

Being Good Wheat

Psalm 37:1-8 Matthew 13:24-30, 36-43

Continuing our series on the parables of Matthew 13...

This morning's parable is going to challenge us. It sure challenged me this week! And by way of introduction, it's important for us to remember that Jesus taught and conducted his ministry during a time of Roman occupation and oppression, and all of the gospel writers wrote their gospels at least two or three decades after Jesus' life, death and resurrection, when the intense persecutions of the church had begun. So the gospel writers felt like they really needed these written documents as reminders of all that Jesus taught and did, when the intense persecution of Christians began. Because they were being blamed for the decline of the Roman empire. So they needed to be reminded of how to live during a time when there was a cultural storm brewing in the world.

So as I read this parable this morning, try to picture Roman soldiers on street corners and on roof tops, heavily armed, and watching; and imagine religious leaders, whom you trusted to protect you, currying favor with your persecutors, not only to save their hides but to make a few bucks under the table.

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

(after finishing the telling of the parables, a few verses later, Matthew says:)

v.36: Then he left the crowds and went into the house. And his disciples approached him, saying, "Explain to us the parable of the weeds of the field." He answered, "The one who sows the good seed is the Son of Man; the field is the world, and the good seed are the children of the kingdom; the weeds are the children of the evil one, and the enemy who sowed them is the devil; the harvest is the end of the age, and the reapers are angels. Just as the weeds are collected and burned up with fire, so will it be at the end of the age. The Son of Man will send his angels, and they will collect out of his kingdom all causes of sin and all evildoers, and they will throw them into the furnace of fire, where there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth. Then the righteous will shine like the sun in the kingdom of their Father. Let anyone with ears to hear, listen!

This is the word of the Lord

For those of you who love gardening, I'm guessing that this parable rubbed you the wrong way a bit. Letting weeds grow alongside good plants makes no

sense! We can't stand weeds. They're annoying. Maybe even evil. So, we work hard to get rid of the weeds, right?!

Obviously, Jesus isn't giving a lecture on agriculture here, or gardening. He's talking about the Kingdom of heaven. And, Jesus is dealing with nothing less than the problem of evil!

First the farmer sows good seed. Next thing you know, somebody else comes along, under the cover of darkness at night, while everyone is asleep (nice imagery there), and plants weeds in the same field. When the shoots come up the farmhands are perplexed: where did all these weeds come from??

"An enemy has done this." And Jesus is saying that's what the kingdom of God is like; this is the kind of world we live in. Jesus is sowing the good news of this fruit-bearing, life-transforming gospel, he is planting the kingdom of heaven on earth, working through his people—children of the kingdom he calls us—isn't that a wonderful affirmation?

But then the weeds get mixed in, too. Good and bad end up rubbing shoulders, growing side by side.

So, “Where...did these weeds come from?” Where *does* evil come from? Have you ever asked this question, maybe just once or twice? Who did this horrible thing? And why is it allowed to exist?

Jesus says: *an enemy* did it. Which we may find a bit frustrating, because the parable doesn’t really say any more than that—other than it’s the devil—but that’s all he says in the explanation. I mean, can’t we get a few more details here? Why does it have to be here in the first place? Why do bad weeds happen to good gardeners?!?

The thing is, whenever you go searching for a biblical answer to the problem of evil, that’s about all you get: an enemy did this. But more often than not, you get nothing. The Bible is consistently restrained on this question. But it’s very clear here and elsewhere: God did *not* do this. God didn’t plant those seeds. But somehow he allowed it, and seemed to not be too surprised that it happened. And it’s clear: God is not freaked out by it.

Well, ok, so now what? Start weeding like crazy, right? Yank that evil right out of there! Jesus says, nope. Well, why not? Because, he says, any attack on the weeds is likely to uproot the wheat as well. In other words... we’ll only end up hurting ourselves, and weakening our true effectiveness.

God wants his children to be effective and joyful, peaceful people. And we are most effective and joyful and peaceful when we're *building the Kingdom* in a *positive* way. We're not effective and joyful and peaceful when we're consistently agitated about badness and evil ("fretting" about it, as it says in Ps.37), rather than working on being the good wheat God planted us on earth to be.

This is similar to what Jesus said in another place: "You are the salt of the earth; you are the light of the world." Positive things! He didn't say, "You are the weed-be-gone of the world." Though it's often tempting, isn't it?!

