

7.19.26 Sermon on Matthew 13:24-30, 36-43

There are some questions that every generation of Christians asks. If God is good, why does evil continue to flourish? If Jesus has inaugurated the Kingdom of God, why do injustice, violence, and hatred still seem so powerful? Why do people who do terrible things often prosper, while those who seek justice and compassion suffer? Why doesn't God simply remove evil from the world?

These aren't new questions. They are the very questions Jesus' first followers were asking. They had begun to believe that Jesus was the Messiah, the one bringing God's reign into the world. But if that was true, why did Rome still rule? Why did corrupt religious leaders still hold power? Why did oppression continue? Why hadn't God simply cleaned house and started over?

Matthew places today's parable in the middle of a whole chapter of parables about the Kingdom of Heaven because Jesus is answering those very kinds of questions. The Kingdom has come near, but it has not yet come in its fullness. Like a mustard seed, it begins small before becoming something great. Like yeast hidden in dough, it works quietly and often invisibly. And now, like wheat growing in a field where weeds have also been sown, God's reign unfolds in a world where good and evil continue to exist side by side.

This parable is not just about the end of time. It is about how disciples are called to live in the meantime. It is about what kind of people we become while we wait for God to make all things new.

Jesus tells the story of a farmer who plants good seed in his field. But while everyone is asleep, an enemy comes and sows weeds among the wheat. When the plants begin to grow, the servants notice the problem and immediately ask what seems like the obvious question: "Do you want us to go and gather the weeds?" You would think the answer would be yes. But the farmer gives an answer no one expects: "No; for in gathering the weeds you would uproot the wheat along with them. Let both of them grow together until the harvest."

You would think that the farmer would want the problem resolved quickly. I don't know about you, but I don't like lingering problems. When things loom indefinitely, it causes me anxiety. We can all be this way – why wouldn't we want evil rooted out immediately? We usually want clear lines between good and bad, right and wrong, wheat and weeds. We are usually drawn to stories where we know exactly who the heroes are and who the villains are. We want certainty. Yet Jesus tells a story where the problem is not immediately fixed, and the servants are left with uncertainty.

Part of what makes this parable fascinating is that the weed Jesus describes was almost certainly something called *DAR-nel*, a plant that, in its early stages, looks almost identical to wheat. Darnel is poisonous when consumed, and it often hosts a toxic fungus that causes severe nausea, dizziness, and even death if it gets mixed into harvested. But before the grain matures, even experienced farmers could have difficulty telling them apart. Pull them too soon, and you risk tearing out healthy wheat right alongside the weeds. The problem isn't simply that weeds exist. The problem is that the servants are not nearly as capable of distinguishing them as they think they are. Their confidence could end up causing more damage to the wheat than the weeds themselves.

I think that is one of the central ideas of this passage. We often hear it as a story about God's final judgment, and certainly that is an aspect of this parable. Jesus explains to the disciples that there will come a day when God sets all things right, when evil is finally dealt with, and when justice is complete. But before we rush to the end of the story, I think Jesus also wants us to hear something else – he wants us to recognize the danger of assuming that we can make those judgments ourselves. The servants are eager to do the work of pulling the weeds. They are trying to protect the field. They probably have good intentions, but good intentions are not the same thing as good judgment. The farmer understands that they cannot yet see clearly enough.

We've seen this story repeated throughout history. The church has often been absolutely convinced it knew who the weeds were. Christians once defended slavery with the Bible while condemning abolitionists as dangerous troublemakers. Many churches insisted women could never preach or lead congregations (I, in fact, occasionally get comments from individuals in the greater community about how, as a female preacher, I am leading people to evil). Churches defended segregation, persecuted scientists, shunned divorced people, and today many continue to insist that LGBTQ people are somehow outside God's love or God's kingdom. Every generation has had its list of "obvious weeds." Yet time and again the church has had to confess that it was wrong. Those who challenged injustice were labeled dangerous. Those who were excluded became some of God's clearest witnesses. Those who were dismissed turned out to bear remarkable fruit. We have repeatedly mistaken wheat for weeds.

