8/22/23-20 Kingdom Parables: Weeds Rev. Amy Haines

Mt 13:24-30, 36-43

Those of you who are gardeners and famers—can you tell from looking at a seed what type of seed it is? Can you tell looking at the seed if it is corn or bean, vegetable or flower, wheat or weeds?

One of the many strange events of 2020 has been the mysterious seed packets sent from China.

Random people have received in the mail unexpected and unmarked packages of seeds, in what authorities are now saying was an online review scam. Although the scientists and news media have repeatedly warned people, do not plants these seeds, a few people have done so.

Are they harmless seeds, like morning glories and cabbage? Or are they an invasive species, a toxic weed? Only time will tell.

As I confessed last week, I do not have a green thumb. In our yard, I can never tell the difference between a beautiful flower and a blooming weed. More than once I’ve wanted to uproot something and Ken has told me not to. So now I leave all gardening up to him.

Today, in the parable of the weeds, Jesus invites us to leave the weeding of this world up to him.

He tells us more of God’s ways through a parable, a story with a twist. A parable will take common items to share the good news about God or God’s kingdom ways. To those who simply want a good story, a parable is a strange story. Yet to those with ears to listen, a parable proclaims a deeper truth.

All of the parables in Matthew chapter 13 proclaim the good news of God’s kingdom ways, ways that are much different than the kingdoms of this world. Last week we heard that God is the great sower, who will continue to plant God’s good news in our lives no matter what type of soil we are. Yet we were also called to cultivate our lives like good soil ready to receive God’s word.

Today, we hear the parable of the weeds, in which God not only continues to plants seeds in good soil, but God also waits to separate the good seeds from the noxious weeds until the harvest.

As Jesus said…

The kingdom of heaven is like someone who planted good seed in his field. While people were sleeping, an enemy came and planted weeds among the wheat and went away.When the stalks sprouted and bore grain, then the weeds also appeared. The servants of the landowner came and said to him, ‘Master, didn’t you plant good seed in your field? Then how is it that it has weeds?’ ‘An enemy has done this,’ he answered.

Following the parable of the sower last week, we are once again reminded that God’s intention is to plant the seed of his good news in each and every one of us. This is a promise not only to Palestine, but to the world then and now.

Yet there are always those who seek to thwart the way of God. To any farmer, on the surface this parable sounds like an act of agricultural terrorism. Who in their right mind would intentionally plant weeds in a wheat field? Only the one who doesn’t want to see the wheat grow. An enemy. Someone with evil intentions.

Most likely what was planted was the darnel plant, a toxic weed that looks very much like wheat as it grows and blossoms. Yet if the darnel is not separated from the wheat before grinding, at the time of harvest, it would render the wheat flour inedible. Common sense then would seek to save the crop ahead of the harvest by getting rid of the weed.

Jesus continues…

The servants said to him, ‘Do you want us to go and gather them?’ But the landowner said, ‘No, because if you gather the weeds, you’ll pull up the wheat along with them.Let both grow side by side until the harvest. And at harvesttime I’ll say to the harvesters, “First gather the weeds and tie them together in bundles to be burned. But bring the wheat into my barn.”’

Here is the twist in today’s parable—the farmer told his servants to do nothing! Leave the weeds to grow alongside the wheat. Leave the bad seeds to grow alongside the good seed, even if the good seed is threatened. Leave evil and good to co-exist in this world.

This twist makes no sense from an agricultural perspective. No farmer in his right mind would allow a weed to threaten his good seed. Even under Levitical Law, a field and its crop became ritually unclean with two kinds of seed in the field. --Bethquick.com 7-21-02

In the time of Jesus farmers and servants were extremely vigilant to produce a bountiful harvest and uphold the family reputation. When another plant or weed was found growing among the main crop, a massive weeding was usually undertaken to save the crop and purify the field. If a few heads of the main crop were sacrificed to save the whole crop, well, so be it.

Common sense to any farmer or gardener would pursue pulling out the weeds in order to allow the good seed to flourish.

Yet Jesus declares, wait. Wait until the harvest. Only then will the weeds be separated from the wheat. Wait until the harvest. Because prior to then, there is a danger of pulling out good seed with the weeds, of sacrificing a few for the many.

When I lived in Northwest Ohio, I could always tell when the railroad had blown through and sprayed the weeds along the rail line. Not only were the weeds dead along the rails, but sometimes crops at the edge of the fields would also have died. It’s a danger called drift, when pesticides are sprayed and carried on the wind, thereby killing more than what is intended.

When we yearn, like the servants, to remove the weeds in our lives, to get rid of evil, to divide and dismiss others, the danger is that we will also get rid of good seed with the weeds, we will harm others as we seek to purge and purify.

