

ARE YOU WHEAT OR A WEED?

Matthew 13:24-30, 36-43

July 20, 2008

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Marsha Gubser shares the following story:

One sunny morning I dragged my teenage son Matt outside to help me pull weeds. He often snickers when he catches me talking to my plants, but I told him, "Be careful. The weeds are so thick here you could easily uproot a flower. If you do, stick it back in the ground and tell it you're sorry."

My son sighed. "Mom," he said, "I just weed the plants. I don't counsel them." (Marsha Gubser, Salinas, California, "Lite Fare," Christian Reader (July/August 2000))

If you've ever planted a garden, you've had to deal with weeds. I've yet to meet a person that likes to pull weeds, and apparently, it's not at the top of God's list either. Jesus tells a parable in Matthew 13:24-30 that is full of surprises. Please turn in your Bible and read with me: (New Living Translation)

13:24

Here is another story Jesus told: "The Kingdom of Heaven is like a farmer who planted good seed in his field.

13:25

But that night as everyone slept, his enemy came and planted weeds among the wheat.

13:26

When the crop began to grow and produce grain, the weeds also grew.

13:27

The farmer's servants came and told him, 'Sir, the field where you planted that good seed is full of weeds!'

13:28

"An enemy has done it!" the farmer exclaimed. "Shall we pull out the weeds?" they asked.

13:29

"He replied, 'No, you'll hurt the wheat if you do.

13:30

Let both grow together until the harvest. Then I will tell the harvesters to sort out the weeds and burn them and to put the wheat in the barn."

Now, in some translations, instead of the word "weeds", you'll see the word "tares." The word "tare" in the Greek is from *zizanian*. It refers to a variety of darnel weed that closely resembles wheat and is almost impossible to distinguish from real wheat before the wheat ripens.

In those days it was not uncommon for someone—out of spite or revenge—to sow tares among an enemy's wheat crop. Weeds in a rose garden are easy to spot right away; but tares in a wheat

field are almost undetectable. The tares would go unnoticed for weeks; when the harvest came up, the tares became evident also.

What did this type of sabotage accomplish? It could destroy, or, at least, greatly reduce the value of a farmer's wheat crop. It was done solely out of meanness. In the Mediterranean world you were born into a given family, normally inheriting a read-made set of friends and enemies. A family's enemies would make varied attempts to dishonor the family. This "tare sowing" type of vandalism was so common in Roman times that they had a specific law against it. So, when Jesus told this story, his listeners were quite familiar with the practice.

But why did Jesus tell this parable in the first place? What did it mean? Well, lucky for us, the disciples asked that very same question and we have Jesus' answer in verses 36-43:

13:36

Then, leaving the crowds outside, Jesus went into the house. His disciples said, "Please explain the story of the weeds in the field."

13:37

"All right," he said. "I, the Son of Man, am the farmer who plants the good seed.

13:38

The field is the world, and the good seed represents the people of the Kingdom. The weeds are the people who belong to the evil one.

13:39

The enemy who planted the weeds among the wheat is the Devil. The harvest is the end of the world, and the harvesters are the angels.

13:40

"Just as the weeds are separated out and burned, so it will be at the end of the world.

13:41

I, the Son of Man, will send my angels, and they will remove from my Kingdom everything that causes sin and all who do evil,

13:42

and they will throw them into the furnace and burn them. There will be weeping and gnashing of teeth.

13:43

Then the godly will shine like the sun in their Father's Kingdom. Anyone who is willing to hear should listen and understand!

So, Jesus explains who everyone is:

- The sower (or farmer) is Jesus, the Son of Man.
- The field is the world.
- The good seed is God's people.

- The bad seed, or weeds, are sons of the evil one.
- The enemy who sabotages the field is the devil.
- The harvest is the end of the world.

In this story Jesus is telling us that in this world there are some people that belong to him, and some people that belong to the devil. They exist together, side by side. They work together, they live together, and sometimes they probably even go to church together. The evil ones can't be uprooted now, but at the end of the age they will be. All those who cause sin and do evil will be separated from God's people forever, so that God's people can live out eternity in the light of his kingdom, free from the presence of sin.