Notice that Jesus' parable goes on to assure us that there will come a time when things get sorted out. Evil's days are numbered, and good will prevail. But **God** is the one who does the sorting. **God** will uproot the weeds. And **God** will make the kingdom prevail, when all is said and done.

But until that day comes, Jesus is saying, the kingdom of heaven on earth is a bit of a messy operation. A mixture of wheat and weeds, of good and evil.

Although, our human tendency is to want to sort it all out now. We spend a fair amount of energy labeling who's who, and what's what. Drawing lines in a non-nuanced sort of way. Here's the good. There's the bad. Here are the weeds, here's the wheat.

Somebody has said we suffer from a condition called a “hardening of the categories.” This is certainly the prevailing cultural condition today, isn’t it?

There was a book published in 2008 by a journalist named Bill Bishop titled, *The Big Sort: Why the Clustering of Like-Minded America is Tearing Us Apart*. Bishop documents how over the last forty/fifty years birds of a social-economic-political and religious feather have been *increasingly* flocking together. The problem is that when people marinate almost exclusively with others of like mind, of like experience, and like-minded *prejudice*, then the less cross-fertilization of thoughts and ideas there is, *and* – here’s the real problem – *the more extreme, rigid, antagonistic, and polarized people become*. And so people stop engaging in thoughtful, helpful dialogue.

And, I would add, people don’t get to know each other. The kingdom of God is right relationships, and right relating! Not right ideology, or opinions! And demonizing another is easy to do when I don’t have a relationship with them.

So what we end up with is a “hardening of the categories,” which creates groups of people who think they alone are right, and treat everybody else not only as wrong, but sometimes as evil. We see this everywhere from the Middle East to the Presidential elections to the Presbyterian Church. We call it tribalism.

People who only want to hang out with their own tribe. And what binds them together is their warring against other tribes.

In this parable Jesus is cautioning God's children against being overly discouraged when opposition comes, not only from without, but also *from within*. Jesus says, that when all is said and done at the end, "all causes of sin and all evildoers will be collected *out of God's Kingdom*." Which means... they were in God's Kingdom to begin with! You see how messy this is sometimes?!

That being said, we must protect persons. That's why we have good policies and procedures in the church and in other organizations. That's why Jesus and the apostle Paul talk about church discipline, and why they consistently talk about honoring one another and protecting human dignity and exercising discernment and discipline and love above all else. Jesus is not telling his followers to be passive or apathetic or permit an anything-goes attitude in church and society. We need to protect people, in church and in society, which is why we need good laws, for example—good laws represent the good wheat, the salt and light and positive influence that protect *all* people, and help *all* people thrive.

What Jesus is cautioning us about in this parable is drawing boundary lines and labeling people and categorizing people, and having too great expectations

for a perfect Kingdom or world and focusing on weeding out evil as our goal and mission. It would not be good for a church to have this mission statement: “First Church: where we get rid of bad people.” If that was the mission, everyone would eventually be shown the door!

In fact, every time the church has tried to pull up the weeds in the world or in its midst, it has resulted in a diminished church, a weakened church.

Actually, to be blunt, more often than not it has ended up a total disaster. History is replete with horrifying weed-pulling episodes: the Crusades, Inquisitions, Salem witch hunts, civil rights abuses. And even on a smaller scale the mini-weed pulling episodes, trying to completely eradicate *perceived* sin and evil from the church’s midst. Not our finest hour. And... **not our job!** Yay! What a relief! It’s God’s job and not ours! Our job is to be good wheat—to focus on the goodness of God and do as much good as we can for God’s Kingdom. Because we are the good seed that Jesus scatters *in the world*.

Psalm 37:1-4: “Do not fret because of the wicked... Trust in the Lord and *do good*; take delight in the Lord and he will give you the desires of your heart.” In other words, shift your focus and energy: don’t fret over the weeds; be good

wheat. Put your attention and effort on the goodness of God, and your good activity in the world.

In Romans 12:17-19 the apostle Paul is giving God's people encouragement about positive behaviors and ways to relate to each other and the world, and he punctuates the encouragement with this: "If possible, so far as it depends on you, live peaceably with all..." (and here is the exclamation point, verse 21) "...do not be overcome by evil, but overcome evil with good." Be good wheat in the world, as you are able.

