

Weeds or Wheat? Matthew 13:24-30, 36-43

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I understand I'm taking a risk today, preaching on a parable about farming to you. So many of you are expert farmers, perhaps even a couple master gardeners. The rest of you are at least really experienced amateurs. Everyone here, it seems, can grow things. We even have Pastor Farmer Tim and Lori back with us this morning. Are you in the expert category, yet?

I, on the other hand, am in whatever category comes before novice gardener. We once killed a cactus after moving it to Texas. And yet we have just bought a home that, we have been told, has been lovingly cared for, for decades by a couple with very green thumbs. There are plants and flowers everywhere; trees whose name we do not know. After a lot of googling, I think I figured out we have a pear tree. I think. There is a great place where we could start a vegetable garden, if we can muster up the courage. But with all my inexperience, there's one thing that I seem very equipped to grow, with little to no effort at all: weeds.

Everywhere! Weeds! I'd pull the weeds...if I could tell what was a weed and what was a good plant. Often, they're both blooming. I thought we had a bunch of weeds growing along our driveway, but then I was told they were ferns. So I've decided to just keep the grass trim, and let the weeds grow. When in doubt, grow it out.

I don't know if this is good gardening, but I'm going to call it the biblical way of weeding, straight from our parable this morning. As this parable indicates, Jesus loves to tell a farming story. I can picture him joining us at coffee time on Tuesdays, as we sit around the table, eager to hear another story from the farm.

But there's something about these farming stories of Jesus: none of the farmers seem to know a thing about farming! Take for instance the parable of the Good Sower, found in the Gospel of Matthew just a few verses before our text. In that parable, the sower just starts throwing out seed. On good soil. On bad soil. In thorns. On rocks. Along the path. Everywhere, this sower is throwing seed. No good sower would do that! What a waste! You don't your heirloom tomato seeds on rocks or inside a thorn bush!

A few verses after our story today is another parable about farmer planting seeds, or, rather, a seed. One seed. We are told a farmer sows one mustard seed. Just one tiny mustard seed, from a plant that was known in his day as a nuisance plant. After planting his one seed, he steps back and waits for harvest. What good farmer would place all of his hopes in only one seed from a nuisance plant?

Jesus can tell a good story, but a good farmer, he is not. Our parable today is more of the same. It starts off better than the rest: "The kingdom of heaven may be compared to someone who sowed good seed in his field." Finally! But then it just gets weird. "While

everybody was asleep,” we are told, “an enemy came and sowed weeds among the wheat, and then went away.”

I don’t know about you, but the farmers I’ve meet usually seem like a pretty peaceful bunch. They make friends, but rarely enemies. Yet, someone, Jesus’ farmer has really angered someone. He doesn’t even seem surprised at the fact. When he is told that someone has sown weeds in with his wheat, that’s immediately where his mind goes--my enemy has done this! Perhaps he made an enemy at the State Fair. He won the ribbon for largest squash, and the runner up is deathly jealous. Maybe some developer wants to buy his land, but he won’t sell. “This farm’s been in the family for years!”

Whatever the reason, he’s got an enemy and he knows it, and things have escalated quickly. An entire crop has been sabotaged. The servants have the best idea: let’s get to work now, pulling the weeds, saving what we can, before things get worse. But the farmer will have nothing of it. Why would he? This is Jesus’ farmer, after all, and Jesus’ farmers never do things the way they should.

“Let both of them (the weeds and the wheat) grow together until the harvest,” he says. “For in gathering the weeds you would uproot the wheat along with them.”

Now, I may not be a good gardener, but I can google. The scientific name for the “weed” referenced in this story is *Lolium temulentum*. It is known in English as a darnel, poison darnel, or cockel. Some older Bible translations called it a “tare.” But the important point is, if your field is infested with darnel, you’re in trouble. This is not a harmless weed. It’s an imposture weed that looks just like wheat, but is actually poison. If you eat too much of it, it can cause blindness and then you die.

Jesus’ listeners would’ve known this: the farmer’s plan is a deadly plan. Leaving poison weed to grow with the wheat is like keeping the Clorox in the refrigerator next to the milk, or storing the steak knives in the kid’s toy bin. It is dangerous. It is risky. It is deadly.

And it is, Jesus says, just like the kingdom of God.

If you’re as perplexed as I am about Jesus’ comparison of the Kingdom of God to this dangerous farmer with a poisoned crop, we are in good company. Jesus’ own disciples had no clue what he was talking about. This parable, like very few of Jesus’ parables, comes with an explanation.