It's a parable that makes us uncomfortable. We don't like to think of God sending people away from his presence. And yet, this parable is also full of hope. Because it appears that God gives the weeds every chance he can of changing their minds. There's always the opportunity to stop being a weed, and becoming wheat.

Let's look at several truths we can glean from this parable.

First, Weeds are an inescapable part of life.

No matter how beautiful your lawn, your garden, your crop in the field, there will always be weeds that mix in and attempt to grow with your harvest. Even the flowers that I planted in individual pots with a bag of special potting soil still had weeds appear with them. And if you don't get them pulled fairly quickly, they can threaten to choke out your healthy plants.

There are a lot of people in the world who act like weeds. They show up and attack without warning—even in the best of circumstances. They seem to exist to cause pain, to choke out life—your life. In the early stages they may look a lot like wheat, but then, they do everything they can to destroy your harvest.

Have you ever worked with someone like that? Someone who doesn't see their job as an opportunity to serve customers or to help the company reach its objectives, but instead spends their days trying to make life difficult for everyone else? People who have 10 negative things to say for every positive idea you come up with? People who seem to delight in tearing you down, destroying your character through half-truths and innuendo? People who say one thing to your face but are always talking about you as soon as your back is turned? People who delight in schemes and plotting? People who don't care about justice or fairness, they're just out to get the most they can from life, in any way they can, at anybody's expense?

I have lived in 10 different cities, in 5 different states, and in 2 different countries, and I've run across this type of people everywhere I go. You can't avoid them; they're an inescapable fact of life. It would be nice if we didn't have to put up with them, but that's not really an option available to us. It would be nice if we could go to work and do our jobs without someone trying to undermine our efforts...it would be nice if our work in ministry and mission could occur

without someone trying to sabotage our progress. . . just as it would be nice if we could go in our backyard without finding weeds in our gardens . . . But life isn't that way. We've got to put up with the weeds.

So, don't be surprised by their presence. Jesus' life was full of such people. Two thousand years later, people haven't changed all that much. The good and the bad still live side by side. So, what are we supposed to do about these weeds?

Well, here's an uncomfortable truth:

In God's Kingdom, we're not responsible for pulling up the weeds.

What? Now that doesn't seem to make sense at all!

The workers of the field ask the farmer if they should pull out the weeds. His answer was simple and straightforward: "No. Your job is not to spot weeds, pull weeds, or burn weeds. Your job is to be wheat. Your job is to keep growing as wheat until you bear fruit."

This will come as a surprise to some people—maybe even to you. Because some people think that the Christian life consists of pointing out what others are doing wrong. But this parable says, no. We haven't been placed in this field—this world-- to pull weeds, we've been placed here to be wheat.

Every time a religious group attempts to go into the weed-pulling business, disaster ensues. There are many examples in Christian history, such as the Crusades of the Middle Ages, the Inquisition, the Protestant Reformation and the Catholic Counter-Reformation. In fact, this is what we see causing so much of the turmoil in the world today: radical religious groups are trying to root out those they consider to be weeds, and in doing so they are only proving that they themselves aren't wheat.

In this parable Jesus is saying that the world is like a farmer's field, and he is saying that He is the farmer, not us. We aren't the farmers, we're the crop. **Our first responsibility is to make sure that we make it to the harvest *as the wheat* he created us to be.**

Does this mean that Christians can't speak out against sin in society, or make a bold stand for righteousness? No, of course not. We do need to be hard on sin—especially our own sin. We do need to make a bold stand for holiness—especially our own holiness. I have noticed in my life a principle at work: the more concerned I am with others' sin, the less concerned I become with my own sin.

So Jesus said: You're not here to be weed-pullers, you're here to be wheat. In plain language, that means that your job is to devote your life to becoming like Jesus. To paraphrase the old blues song, *Before you accuse anyone else, take a look at yourself.*

Now, this is easier to say with words than to put into practice in real life. It's no joking matter when it's your life and evil appears to be flourishing while goodness withers. It's not funny when

cancerous cells spread through your body and good cells starve, or when defenseless children become innocent victims of roadside bombs, or when drugs ruin a family member's life while enriching the one who sold it to him. At such times we often scream, "Lord, did you not sow good seed in your field?"

