

Matthew 13:24-30, 36-43

The Parable of Weeds among the Wheat

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.’”

Jesus Explains the Parable of the Weeds

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!

Sermon: Wheat and Weeds

The bearded darnel. It’s a nasty, nasty weed. I have heard it said that a weed is a plant whose virtues haven’t yet been discovered, but the bearded darnel has no virtues. It grows alongside other plants and sends its roots down to wrap around the roots of its neighbour, sucking up precious nutrients and scarce water. It looks like wheat while it’s growing; you can’t tell that it’s a weed until after the seeds appear – the seeds of the bearded darnel are not full and healthy, like regular wheat. Instead, the seeds are small and black – like Ebenezer Scrooge’s heart.

These little black pips also tend to be infected with an ergot fungus. When eaten, this fungus produces trembling, an inability to walk, affected speech, vomiting, hallucinations, and even death. The name darnel comes from an old French word *darne* which means to be stupefied. Nasty, nasty stuff to have mixed in a field of wheat that you hope to be able to eat.

As I mentioned, as it grows this weed wraps its own roots around the roots of neighbouring plants in a parasitic manner. This means that you can’t pull out bearded darnel without also uprooting everything around it. It is pernicious, and tenacious, this bearded darnel.

Another name for this weed is a tare – those of us familiar with some of the older translations of the bible will recognize the parable that we heard from Mathew this morning as the parable of the wheat and the tares. The tare is a cheat weed, it is the botanical equivalent of a wolf in sheep's clothing. Mat 7.15

This parable of the wheat and the tares immediately follows another parable about seeds that Rev Cox may have preached about last week; the one in which the sower (stained glass) scatters the seed of the word in the world.

In that lesson, the seed falls on various types of soils; it falls everywhere – some seeds grow, some don't. It's a parable about receptivity, it's a parable about happenstance, and it is a parable about the world out there.

In today's parable, Jesus does not seem to be speaking about the world out there anymore, but about a select group. He is speaking about the field of a particular homeowner. Jesus is the householder; the field is his field; the field is the church – the community of believers.

Moreover, in this parable Jesus is no longer speaking about bad results due to environment or chance, as with the sower. Jesus is telling a tale of intentional evil being sown within the community of faith.

As much as we might like to pretend otherwise, it is true that the church is a mixed bag of people. There are times that the church as a whole acts in a manner that is contrary to the greatest commandment 'love God with all your heart, mind, soul and strength, and love others as yourself.' Residential schools are an example of this. The church as a body can be infected and do evil.

Within the body, at any given moment, there are members of the church who, publically or privately, act in unchristian ways. I won't even try to give examples – we all know the ways in which we sin individually. It is certainly the case that there is evil at work among us.

The community of Jesus is called to imitate Jesus, to follow Jesus, to present the face of Jesus to the world, and to act in his name according to his commandment to love. We, however, are not purely that community. In fact, the church is never pure; it has never been pure, and never will be pure. We've got tares.

Our reaction to this infestation could certainly be just the same as the servants in the parable; we start ripping out what we feel doesn't belong. Some of us, deep down inside, secretly enjoy this kind of housecleaning – determining who is in, and who is out.

Who is part of the church, and who should leave? Who is accepted by God, and who is not? When we ask these kind of questions, we are assuming that it is our job to draw up the specifications regarding inclusion. We take upon ourselves the job of determining the parameters of salvation.

Jesus warned his followers about this desire to root out the evil. His response in the parable is to tell the servants to wait until the appointed time, and then Jesus himself will direct the workers and make the determination of what is wheat and what is a weed. Not our decision – His.

You see, as I've mentioned before, whenever we draw a line and place ourselves on this side, and the others over there, we inevitably find Jesus on the other side, talking and eating with those others that we have rejected.

As we resist the temptation to judge those around us, we ought to keep in mind that Jesus' own little private garden of disciples had a rather nasty weed in it who was not uprooted. Jesus didn't miss recognizing Judas – he even told the whole group after washing their feet that there was one among them who was a betrayer; one who received the grace and hospitality of Christ and yet was about to lift his heel against him.

Jesus followed the very same advice that he gave to his disciples – to leave the weeds be until the appointed time. The reason that he gives for this is that pulling the tares out will damage the other crop.

Imagine if Jesus had kicked Judas out of the group. What effect would that have had on the eleven that remained? Jesus would have been fully justified – he knew full well what Judas was planning, and he is the King after all. Jesus has the knowledge to recognize a bad seed when he sees it, and the authority to pluck that weed out.

But in the eyes of the eleven, Judas had done nothing wrong – yet. Although they may trust Jesus enough to accept his judgement, for the rest of the ministry they would forever be unsure and insecure, afraid to do or say the wrong thing because they might be next on the chopping block.

Already, the disciples were a pretty shaky lot. They were consistently getting things wrong, like toddlers falling all over themselves. If they were also afraid that any wrong move could result in Jesus sending them away, they would have frozen up – too terrified to even try. The rejection of Judas would have damaged this group beyond repair.

In waiting, Jesus allowed his group of fledgling disciples to learn and grow together. Eventually, after a look into the sorrowful eyes of Jesus, Judas removed himself from the group. A small observation about that incident – although Jesus had the right and authority to condemn Judas, it was actually Judas who convicted himself, and carried out his own death sentence. Although I put this out to you as a small point to ponder in the middle of this sermon, I would encourage you to sometime spend an hour contemplating the ramifications of this episode in regard to your understanding of judgement and predestination. C.S. Lewis writes very well on this topic.

When faced with a weed in his garden, Jesus chose to wait, and he tells us to do the same.

