

“Weeds in the Wheat”

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Psalm 139:1-12, 23-24 Matthew 13:24-30

How many times have you heard people divide the world into two kinds of people? There are two kinds of people in the world: those who think there are two kinds of people in the world, and those who don't. But some of these sayings are good ones. Mark Twain wrote, “There are ... two types of people. People who accomplish things, and people who *claim to* have accomplished things. The first group is less crowded.” Abigail Van Buren wrote, “There are two kinds of people in the world – those who walk into a room and say, ‘There you are!’ – and those who say, ‘Here I am!’” Joy Mills said, “There are two kinds of people in the world: the Givers and the Takers. The difference between the two is that the Takers eat well, and the Givers sleep well at night.” And Albert Einstein said there are two kinds of people, those who live as if nothing is a miracle, and those who live as if everything is a miracle.

This morning Maurice read a parable from Matthew with two kinds of plants that represent two kinds of people. It's the parable of the weeds in the wheat, where a farmer plants a field only to find weeds growing among the wheat. Last week we read the parable of the sower, where the seeds that were sown represented the word of God which is planted in human hearts. But in today's parable, the seeds represent two kinds of people, those who grow into wheat that bears grain, and those who grow into weeds that yield nothing of value.

Now, as I said last week, a parable is a story using everyday things to teach a religious truth. In this story the everyday things are wheat and weeds. And the particular weed in question is called dandelion, a kind of grass that in its early stages looks like wheat. And it seems that this kind of thing must have been happening, that people would purposely sow dandelion in someone else's wheat field as an act of sabotage to harm their enemies, because there was actually a Roman law against it.

The problem with dandelion is when it first starts to grow, it looks just like wheat, so you can't tell which is a weed and which will turn into good grain. But you don't want to get them mixed up, because the dandelion carries a toxic fungus that can sicken or even kill those who eat it.* Still, the root system of this weed spreads deep and wide, so by the time you *can* tell the difference between the two, the roots are entwined with the roots of the wheat, so if you were to pull up the dandelion, the wheat would be damaged as well. So what is a farmer to do?

In the parable, the workers noticed that some seeds were growing into weeds and asked the farmer, “Do you want us to pull them out for you?” And the farmer answered, No, because when you pull out the weeds, you might also hurt the good plants. So let them grow together, and when it's harvest time, we'll collect the weeds and burn them. But the wheat we'll gather into my barn.

This kind of story would make sense to Jesus' listeners. Yes, an enemy might sow weeds in a wheat field. And of course you would then have to wait until harvest time to separate the weeds from the wheat. And yes you would burn the weeds so they couldn't create more harm. The thing that might *not* make sense to Jesus' listeners, the thing that might be shocking to them, would be the religious application. Because every

good religious person back then knew that you were supposed to weed out bad people and stay away from them. What was Jesus saying here? What did he mean when he said, “Let them both grow together?” And is it really true that you can’t tell who’s bad and who’s good? Does that mean the people who look good on the outside may turn out to be bad in the end? Well, yes it does.

Sometimes the people we believe to be honorable and trustworthy turn out to be immoral and corrupt. I think of pastors, priests, and other trusted authority figures who are guilty of pilfering money, or of sexual abuse. And sometimes we are wrong about the people we believe to be bad. How many people today are still being convicted of crimes they didn’t commit? How many times have you judged someone and later realized you were wrong? We may think we know what is right, but we can only see part of the picture. And we are biased by our selfish interests. You can’t always tell what a person is like deep down.

Now in the parable, the problem is not that an enemy secretly sows bad seeds among the good. And it’s also not really about mistaking good for bad, although that can be part of it. In the parable, the workers knew which plants were weeds. The real danger came from those workers who wanted to help the farmer. They may have meant well. But if they had pulled out the weeds as they thought best, they would have destroyed the entire harvest. It’s not God’s enemies that are the real problem. It’s God’s so-called friends, who think they are doing good, but who “make things worse by trying to fix them.”**

And we do make things worse by trying to fix them. It’s not just in making mistakes in judgment, or condemning people who are innocent, although that happens a lot, and I’m sad to say, especially among Christians. But even if the evil is clear, pulling out weeds does something to us. When we try to root out evil, we risk becoming evil ourselves. Anyone who executes a murderer, becomes a murderer. If we fight against prejudice or intolerance, even when the fight is justified, we risk becoming self-righteous and intolerant in the process. Look at what has happened to our nation as we fight against terrorism. We all agree that terrorism is evil. Yet we have resorted to torture and killed countless numbers of innocent men, women and children in fighting against it. And we have expended enormous amounts of energy and resources, only to produce more new terrorists who keep up the fight. But now we have less energy and fewer resources to do good at home. When we focus on destroying evil, it sucks the life out of what is good.

Now this does not mean we should just accept sin and evil, because God will sort it all out in the end. There’s a difference between resisting evil, and trying to wipe it out or kill it. The job of the prophets in the Old Testament was to point out people’s sin and condemn those who refused to repent. And Jesus himself condemned hypocrisy, corruption and evil, especially among the religious leaders.

And so for us. If we see a child being abused we have the responsibility to speak up and report it. If we know someone is lying and hurting someone, we can call them on it. If we know a business is exploiting or not paying its workers, we can try to do something about it. But we can’t just kill people who are bad, or obliterate everything evil. As long as we live in this world, sin and evil will be part of life. It’s not our job to root it all out. In fact, we can’t. And if we try, we will most certainly make matters worse.

According to the parable, there will be a harvest. In the end, all the plants (that is, all the people) will be gathered and separated according to what they have produced

during their lives on earth. But God will do the sorting, not us. Our job is to take root where we have been planted, and do our best to grow and bear fruit while we can.

Now the problem with darnel is that it's toxic and useless.*** So in the parable, the weeds are people who are toxic, people who poison the atmosphere wherever they go. They are like plants that soak up water and nutrients, who take, but don't contribute anything helpful or positive in return.

But our job is to bear good grain or fruit, to be useful to God's reign in the world. The idea is to focus on what we are for, rather than what we are against. We can care for the sick and helpless, and comfort those who mourn. We can be good stewards of the environment. We can protect and care for the poor, not just by offering aid, but by working for equal opportunities and fair wages. We can welcome those who are rejected by others and work for understanding and healing. We can be a light in a world of darkness. We can be salt when the world seems bland and ordinary. We can strengthen what is good.

There's one more point I want to make. And that is, you can't really divide the world into two kinds of people. Human beings are much more complicated than that. And all of us have a mixture of good and bad in our very own nature. All of us have some good in us, for we are made in God's image. Still, sometimes even the best of us are toxic. But that doesn't mean we are lost. I like to think of the whole field in the parable as representing one person's life. And if we are honest with ourselves, our lives are always a mixture of weeds and wheat, good and bad.*

And in the end, God will sort things out. And we can have faith that our God is a God of forgiveness and grace. Even in times when we feel our lives are more like weeds than wheat, we can still come to church and hear God's message of forgiveness and a call to start over. For the farmer said, "Let both of them grow together until the harvest." It's not over til it's over. There's still time to grow and produce what is good.

Leah read from Psalm 139 this morning, "Search me, O God, and know my heart; test me and know my thoughts. See if there is any wicked way in me, and lead me in the way everlasting."

The psalmist knew there may be some hurtfulness and wickedness in him. But he opened his life and his self to God, trusting in God's forgiveness, and asking for direction and guidance. May we also open our lives to God, for God does know our inmost thoughts. And yes, there is some wickedness within and among us, and we're not going to get rid of it all in this life. Still, God offers forgiveness, and if we put ourselves into God's hands, God will guide and strengthen us in ways that lead to life, in Jesus' name.

Amen.

* credit to the Rev. Nanette Sawyer, "The Cheatgrass is in Us," at www.questionthetext.org/2014/07/14/the-cheatgrass-is-in-us/.

** credit to Brian Stoffregen, Crossmarks Christian Resources, at <http://www.crossmarks.com/brian/matt13x24.htm>.

*** credit to Richard Mario Procida, Esq., "Let Them Grow Together: God's Solution to the Problem of Evil," at <http://modernlectionaries.blogspot.com/2014/07/matthew-1324-30-36-43-new-revised.html>.

