.

But in our parable, the master has more patience and foresight. He tells his hasty servants to wait. Part of his reasoning is practical. Young wheat and young weeds can look very similar in appearance. It's impossible to tell them apart. And by the time they both mature, their roots are so intertwined that you can't pull up one without pulling up the other. To uproot the weeds now could bring about economic ruin, because the harvest of wheat would be destroyed, as well. The only solution then, was to wait, let them both grow and sort them out later.

That may not be soon enough for us stalks of wheat, but there's wisdom in that line of thinking. As much as I'd like to think I know a weed when I see one, I don't. Our house in Illinois had some beautiful flowers and landscaping, but during the time that the previous people moved out and we moved in, the yard became infested with weeds. Well, as a first-time homeowner, I was ready to go out into my yard and begin enforcing some agricultural justice on those renegade plants. Problem was, once I fired up the weed-whacker and set to work, I wasn't sure what to kill and what to keep. I might be tempted to chop something down, only to find it in a vase on my kitchen table later that evening. We think we know the weeds in life, and if you catch us in the right mood we'll even name names, but we don't know. Only God truly knows.

Another reason we should wait before pulling up the weeds is that, if we look closely enough, we might find weeds in our own garden. A Far Side cartoon showed the inside of a refrigerator. The bottle of ketchup, a head of lettuce, and a block of cheese were all huddled together on one side of the fridge, their faces covered with fear and their hands in the air. On the other side of the fridge was a carton holding a gun. The caption read, "When sour cream goes bad." We've all got some bad sour cream in our refrigerators, don't we?

Our hearts are a mixture of good and evil; no one is purely one or the other. We all live with that constant tension of trying to grow our wheat while fighting the weeds. Because of our imperfection, our humanness, our poor choices, we sow bad seeds along with the good, so we are all in need of mercy. Some folks may like to think that there are two kinds of people in the world – wheat and weeds. The problem with that is that no one draws the line between grace and judgment behind them, so a weed is always defined as

someone who thinks and behaves differently than me. Wouldn't life be easier if that were the case? In reality, everyone is a mixture of both.

If that's true, then everyone has the potential to be transformed by God's power and love. In the world of agriculture, weeds may contaminate wheat. But in God's garden, wheat can transform weeds. I certainly forgot it when dealing with Claire. I judged her as weed right away, and that diagnosis colored how I dealt with her for a long time. But I watched as she came to know God, and I watched how God changed Claire, how God's word took root in her heart. She became a vibrant member of the youth group. She's matured into a beautiful young woman, full of dreams and aspirations, and with a solid faith in God. She still listens to loud music with cuss words, but sometimes I do, too. Do you know what happened? Where I only saw weeds, God saw wheat.

That's what God can do if we give God the space to do it. It's tempting to divide the world into Christians and non-Christians, or better yet Christians like me and everyone else. But putting people into categories is dangerous, because it doesn't allow for the ambiguity of the human condition. There is more bad in the best of us and more good in the worst of us than we'll ever know. God can take a person full of anger, envy, or animosity, and turn them into a person full of love, grace and mercy. A person is not to be judged by a single act or stage of life, but by their whole life. It's a difficult thing for us to look at someone who's acting like weed and say, "You know, there's wheat in that person." But on our worst days, that's what God does with us. In my backyard, I've never seen a dandelion turn into a rose, no matter how hard I pray. But in my ministry, given a little time and a lot of love and forgiveness, I've seen a weed of a person blossom into a flower.

So what do we do? How does the wheat survive if they have to live among the weeds? Do we spend all our time attacking the weeds, trying to keep the garden pure? I've seen people who consider themselves wheat get so riled up and defensive that they start sounding a lot like weeds. "That person calls themselves a Christian, and yet they say THAT? They do THAT?" This parable reminds us that it's not our job to weed out the world; it's our job to be wheat, rooting ourselves in the One who planted us.

We are called to be the best wheat we can be, and to trust that God will work through us to bring nourishment and sunlight to those around us. In the ultimate end, we can't control what's going to happen to the weeds; we just have to do our best to not be one of them. As Annie Dillard says in *The Writing Life*, "There is no shortage of good days. It is good lives that are hard to come by." Our goal is to live good lives, honoring God and following Christ, proclaiming the gospel in how we live and treat others.

There are going to be weeds in our life, probably on a daily basis. We're even going to find weeds in our families, maybe even in our church. And scariest of all, we may even discover weeds in our own hearts. Thankfully, we have a Master Gardener who's slow to pluck up and burn. He's patient with us, allowing us time to grow and mature and transform. We have been shown such tremendous mercy and forgiveness by our loving God. May we have the strength to live our lives as fully as possible and to let God do the sorting out in the end. Because you just never know what God is doing, do you? You just never know how God is turning weeds into wheat in this world...and in us.