Waiting is hard – patience is not something that North Americans are good at. We’re used to a fast paced life that is filled to overflowing with input. Impatience defines our current era, we want everything now, faster, and better.

If a website takes more than five seconds to load, we skip it and move on to the next one. The driver who waits three seconds at a green light gets blasted by the horn behind him. Packages from Amazon that take more than a day or two to arrive result in bad reviews.

We aren’t good at waiting. We are impatient – certainly I know that I am. We need to repent of our impatience, and prayerfully seek patience, which is, after all, a fruit of the spirit.

It is for our benefit that we suspend our judgement of others and wait. If we look again at the disciples we see that not only is there a weed among them, but that each of the disciples acts like a weed at one time or another. The disciples were fickle and wavered between loyalty and strength - and despair and confusion.

This is true of us as well. Our own lives resemble that farmer’s field, with wheat and weeds intertwined within our hearts, souls, and minds. The apostle Paul certainly was thinking of something like this when he wrote I do not do what I want to do, but instead I do the very things I hate, which you heard two weeks ago.

The truth is that just as the community of faith is neither purely wheat or purely weed, so too with each of us. Each of us is some mixture wheat and weed, holy and unholy.

There is something inside of us that likes the idea of dualism – the categorization of everything around us into good and bad, black and white, big and small. We feel comfortable putting labels on things so that we don’t have to think too hard, but the labels don’t stick, because they aren’t really accurate.

When we look at ourselves, we see that we are both wheat and weed at the same time, but when we look at others we somehow feel empowered to declare them to be weeds and judge them for it. It is at these times of dualistic, black and white judgement that we should call to mind Jesus’ directive to love others as we love ourselves. We cut ourselves some slack as being complex creatures that contain both good and evil – we ought to do the same for others.

Given that some days are wheat days, and others are weed days, we ought to be grateful that Jesus is choosing to wait. There are plenty of days in which I am only fit to be bundled with the other tares and thrown in the fire – waiting works well for me. I have opportunities to grow, to learn, to respond to God’s call, and so do all of you. It is in all of our best interests that Jesus chooses to delay judgement.

But this waiting also presents a problem. Because of the wait, the weeds often win out in this life. Jesus knew this. You know this too.

There are weeds that get their roots tangled around us and rob us of much of what we work so hard for. The cheater weeds choke us out, poison us, and because they look like us, they give us a bad name. The tares are a burden; they cause suffering.

Sin doesn't just hurt the sinners, and evil doesn't only affect evil people. Because we are both saints and sinners together and at the same time, we suffer together.

Some of this suffering is due to the evil that is sown into the world. Greedy, lustful, self-serving, power-hungry, rude, indifferent, uncaring, obsessed, and parasitic people make our lives miserable. Evil creates suffering.

Creation suffers as the ice caps melt and species go extinct faster than we can record them. Individuals suffer in ghettos and reservations, in prison; people wither in dead-end jobs and abusive homes; some only wish for homes since theirs have been bombed out in wars that they know nothing about. This kind of suffering is pointless and useless – for the most part this suffering at the hands of evil is suffering in vain.

There is also another kind of suffering - one brought on by hope. This is the suffering of which Paul writes in Romans.

Christian hope is not merely wishful thinking; it is hope rooted in what Paul calls the 'first fruits of the Spirit'. This metaphor of the first fruits means that in Christ we have come to know the power of life over death. We know freedom. We know love. We have tasted the first fruits and they have whetted our appetite for the Kingdom of God to come in fullness.

We have a taste of what should be – what is to come – yet we look around us and see that we are far from where we ought to be; individually, and together as a society. Paul writes of creation waiting with eager longing – groaning inwardly in some translations – because it has been subjected to futility; vain suffering that produces no fruit.

The hopeful children of God suffer alongside creation. The one who hopes hurts. The one who hopes has a restless heart. The one who hopes sees what we get, what is in front of us, and is sorely disappointed.

Those of us who have tasted the first fruits hunger for more, and we cry out wherever love is absent, life is shortened, and freedom is taken away. This kind of suffering gives us a clue as to what we are expected to do while we wait.

We are not merely to sit around waiting for God to make all things right. The servants certainly didn't spend months loafing around the house waiting for the crop to ripen so they could get back to work. We are not to wait passively, suffering the effects of evil among us, but we are to use the time that we have been given well.

Our hope, based on our experience of God and the promises of God, ought to empower us to confront the evils of this age, knowing full well that the evil way is not the final way. The days of evil are numbered, and so we who hope are inspired to work in the present to bring about God's Kingdom today.

Instead of judging and casting out, we are to get on with the business of loving, or at least living with, each other. Often, in the space created by such patience, it is not just others, but ourselves who find ourselves welcomed into a larger reality.

As we consider the wheat and weeds within, we do well to remember that there is a being, the Psalmist wrote, a perfect Father, a God who knows us, understands us, sees us and is all around us on every side and who protects us with His power.

He sees the turmoil inside; he knows our very thoughts. God sees your weeds. You cannot hide from God, wherever you are on earth, in heaven, or even among the dead, God is still very much present.

So too is Jesus present. Patiently present, willing to wait as you mature and ripen so that he can reap the good wheat that you produce. The weeds in us will be discarded in due time. Jesus is not willing that any should be lost.

His mission is also our mission. Our job is not to pluck out weeds in others, but to patiently nurture that which is good. To love those that have been planted around us. To encourage others to catch the hope that we have in Christ, the hope that gives us the strength, not only to endure, but to thrive.

We have been given time – but we don't know how much. Let hope burn within you and stir you to love wastefully in the manner that Christ has loved you, and you will find as the Psalmist wrote

'I come to the end – I am with you still.'

I speak to you today in the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit.