

Wheat and Weeds

A sermon preached at Niles Discovery Church, Fremont, California,
on Sunday, July 23, 2017, by the Rev. Jeffrey Spencer.

Scriptures: [Matthew 13:24-30, 36-43](#) and [Genesis 28:10-19](#)

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We had a red brick walkway that led to the front door of the house I grew up in. It had been laid decades before I was born and had a few small dips and humps in it, but very little space between the bricks. And yet, somehow, grass managed to grow between the bricks for about a third of the walk. Getting sent out to weed the walk always seemed like punishment. It was boring and there was no shade and the grass hung on tenaciously. Half the time the stalk of the grass would break, rather than the root, and only on the rarest of occasions was it possible to actually pull out the full grass, root and all. I suspect I got to weed the front walk because the one time my mother asked me to weed the garden I pulled up the daffodils that had been growing there for years.

The memory of pulling up the daffodils came flooding back as I studied today's gospel lesson. It is so easy for the untrained gardener to destroy what is wanted in an effort to extract what is not. I like the definition of a weed that says, *a weed is any plant that is growing where you don't want it*. I also like the advice, "To distinguish flowers from weeds, simply pull up everything. What grows back is weeds."¹ This approach to gardening works for me. Maybe it's obvious that the characters in the parable I most identify with are the slaves who ask if they should rip out the weeds.

In Matthew's narrative, this parable comes right after another parable, one that is probably a little more familiar, that is also about seeds. In that parable, a planter goes scattering seed and the seed falls in four different kinds of soil – on a path; on rocky, shallow soil; on weed-infested soil; and on good soil – and only the seed that fell on the good soil produced grain. Then Matthew has Jesus explain the meaning of the parable to the disciples. And right after explaining the parable of the four soils, Matthew has Jesus tell the parable we heard today. And then a couple short parables, almost aphorisms. And then Matthew has Jesus explaining today's parable.

Most biblical scholars think that the explanations are from the early church, not Jesus. I actually find it reassuring that Matthew includes his explanation (he includes one for the parable of the four soils, too). I think these parables are pretty obtuse by themselves and the fact that Matthew's early church community created these explanations is reassuring because it means the early church found them obtuse as well and needing an explanation. But that's not too surprising.

Parables are, as David Lose put it, "suggestive, evocative, sometimes disconcerting, offering *glimpses* into the kingdom of God, but not explanations or definitions."² Accepting only one explanation of a parable does it a disservice, in my opinion. So, while they may

¹ From a sermon illustration that was provided in an email dated 18 July 2017 from sermons.com.

² David J. Lose, "Pentecost 7 A: On the Question of Evil," ... *in the Meantime*, <http://www.davidlose.net/2017/07/pentecost-7-a-on-the-question-of-evil/> (posted and accessed 20 July 2017).

have captured a meaning of the parable for them in their day, I want to set aside their explanation and see what we can harvest from the parable today.

The first thing that I notice is that farmer is not a sharecropper. He is rich enough to own slaves, so he probably owns the land as well. This might not make him part of the 1 percent, but he is part of the top 10 percent. So, like me, the people listening to Jesus would have identified with the slaves – but for different reasons. They would have identified with the slaves because 90 percent of the population was peasant class – farm laborers, sharecroppers, day laborers, fishers, miners, construction workers, servants, slaves, the disabled, and the untouchables.³

If they identify with the slaves, might they have been rooting (if you'll pardon the expression) for the weeds? Having more agricultural sense than I have, could their suggestion to rip up the weeds be subversive, knowing full well that doing so would ruin the crop as well? So, I'm left wondering, what if the kin-dom of God is like the weeds or the one who sowed the weeds – subversive and undermining the domination system?

Laurel Dykstra says that the weeds sown in this parable are a specific species: darnel. "Darnel looks very much like wheat when it is immature," she writes; "its roots intertwine with those of the wheat and its toxic grains are loosely attached to the stem. The problem of what to do with an infested field does not have a simple solution – pull up the shoots and you pull up the wheat; wait until the harvest and you poison the grain and contaminate next year's crop with falling seeds.

"For the landless peasants who were Jesus' audience, the economic loss represented by a contaminated field could mean the death of a child to malnutrition. To the wealthy landowner in this story, it means loss of profit. A rich man who imagines that simple bad luck must be the work of some enemy, and who stands to lose only income, might not have been a sympathetic character to peasants. For him the kingdom of God is a noxious weed.

"The kingdom parables 'put before us,' in stark relief, the conditions of life under empire. The rich risk their profit, the poor their lives and the lives of their children. The few live in luxury sustained by enmity, scarcity, profit, and accumulation, and they are supported by the labor of those who struggle with poverty and constant vulnerability."⁴

Another way to look at the parable is to ask, "When have I felt that way?" I doubt the experience of the servants is foreign to you; it certainly isn't for me. I've been frustrated when things have gone the way I thought they would. I've thought I'd prepared the soil and planted good seeds (metaphorically speaking) for some plan I have, and then something goes awry. I want to correct it, like the slaves, to make it right – even if that means risking damage to something important. It feels like life has ganged up on me, as if some enemy has done this.

I bet you've felt the same way at least at some point in your life. "When the cancer returns, when the job goes away, when the relationship ends, when depression sets in,

³ See Marcus Borg, *Jesus: Uncovering the Life, Teachings, and Relevance of a Religious Revolutionary* (San Francisco: HarperCollins, 2006), p. 83.

