

Sermon, Matthew 13:24-30
January 15, 2017

HPMF

Sermon Title: *Wheat or weed?*

Matthew 13:24-30, parable of wheat and weeds

²⁴ He put before them another parable: ‘The kingdom of heaven may be compared to someone who sowed good seed in his field; ²⁵but while everybody was asleep, an enemy came and sowed weeds among the wheat, and then went away. ²⁶So when the plants came up and bore grain, then the weeds appeared as well. ²⁷And 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?’ ²⁸He answered, ‘An enemy has done this.’ The slaves said to him, ‘Then do you want us to go and gather them?’ ²⁹But he replied, ‘**No; for in gathering the weeds you would uproot the wheat along with them.** ³⁰Let 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.’ ’

This parable of Jesus comes in a line of agrarian parables, sandwiched between the more well known parable of the Sower and the parable of the Mustard seed. These are the kinds of parables of Jesus that probably make more sense to those of you who grew up on farms or who spend a lot of your time out in the garden. For myself, growing up in the city, I have little experience with fields full of weeds. My father grew-up on a small Nebraska farm, but as one who hates being cold and loves sleeping, he says that he knew from a very early age that he did not want to be a farmer. Leaving me, a city kid, with little weed experience.

There were, however, a few miserable summer times during my junior high years when my Grandfather was still farming that I had to go out and help my cousins rouge the milo field – removing sunflowers from the field before the harvest. I was excited at first because I got to use a machete, but it did not take long for my excitement to turn way to exhaustion. It did not take long until I was agreeing with my father, I had no desire to be a farmer. And so, I don't know much about weeds, other than that trying to keep your field free of them is, at best, an exhausting task – one I will continue to try to avoid.

About a year and a half ago we did a series in worship on some of the parables of Jesus. I remember this parable specifically being suggested as a possible option during that series, but I consciously avoided it. I am a conflict avoider by nature, and I guess that this extends to avoidance of some of Jesus' teachings that end with allusions to things being burned, because frankly, I just don't know what to do with them. If it is an Old Testament prophet, the apostle Paul, or even John the Baptist talking about things being thrown into the fire, I can find a way to make peace with that, to understand it. But when Jesus' parables and teachings end with things

being thrown into the fire, I struggle to align this with my broader picture of Jesus and the God which Jesus describes and illuminates. Thus, I tend to avoid some of these fiery teaching of Jesus like a sunflower in a milo field. But, such avoidance is not really fair to us, because those parables and teaching exist – avoiding them doesn't give us the fullest picture of Jesus or the God he embodies/presents. So, to start off my preaching in 2017, I will give one such parable a try.

The wheat and the weeds: We live in a mixed field, says this parable. A field where beauty and pain live together, side-by-side. A field where love and hate live together, side-by-side; a field where fear and welcome live together; a field where miracle and tragedy live together – wheat and weed together. And for those of us who believe in a God of love and life, we often have a hard time explaining (whether to ourselves or to anyone else) why things are the way they are. I have, for the most part, come to be at peace with our great and mysterious God, though this peace leaves me with few answers of “how” or “why” – only that this is how God has created things to be, and that I continue to trust in that God of love. Still, we are left to wrestle with a world that is much messier than we would like – a world with unanswerable questions, where great beauty and great pain live side-by-side. Wheat and weed together.

The details of our world have changed since the final words of the Bible were written a few thousand years ago, but the dilemma for followers of Christ is basically the same: what should we do about this mess? What can we do? And why is it this way in the first place? We have many of the same questions that the Biblical authors were asking as they observed, wrote,

and reflected on life with God: If God is really in charge, then why isn't the whole world more wheat than weed? Why isn't this a beautiful sea of waving grain from sea to shining sea?

This parable of Jesus that I have been avoiding, according to it, even the kingdom of heaven is not pure – it is wheat and weed alike. And so, perhaps we should not be so surprised at the up and down history of the Christian church if Jesus himself said even the kingdom of heaven was full of both wheat and weeds. As the parable goes, it may have started out pure, but at some point during the night an enemy sneaked in and planted weeds among the wheat.

But, explains Barbara Brown Taylor, this is not any simple weed. If we were farming people we would recognize that this parable is not about a weed as obvious as a sunflower in a milo field, but about a much different type of weed – the *Lolium temulentum*, to be exact,



better known as the darnel, a nasty weed that looks almost exactly like wheat that has poisonous seeds and roots like nylon cord. It is sometimes referred to as “false wheat” because it so closely resembles wheat until the ear appears. If the darnel weed is not separated from the wheat at some point and those seeds get ground into the flour, it will produce a loaf of bread that will give you a serious stomachache – ranging from nausea to even being fatal. Separating this weed was a

serious matter – now the modern combine is able to tell the difference and separate it out automatically, but, in Jesus’ day, John Deere had not invented such technology.



Jesus’ parable says that an enemy comes and spread this weed among the pure wheat. But, we know that it does not require an agrarian terrorist to plant weeds, they seem to grow just fine all by themselves. However the weeds get there, most of us have got them – not just in our yards and gardens, but in our lives as well: thorny people who seem to suck up our sunlight and water. Some are just an eye sore, some make us itch, and some can be deadly. The question, of course, is what to do about them?

The slaves ask the master, “Do you want us to go and gather them?” This is the common sense organic solution – to pull them up, to cleanse the field of these weeds. And this seems to be the common answer in our world as well, to try to purify things, to separate, to make things black and white, to be with only “our people”: it happened in Germany, in Northern Ireland, in Rwanda, Bosnia, in Iraq with the Kurds, in the US in the south, in the US with American Indians

– and it continues on and on. It happens with Christians and Muslims and Jews and Buddhists and Atheists. Wherever people are busy trying to keep their fields pure, they are doing what these slaves wanted to do – seeking to uproot and get rid of what they believe to be weeds – to get all that is thought to be impure out of the field. But, whenever someone is doing this, whatever reasons they give for their actions, they are doing this on their own, because the Master says, “No” to this. “No, do not go out and try to sort out wheat from weed at this moment.” No, this is not our role. “No” says the Master, “because in gathering the weed you would uproot the wheat along with them. Let both of them grow together until it is time for the harvest. At the harvest I will tell the reapers, collect the weeds first and bind them into bundles to be burned, but gather the wheat into my barn.”

At first glance, we likely read this reference to weeds being burned as we would almost any other Biblical reference to things being thrown into the fire. We, in the Christianity that has been given to us from the 20th century, automatically assume this is a reference to hell – to an afterlife with either eternal punishment (of fire for the weed), or reward (of the wheat being in the barn). It is such an automatic response for us when we read these types of allusions because we have inherited a particular telling of the Christian story – it is this automatic response which results in pastors like me tending to avoid such a parable rather than exploring it. But, there is more happening here. This parable is not about the end of time, it is a parable about the here and now.

The master says to let the weeds and wheat grow together. Do not go out there and try to pull them up; do not send a team of Jr. Highers out there with machetes; do not get the ‘Round-Up. The master tells the field hands “no, let them grow together.”

And here are, I believe, a few reasons why the Master says “No”, do not try to remove the weeds from the wheat.

The first is that they are not skillful enough to separate the good from the bad – that it is too hard to tell the difference. The field hand might go out and, in trying to do what they believe is right, in trying to remove what they believe to be a weed, well, they accidentally pick out wheat instead.

During one of the first Crusades, Christian knights from western Europe rode through an Arab town on their way to the Holy Land and wiped out the entire town as they went, killing every brown body in sight. It was only later, after the killing was done, when they turned over the bodies to examine them that they found crosses around the necks of most of their victims. It never occurred to them that Christians could have brown skin as well as white. They were only trying to purify the Holy Land, only trying to do some good. But of course, we are not as skilled as we think we are when it comes to recognizing weed from wheat. We try to do it based on color of skin, on religion, on political affiliation, on bumper stickers, on our selected news channel, on the kind of car we drive, or the neighborhood in which we live. Most of us believe we are pretty good at recognizing weed from wheat, but the Master doesn't seem to trust our intuition on this.