In addition to this call to do good, why are we commanded not to extract the weeds from the wheat? Because we're bad at it. Let's be honest, we wouldn't do a good job of sorting good from bad. If I asked you right now to turn to 3 or 4 people around you and answer the question, "Who is evil?", there would be some long lists created; and you wouldn't agree with each other. For a moment let's pretend that God did assign us to eradicate evil, and pull out the weeds... Who would you identify as evil and yank out of God's field? I bet that among 4 or 5 of you there would be 10 different opinions about who is evil. We wouldn't all agree. Some would pick an evil dictator from another country; some would pick a member from their family that you have to sit through family

gatherings with. Some would pick a politician, some would pick your next-door neighbor, or an ex.

Here's the important question: Does *God* agree that these people are evil? We need to be very careful how we answer that. Or even if we should ask it to begin with.

Because history shows that we're not very good at this. We don't see clearly enough to make a good judgment about it. That's why Jesus says, in that "Do not judge" passage from Matt. 7: "how can you offer to take the speck out of someone else's eye when there's a log in your own eye?" What Jesus is saying, in a comical overstated way is, our vision isn't clear enough to make these kinds of judgments. Only God has perfect vision; only God has perfect perspective.

Along with all of this, I believe that Jesus tells us not to pull weeds because God never gives up on anyone. God never gives up on anyone. Everyday there happens a story about someone who was thought to be too far gone, and God got a hold of their life and turned it into something beautiful. God never gives up on anyone; and neither should we.

So we are not in the weed pulling business. In fact, if there is one place we *are* called to eradicate evil, and told one method of *how* we're to do it, it's given

to us in that line from Romans 12:21: overcome evil with good. Overcome evil with good.

Our calling is to be good wheat in the world. This parable of the wheat and the weeds calls us to be wheaty, fruit-bearing children of the king, by doing good as much as possible, with as many people as possible. One of our favorite quotes at home: The best critique of the bad is the practice of the better.

One last thought. If we are honest with ourselves, and examine our own hearts with humility and honesty, in God's gracious presence, we realize that wheat and weeds don't just grow together out there, but also in here (heart). Like I said last week about the 4 soils. We all struggle with being each of the 4 soils at different times. And it's the same with wheat and weeds.

Alexandyr Solzhenitsyn (Nobel Prize winning author; survivor of the Russian gulags, and follower of the way of Jesus) has said—and think about this from the perspective of a man who suffered intensely under a Soviet system that persecuted dissenters: *“The line separating good and evil passes not through nations, nor between classes, nor between political parties either – but right through every human heart.”* The line between good and evil passes through

every human heart. We all are a mixture of wheat and weeds. Trying, by God's grace, to be good wheat.

Years ago when I first saw the movie *Schindler's List* I was forewarned: I knew it was about the Jewish Holocaust, depicting Hitler's slaughter of 6 million Jews, and that the film was graphic and disturbing in places. But nobody told me it was about how mixed evil and good can be.

The film's protagonist, Oscar Schindler is a Nazi: a boozier and a womanizer. He's a charismatic party-guy who constantly used his considerable wealth to buy favors. A businessman with questionable ethics who profited greatly during the early years of World War 2.

But the movie goes on to reveal what happened during the last year of the War, when Schindler spent nearly his entire fortune to save the lives of 1,100 Jews who had worked as slave laborers in his enamelware factories on the outskirts of Krakow, Poland. He was their lifeline to freedom. And he helped them.

The movie is not about a Jew saving Jews. Or an American saving Jews. Or a neutral person from Switzerland saving Jews. It is about a Nazi saving Jews. Good and evil mixed together. It's messy.

Methodist bishop William Willimon says: “You see what happens? Just when we get things sorted out, “weed from wheat, sheep from goats, hopeless from hopeful, somebody makes a move, something shifts. Maybe somebody even changes!” That’s why I say, God never gives up on anyone.

After all, isn’t that what happened on the cross? The cross is where we learn that Christianity is not an “Operation Throw Them All Out” effort. At the cross Jesus didn’t threaten his enemies, didn’t rail at them, didn’t cut them down, and... didn’t give up on them. On the cross Jesus said, “Father forgive them.” He patiently forgave. He still does. And calls us to do the blessed work of loving and forgiving, and doing good.

This isn’t easy, which is why it’s by God’s grace. We need God’s grace, and we need each other’s support and encouragement, as we are called, together, to be peacemakers, good wheat in God’s field.

Make Me a Channel of Your Peace