“Explain to us the parable of the weeds of the field,” the disciples ask. And Jesus does. He lays it out, clear as day, explaining the players in the story as if he’s reading off a playbill, listing actors in a play and their respective roles.

It is so neat after Jesus explains it. I wish Jesus did this more often! Everyone has their role to play, and it will all be sorted out at the end. It's so neat and tidy that many scholars believe this explanation is not from Jesus at all, but was added later, perhaps by the writer of the Gospel or some early Christian scribe, trying to clear up what Jesus left hanging. I'd argue against such a scholarly explanation, except this certainly sounds like something a minister or church leader might do. Don't we love a good explanation: this is what Jesus really meant! We aren't comfortable with ambiguity.

We need Jesus to explain this parable to us. Because we love drawing lines, separating the good from the bad. We want to know who is on which side of the line, and where we stand. Am I a weed, Jesus, or am I a wheat? And what about her, and him?

The Gospel of Matthew, more than any other gospel, is this way. Matthew loves his world to be neatly ordered. He can't stand the thought of the bad guys getting away. There is no Prodigal Son in Matthew's Gospel. Matthew brings us parables like weeds and wheat, and sheep and goats. To him, everyone has a category. Everyone has a place. There's good and there's evil, and if you're evil, well, you'll get what's coming to you soon enough! Most of the parables in Matthew's gospel usually end with the bad guys being cut up into pieces and thrown into unquenchable fire. Matthew would probably have been a good candidate for therapy.

There certainly is a time and place for seeing the world the way Matthew does. But these days, it seems, Matthew's way of looking at the world is the only way. Everywhere, we're drawing lines. Most Christians have given up on ambiguity, as they carry lists in their pockets of who is a weed and who is wheat. You can tell who's on which list by how they vote, or worship, or where they shop, or what they eat, or how they dress, or where they live, or how they feel about gays, or about abortion, or do they believe in a literal hell, or what is their view on evolution.

Liberal or Conservative, everyone uses these issues as a litmus test to determine who's in and who's out. What makes you a "weed" to one group, makes you "wheat" to another. And before long, we've all cut one another up into pieces and thrown the whole world into the furnace of fire.

It's been quite a week for the line-drawers. We were traveling this week, so the news came to us slower than it may have come to you. This week Israel sent armed troops to invade Gaza, a bully move in the latest escalation of a long dispute over a line called a border.

Here in the U.S., everyone is arguing about another border line, and the unaccompanied, immigrant children who keep crossing it in droves, seeking refuge from the dangerous conditions in their homelands. Some call them illegals, undocumented, and law-breakers. They belong on one side of the line; we belong on the other.

And then we hear about a passenger plane that was shot out of the sky from the ground by a missile. Someone, we don't know who, in an instant threw 298 people into a fiery furnace, over 80 of them children, for reasons we cannot imagine, as the plane flew over yet another area embroiled in a border conflict.

We love our lines, and we're willing to kill to enforce them, or let people die as we turn them away. Weeds over there! Wheat in here!

And then we meet Jesus' farmer. He doesn't seem to know a thing about good farming, but if you haven't already caught on, this story was never about farming. This is a story about us, and how we love to hate a weed.

In this story, we've been cast as the servants, and at the second we hear any mention of the word weed, we start running for our threshing hooks. After all, we can't be too careful! These are potentially deadly weeds. They're poison. They could trick us, lead us astray! They could pollute our children! It's safer if we get rid of them! Purify the crops! Save the harvest! We can't be too careful.

And just when we think we're safe from infestation, someone turns the threshing hook on us. Maybe we're a weed. After all, we're not perfect. We have our doubts. We mess up. Who knows what weedy secrets are hiding in the soil of our hearts.

And just as the threshing hook is raised, someone yells, "No! Leave them! Let them grow!"

What's a weed, anyway? Your weed, may be my flower. Dandelions are a weed, but they're one of my son's favorite things. Driving through Southern Iowa this week, I saw a lot of short, stubby corn stalks, poking up among crops of soybeans. Were they weeds? Honeysuckle can be very invasive, swallowing a mailbox whole, yet the smell is straight from heaven. Some weeds are companion plants, and can actually help other, more preferred, crops grow. And what good is wheat, if you have a gluten intolerance?

What's a weed and what's wheat?

And to our obsession with lines, Jesus says, it doesn't matter. Let them all grow in the field. Your job is to water and care for the field. Don't throw anyone out. We can't risk losing someone.

Stop drawing and enforcing the lines. Stop seeking vengeance. Put your "weed" and "wheat" labels away, and bask in the beauty of this big, ambiguous field of God, where there's room for us all, no matter how weedy or wheaty we may be.

May those with ears to hear, listen. Amen.