It seems so easy, from far away, to determine enemy from ally, good from evil, right from wrong. We watch on the news and it seems quite clear to us, based on the way it is presented to us, who is in the right and the wrong. But when we traveled to Iraq we were reminded how difficult it can be to tell weed from wheat. We have heard here about some of the bombings in Turkey that the group the PKK have taken responsibility for – these are terrible acts of violence. And, when we were in Iraq we also learned about the PKK rescuing thousands of Yazidi Kurds

from the hands of ISIS. A terrorist group saving thousands of lives and marching them to safety – sometimes, it is hard to tell wheat from weed.

Another problem in trying to separate the good plants from the bad is that often their lives are intertwined. That is, in fact, one of the ways that the “false wheat” survives, by wrapping its roots around the roots of the wheat so that you cannot pull up one without getting the other as well. There is no farm hand skilled enough to be able to pull one without getting both, no matter how delicately we try. So, according to the Master, it is not worth it. Better to let them all grow together.

Today in our Mennonite denomination, like denominations across the country and world, in our attempts to remain pure and right our field is dying. Whatever the issue, it seems that every time we try to keep our field clean and pure, we lose more and more wheat. When we try to remain fully like minded – when we try to remain uniform on any issue or topic – we lose more and more wheat. The more we fight and argue over who is in and who is out – over what is weedy behavior and what is wheaty behavior – the more people who simply walk away. At the very least, we exhaust ourselves trying to keep our fields clean and pure, and we neglect other important tasks to which we have been called and instead preoccupy ourselves with these weeds in our field. To this, once again, the master says “no.”

And a final reason that perhaps it is better to let the weeds grow is that, it could turn out in the end, that these weeds might actually turn out to be useful – there may be a larger purpose at work that we cannot see with our finite vision – there may be a longer view which we cannot

comprehend – or it may be that those we considered to be useless weeds actually have an important role to play that we did not know or recognize. In Jesus’ day, lumber and coal were hard to come by. The best heating and cooking fuel was either manure or dried weeds. Thus, by letting the weeds and the wheat grow together, farmers had almost everything they needed for baking bread: wheat for the bread and weeds for the fuel. The only other thing needed, says Barbara Brown Taylor, was a little patience, a little tolerance of a temporary mess, until all was put to use in its right place at the harvest. And so, perhaps this parable is not about a future apocalyptic judgment, but about the here and now.

This parable of Jesus reminds us that God allows a mixed field – whether we like it or not, whether we approve or not, whether we understand or not – God asks us to live in a mixed field, in our nation, in our world, in the Christian church. And on this weekend when we celebrate the life and legacy of the Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., we must remember that the wheat must be careful to not become weeds itself – to not go from being something that nourishes life to something that is full of poison – to not go from life-giving to something that, at best, produces nausea. We must remember that our role as followers of Jesus is not removal of the weed, but transformation from weed into wheat. Our role is to simply be the wheat bearing good fruit, whatever field we have been planted in. We remember, with this parable and with the Rev. King, that “darkness cannot drive out darkness, only light can do that. Hate cannot drive out hate, only love can do that.”

This, I believe is what Jesus is telling us in this agrarian parable. You who are wheat, do not concern yourselves so much with the weeds – do not waste your time and energy being so

focused on what looks like a weed to you. Instead, attend to your part, occupy your soil well and produce the best tasting fruit you can, because, in the end, that is the only way to tell the wheat from the weed – whether we are producing poison or life-giving food?

Our job in a mixed field, is not to devote all our energy to the destruction of the weeds, but to be faithful to our own business – the business of reconciliation of the world through the practice of extravagant love. In this new year, let us not exhaust ourselves by trying to combat each weed that comes into our path; let us not assume we can simply yank a weed without doing lasting damage to our field; let us not believe we can so easily recognize who is bringing health and who is bringing nausea. Rather, let us follow the instructions of our master and seek to be the best and most delicious wheat we can be, wheat with the freshest and most compelling flavor. If we give ourselves to that, we can leave the rest to God's good and creative hands. In this messy and mixed field, let us grow and flourish – let us produce the freshest and most delicious food – that healing and hope might flow through us and into the world. Amen and amen.

Sending Blessing

*And now as you go from this place, may the God of Life go with you –
empowering you to continue to grow and flourish in the soil where you have been planted,
and empowering us to be a people that help to nourish this beautiful and broken world of ours –
that healing and hope might flow through us and into the world.*

Go in peace.

Amen.