There is, indeed, something deeply attractive about dividing the world into simple categories: good people and bad people, saints and sinners, insiders and outsiders, us and them. It makes life feel more manageable as it gives us the comforting illusion that we know exactly where everyone belongs. But Jesus consistently disrupts those categories. Throughout the Gospels, it is often the religious leaders, the people everyone assumed were the wheat, who find themselves resisting God's work. Tax collectors become disciples

and Roman centurions display extraordinary faith. Samaritans become heroes and shunned women become preachers of the gospel. The people everyone else dismissed become the very people through whom God's kingdom is revealed. Jesus has a way of seeing possibilities in people that no one else can see.

This parable is not suggesting that evil isn't real. The weeds are real, and sin is real. Injustice causes tremendous harm and violence destroys lives while hatred divides communities. Jesus never asks us to ignore evil or pretend that harmful actions don't matter. Throughout Matthew's Gospel he calls us to confront injustice, protect the vulnerable, seek reconciliation, and bear the fruits of God's kingdom. We are called to stand against oppression and work for justice. But confronting evil is not the same thing as claiming the authority to pronounce final judgment on another person's standing before God. There is a great difference between resisting harmful actions and deciding who ultimately belongs to God and who does not.

If we pay attention to Jesus' teaching throughout Matthew, he spends very little time telling his followers to identify who is in and who is out. Instead, he tells them to love their enemies, to forgive seventy-seven times, to feed the hungry, to welcome the stranger, to care for the sick, and to seek first the kingdom of God. He calls them to cultivate lives marked by mercy, justice, humility, and compassion. He never commissions them to become expert weed inspectors, ready to eliminate the weeds. He calls them to become faithful disciples who bear good fruit.

I find it hopeful that in this parable the wheat and the weeds are allowed to grow together for a time. That means there is still room for grace. There is time for repentance. There is time for transformation. Maybe the weeds will turn out to be wheat after all. Think about Peter, who denied Jesus three times, or about James and John, who wanted to call down fire from heaven on an entire village. Think about Matthew the tax collector or Paul, who persecuted Christians before becoming one of the church's greatest apostles. What if someone had judged them too early, deeming them as weeds ready to be pulled up? God sees possibilities long before we do. God sees the harvest even while we can't recognize the seeds.

And maybe there is another truth in this parable. Perhaps it is not just about identifying the weeds of other people. Perhaps it is an invitation to look honestly at ourselves. None of us is simply wheat. Each of us carries within us good and evil. Each of us contains faithfulness and unfaithfulness. Each of us contains generosity and selfishness. Each of us contains love and hatred. We are all works in progress. We all depend upon God's patience. We all need the grace of the farmer who refuses to give up on the field before the harvest is complete.

The good news of this parable is not just that one day God will judge the world . The good news is that God is the one who will do the judging, not us. That frees us from the perpetually exhausting burden of trying to play God. It frees us instead to become faithful servants in the field, tending the wheat with compassion, protecting the vulnerable, bearing good fruit, and leaving room for grace. In reality, we may not always be able to tell the difference between the wheat and the weeds, even when we feel certain. Sometimes the people we dismiss become the saints who change the world. Sometimes the people we admire disappoint us. Every single one of us stands each day in need of God's patience and mercy.

The invitation of this parable is not to become better at identifying the weeds. The invitation is to become better at trusting the farmer, God. The invitation is to trust that God sees what we cannot see, and that God will bring justice in God's own time. The invitation is to trust that God's mercy is wiser than our certainty and God's judgment is more faithful than our own. And while we wait for that final harvest, may we spend less time trying to sort the field and more time cultivating lives that bear the fruit of God's kingdom – the fruit of love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, generosity, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control. Those are the marks of the wheat that God is growing in us. Amen.