⁴ Laurel A. Dykstra, "Seeds and Weeds," *Sojourners*, <https://sojo.net/preaching-the-word/seeds-and-weeds> (accessed 18 July 2017).

when addiction robs a loved one (or ourselves) of life, when a congregation is divided, when a loved one's life is cut short, when war forces thousands to flee as refugees, when the world turns its back on people in need. At these times, the sense that this world is not what God intended can be almost unbearable, and you don't have to believe in a red-suited devil with a pointy tail and pitchfork to name the reality of sin, brokenness, and evil in the world. ... [T]he temptation to use this parable to explain evil probably won't turn out that well. But can we at least acknowledge [the reality of evil]?

"And, having acknowledged it, can we then also acknowledge that this is not God's design or desire?

"I have witnessed time and again how difficult it is for many of us to avoid the temptation to explain evil – quite ironically! – by assigning it to some greater plan God supposedly has for us. 'Don't worry, it's part of God's plan,' someone says to another after tragedy. Or, 'Don't worry, God never gives us more than we can handle' [as if such hardship is something from God]. Or, 'God's purpose for this will reveal itself in time.' All of these words of supposed comfort end up assigning God responsibility for tragedy and brokenness ...

"I think one of the things this parable suggests is that God does not will evil for us, not in any way, shape, or form. That our tragedies are not part of God's plan. That God never, ever wants us to suffer. Rather, according to Paul, 'God works for the good in all things' for those God loves."⁵

"Are there ways to find 'healing' amid devastation? Yes. Can one be 'transformed' by the hell life thrusts upon them? Absolutely. [In fact, I believe it is God's desire that we find healing and transformation when tragedy happens.] But it does not happen if one is not permitted to grieve."⁶ So, rather than these platitudes that end up blaming God for tragedy, we can sit with our friends when the weeds are growing in their crops and simply be, giving them the space to grieve.

It's important to remember that we don't all grieve in the same way. In fact, we don't necessarily grieve in the same way as we respond to different tragedies. Different weeds need different ways of dealing with them. According to Todd Weir who learned cutting weeds at age 13 in Iowa, "A cockle burr had shallow but widespread roots and had to be pulled out to get all the roots. If you hacked it off at the ground level with a hoe it would be back in a week. A milkweed had a very long tap root that could not be pulled out. If you did try to pull it up, three separate sprouts would be back in a week. Milkweeds had to be hacked off with a hoe and would 'bleed' and die as the sap ran out. If you didn't handle the weeds right, hours of backbreaking work in the sun would be completely wasted."⁷

On the other hand, sometimes you can't tell the weed from the crop. Or maybe you can tell the difference, but it's impossible to eradicate the weeds without destroying the

⁵ Lose, *op. cit.*

⁶ Tim Lawrence, "Everything Doesn't Happen for a Reason," *The Adversity Within*, <http://www.timjlawrence.com/blog/2015/10/19/everything-doesnt-happen-for-a-reason> (posted 20 October 2015; accessed 15 July 2017).

⁷ Todd Weir, "Wheat and Tares," from the emailed dated 18 July 2017 from sermons.com.

crop – as the parable suggests. “Since good and evil commonly inhabit not only the same field but even the same individual human beings, the only result of a dedicated campaign to get rid of evil will be the abolition of literally everybody.”⁸

If this parable makes you ask, “Am I wheat or weed?” let me tell you the answer. You’re both. We all are. And our church is both wheat and weeds. We may think we know who’s who, as if one could simply put a sticker on each person’s nametag so we could accurately identify them. Ooooo. Weed sticker. You need to sit in the back on the left. Wheat? Up front, on the right, please.⁹

Luckily, God is not only just. God is also merciful. So, while we are both wheat and weed, when the final sorting comes, we will be transformed into a bumper crop.

I was walking home from church one day last week when I noticed a blackberry. I kept walking, maybe a couple steps, when I decided to go back and take a closer look at its beauty, hanging there right next to the sidewalk. I thought about eating it, but decided instead to just enjoy its berriness. And I took this picture.



There’s a poem, Elizabeth Barrett Browning, that includes these lines:
*Earth’s crammed with heaven,
And every common bush afire with God;
But only he who sees, takes off his shoes,
The rest sit round it and pluck blackberries.*¹⁰

I didn’t take off my shoes, but I marveled at the berry’s majesty. And that night, reflecting on the day, I wondered who would end up communing with God, feasting on the berry’s goodness. Would some child skipping by pluck its juiciness and feast? Would some lucky bird or squirrel dine? Would the berry just revel in its own berriness and eventually go to seed?

On the west side of the mountains in Washington State, blackberries are typically considered a weed. The climate is, it seems, perfect for them, and if you disturb the ground, they will grow. And you will spend the rest of

your days trying to get rid of them.

Still, they produce these berries...

⁸ Robert Farrar Capon, quoted by James C. Howell, "Weekly Preaching: July 23, 2017," *MinistryMatters*, <http://www.ministrymatters.com/all/entry/8303/weekly-preaching-july-23-2017> (posted 19 July 2017; accessed 22 July 2017).

⁹ Howell, *Ibid.*

¹⁰ Elizabeth Barrett Browning, "86. From 'Aurora Leigh'," *Bartleby.com*, <http://www.bartleby.com/236/86.html> (accessed 22 July 2017).

As I reflect on the parable of the wheat and the weeds, I have one more thought: In addition to everything else the parable might mean, might it not just be an invitation to notice both the wheat and the weeds, the farmer and the slaves, and see in them both an invitation to an awareness of the presence of God?

Like Jacob at Bethel, as I walked home from church that day, God was there and I didn't know it – until I stopped and noticed the blackberry.

Amen.