When you look at the people around you—friends and family, coworkers and fellow students, neighbors and strangers—can you tell at first glance who is more saint than sinner, or who is more weed than wheat? Often we cannot.

We may see an outward ordinary appearance that hides a callousness and uncaring beneath.

Or we may see an outward appearance of struggle or poverty that hides a deep faith and heart of gold.

“Harry Ironside, for 18 years pastor of Moody Memorial Church in Chicago, understood the folly of trying to separate the wheat from the tares. He was fond of telling the story of Bishop Potter.

Potter was sailing for Europe on one of the great transatlantic ocean liners back before taking cruises was popular. When he went on board, he found that another passenger was to share the cabin with him. After going to see the accommodations, he came up to the purser’s desk and inquired if he could leave his gold watch and other valuables in the ship’s safe. He explained that ordinarily he never availed himself of that privilege, but he had been to his cabin and had met the man who was to occupy the other berth. Judging from his appearance, he was afraid that he might not be a very trustworthy person. The purser accepted the responsibility for the valuables and remarked, “It’s all right, bishop, I’ll be glad to take care of them for you.

The other man has been up here and left his for the same reason!

-Homiletics 7-05

Our human nature judges one another. One society easily divides us. We have been conditioned to purge those not like us, even though they are still children of God.

In the midst of presidential political conventions, we are pressured to choose a side, and demean the other. In the midst of a pandemic, masks have become a divisive symbol rather than a way to care for one another. In the face for racism, we are becoming quick to judge or dismiss others instead of recognizing the many nuances of systemic struggles. Even in the church, we’ve become known more for what we are against than who we are for, as we seek to purge and purify, living more like the Pharisees than Jesus.

In such a polarizing culture, we have to recognize that the destruction of one often leads to the demise of the other. We cannot pull another down without hurting ourselves in the process.

We cannot weed out bad seed without hurting the roots of the good seed.

Weeding is our inclination; yet it is not God’s kingdom ways. And thus, this parable may frustrate us.

As Kim Henning once wrote:

..It’s a frustrating story, weeds and wheat together. But it’s also real. You raise your children, and you pray for them. Your take them to worship — you surround them with good friends, good influences. And then they go to school, and they come home with words that you hoped they’d never hear. And they watch television and they experience a world of extramarital affairs and uncommitted relationships and [rape and] drugs and alcohol. And it’s like wheat being surrounded by weeds.

It’s real, and what we would pray to God is this: “Take the weeds away!” Take away the evil and the temptations and the anxieties. Pull those weeds. Take away the wars and the human hunger. Take away the divisions between humanity. Yes, our prayer would be no less than Jesus’ prayer, “Father, if it be your will, take this cup from me ....”  
  
But the kingdom of God is here on earth and wheat and weeds grow side by side, lest in pulling out the weeds we disrupt the wheat as well. Weeds and wheat — side by side. We are not afforded a monastery — where we could get away from the problems of this world. And our church does not give us the option of saying, “This one stays, but this one goes.”

“Judgment is mine, sayeth the Lord.” So where does this leave us? Wheat, weeds, together.

—Kim Henning, “Those weeds! Oh, those weeds,” July 21, 2002,

*Grace Congregational Church Web Site*, graceucc.org.

-“Willy Wonka’s Weeds” 7-17-05 homileticsonline.com

There are times when we have to call out blatant evil, including the -isms in our lives.

Our baptism and membership vows call us to renounce-reject-resist the evil around us.

Yet when it comes to judgment, Jesus says let him do the weeding. Let him be the judge, at the final harvest, at the end of our lives.

For what if we get it wrong? We cannot see into the heart. We cannot see the big picture. We cannot see the long-term journey. We are not God.

As Sam Allberry remind us, reflecting on John 3:17:

If God did not send his Son to condemn the world, it’s a fair bet he doesn’t need you to.

-thepastorsworkshop.com:judging

The good news of this parable is that God is the final judge, yet not until the final harvest, not until the end of our lives. And this delay is a gift of God’s grace.

Beverly Zink-Sawyer reminds us,

“We are not responsible for eradicating evil in the world. We are only responsible for our own actions and faithfulness to the work of the kingdom.” -Lectionary homiletics, 6-05

So in the meantime, in the here and now, let us concentrate less on judging one another and more on cultivating the good soil in our lives in order to bear good fruit, the fruit of God’s ways in our lives, fruit that proclaims God’s kingdom ways in this world.

In the words of the apostle Paul in Romans,

"Do not be overcome by evil, but overcome evil with good." --Romans 12.21

- bless instead of curse

- praise instead of criticize

- help instead of stand off

- love instead of hate

- forgive instead of resent

- tell truth instead of lies --Richard Fairchild spirit.net

Let anyone with ears to hear listen and respond.