It's a mystery, and even by the end of this parable it remains a mystery. By the end of the parable, there are still weeds growing right alongside the wheat. You wonder what's going to happen. We don't know. We've got to wait. According to the story, we've got to wait until the harvest. In other words, we won't get some answers until we see God face-to-face.

The Bottom Line is this: God has a right to take risks. It's His farm.

Maybe the farmer *is* employing a good strategy. And yet, everything dear to agriculture suggests this farmer is taking a big risk. He's headed for a tough harvest. On the surface, it appears that He's putting a lot of good wheat at risk.

"Do you want us to gather up the weeds?" asked the servants

"No, no; let's wait," says the farmer. "Let's just wait. I'll risk it."

Isn't that wasteful, especially for conscientious, ethically sensitive, religious people like us? Isn't that wasteful? What kind of way is that to run a farm?

"Well," says this farmer, "I remember one time I had this one sheep that was lost—just one sheep. I took a risk, leaving the 99 sheep in the wilderness, and went out after that one sheep. I searched until I found him.

"And last year I gave this dinner party and told my servants to bring in everybody off the street, anybody they could lay their hands on—both good and bad. It was rough on the furniture, but did we have a party!

"Then, I had these grapes to harvest. I went out and saw I needed other people to harvest them. So I went downtown and I got people. Then I went downtown again to get more. By the end of the day, I was feeling so good I said, 'Heck, I'll pay everybody the same wage, even those who've only been here one hour.' But the workers grumbled. So I said, 'Hey, this is my farm, isn't it? And I'm going to run my farm the way I run my farm. Okay?' "

(By the way, you can read about all of this in Matthew.)

It takes patience to work on such a farm, with such a farmer. It takes patience to endure such a wait, such a risk

Now before you despair of this farmer, and cast too much judgment on all those weeds out there that seem to be messing up your life, let me remind you of this: We were all once weeds!

Romans 3:23 reminds us: "For all have sinned; all fall short of God's glorious standard."

Without Jesus, we are all weeds. But through him, we can become wheat. That's the Gospel message. We were all born weeds, but Paul said in 2 Corinthians 5:17--

If anyone is in Christ, he is a new creation; the old has gone, the new has come!

The Christian life is not a matter of weeds trying to pretend to be wheat, the Christian life is a matter of weeds being transformed into wheat by his power.

No matter how "weedy" your life has been, today, right now, you can be transformed into wheat, and begin the process of growing to maturity and bearing the fruit that God created you to bear. This is how it happens: you say, "Jesus, come into my life. Forgive me of my sins. Make me into a new person. Change me through and through. I turn from my old way of life and give you control of my life today. I am yours now; I belong to you."

This simple prayer begins the process of change in your life, the process of becoming fully grown, fully mature, fully developed wheat. Jesus will give you a new nature that empowers you to become what he made you to be. And what is the final outcome of choosing to be wheat? Verse 43 says:

(v. 43) Then the righteous will shine like the sun in the kingdom of their Father.

This is God's plan for you. Even if you've been a weed all your life, his invitation is still available to you. You can be wheat. You can be righteous. Your life can shine like the sun in the Father's kingdom.

Right now we may struggle with weeds, but that won't stop us from becoming wheat. True, weeds are an inevitable fact of life, but he made you to be wheat. And he'll see you through to the harvest, till you become what he made you to be...till you are filled such righteousness that you shine like the sun in his kingdom.

When you read those verses you may ask, "God, can that happen in my life? Can I be filled with such righteousness that I shine like the sun?" Through his grace and his mercy and his power, the answer is yes. It's his plan for each of us. If we are willing to let it happen, he has promised to make it happen.

Let me close by telling you this parable in a creative re-write by David Skarshaug, a youth pastor in Ames, Iowa. (Share "Pulling Up the Weeds")

Closing Prayer.

RESOURCES:

Sermon by Steve May: *Become the Person God Made You to Be*. Preaching Today.com

Sermon by William H. Willimon, Dean of the chapel and professor of Christian ministry at Duke University Chapel in Durham, North Carolina. *Some Way to Run a Farm*. Preaching Today.com

Social-Science Commentary on the Synoptic Gospels by Bruce Malina. Page 103.

Skit *Pulling Up the Weeds* by David Skarshaug. 2005. www.alcames.org/ROCK_Skits.html

Crosswalk.com for New Living Translation of the Bible