

Matthew 13:24-30, 36-43
Creekside COB
July 17, 2005

“Weeds in the Wheat”

At my first church there was a field behind the building that was tilled each spring for the congregation's gardeners. After the plots were planted, you could not distinguish which belonged to the master gardeners and which belonged to the rank amateurs. But by midsummer the difference was apparent. Noble Frederick's garden was a horticultural masterpiece filled with tall stalks of sweet corn, vines heavy with fat tomatoes, and cantaloupe the size of bowling balls. He was there almost every day, watering the plants and manicuring the immaculate, weed-free rows.

Then there was Marilyn's garden. Right after the field was plowed, she went in with her turbo-charged rotor-tiller and worked the soil to the consistency of flour. After she planted her seeds and starts, Marilyn bid farewell to her plot until late July. Her's was a non-invasive method of gardening. She didn't water it or weed it. She was content to let the weeds and her plantings co-exist. By the time she returned to see how her garden had grown, the garden couldn't be seen. The weeds were taller than she was!

From my study, I saw Marilyn disappear into the thicket with buckets in case she found any produce in the jungle. If an hour passed without seeing her, I worried that she couldn't find her way out.

I couldn't help but think of Marilyn as I studied the parable of the wheat and the weeds, or, as some of you know it, the wheat and the tares. We are in the portion of Matthew's gospel that contains a number of Jesus' parables. Jesus didn't teach with abstract, ethereal lectures. He used familiar, everyday images the people could understand. The word parable comes from the

Greek, para-- which means, "in front of," and holein-- which means, "to throw down." In other words, Jesus put stories down at people's feet so they could pick them up, soak them in, and take root in their hearts.

"This is what the Kingdom of God is like," Jesus said. One day a farmer sowed good seed in his field. He finished by day's end and went home. That night as he slept, despicable men crept into his field and sowed weeds-- that's right... they sowed weeds in his wheat field. The weed was called bearded darnel. In its early stages looked just like wheat, but it wasn't wheat. Even a trained eye couldn't tell the difference.

Weeks later it was apparent that something was wrong with the wheat. The hired hands asked the owner, "Didn't you plant that good DeKalb seed?" "I did. Why do you ask?" "Your wheat is full of weeds. Do you want us to pull them out?" The wheat and darnel were intertwined. A pulled weed took wheat with it. "No, no, don't do that," he said, "Let them grow together. We'll separate them at harvest, burn the weeds and put the wheat in the silo."

This parable had a general and a particular audience. It was for the masses, but it was to one group in particular-those who spoke with certainty about God; those who knew the difference between good and bad and always chose the good; the pious ones who spent hours in prayer, their hands folded just right and their posture just so; those who only associated with good folks... like themselves; those who didn't hesitate to weed out unseemly and unsavory people. It was for the Pharisees, but they didn't get it. The planks in their eyes that they got from pointing out the specks in other's eyes kept the message from sinking in.

This is a parable about the final judgment-the day of reckoning, the final audit at which God will judge between the good and the bad. This theme of separation is repeated in Jesus' other parables. A fisherman hauls in a net full of fish. Since the net cannot choose the fish it catches, the fisherman sorts them, keeping the good and throwing away the bad. In Matthew 25,

God separates the sheep from the goats. The sheep cared for the sick, the hungry, and the hurting and are destined for eternity with God. The goats have hell to pay because they saw people in need, but looked away. Good fish and bad fish, sheep and goats, wheat and weeds. One shall be separated from the other.

I recall the story of the old man who listened to a revival preacher rant and rave about the eternal gnashing of teeth that awaits the unrepentant. Trying to get a rise out of the preacher, the old man said, "Well preacher, I must be exempt. I don't have any teeth." The preacher replied, "Teeth will be provided!" Woven throughout the Bible is the reality of final judgment. There are no exemptions. Here has ramifications for hereafter. What we do or don't do has eternal significance.

This is a parable of judgment. It is also a parable about opposition. Sowing darnel in someone's wheat field was punishable under Roman law. Darnel is toxic, and if processed with the wheat and consumed it caused severe illness. When the owner discovered what happened, he reached an immediate conclusion-"An enemy has done this."

C. S. Lewis said, "We live in enemy occupied territory." Long before weeds were sown in landowner's garden, an enemy sowed discord in God's garden. "Eat from every tree, EXCEPT the tree of knowledge. If you do, you will die," God said. Then along slithered the slick-talking serpent that said, "God didn't really mean it. Go ahead. Try it. You'll like it."

Regardless your conception of evil, whether personified in Satan or as a malevolent force at large in the universe, there is opposition to God's will. It was there in Eden. A death cloud hung over Jesus from his birth on. Since it's beginning, the church has faced opposition, especially when it has been faithful to Jesus. We shouldn't take it personally. The mere act trying to live like Jesus means that toes will be tropped on. The principalities and powers won't give up turf to God's Kingdom without a fight.

When our efforts at faithful discipleship meet resistance, we shouldn't act surprised. Jesus told the disciples repeatedly that resistance wouldn't be an exception but the norm. "I'm sending you out as sheep among wolves..." "Blessed are you when people mock and persecute you and utter all kinds of evil against you falsely on my account..." "Remember the word I said to you, 'A servant is not greater than his master.' If they persecuted me, they will do the same to you..."

Don't be surprised when your faith meets confrontation. Adversity comes to every one. We are not singled out. Jesus said the rain falls on the unjust and the just-- the weeds and the wheat. We live in enemy occupied territory. It is not an excuse for curling up in a fetal position. It's an opportunity to stand on the rock of our salvation and demonstrate to others our belief that--- "Great is he who is in me, than he who is in the world.

There is another theme in this parable. It has to do with who is qualified to make judgments. The hired hands were ready to yank the weeds out by the roots, but they couldn't tell which were weeds and which was wheat. There is a reason we are not to judge. WE ARE NOT GOD. Only God knows what is in people's hearts.

British police have now identified the four suicide bombers who struck London last week and killed 55 people. They ranged in age from 18 to 30. The oldest worked in the public schools as a teaching assistant. Months ago his picture appeared in the paper. He was recognized for the outstanding work he did in helping children with disabilities-work he did up until he put on a backpack filled with explosives.

The columnist Sydney Harris was invited to debate the legendary communications specialist, Marshall McLuhan before a huge audience in Windsor, Canada. Harris said, "I knew McLuhan was the drawing card; I was only his foil, something like a prelim boxer signed up just to give the champ a chance to show his stuff."

So many tickets were sold that the event was moved to a larger venue in Detroit. The debate began, and Harris was totally put off by McLuhan. He couldn't stay on the subject, he didn't respond to Harris's points, he rambled on, putting thoughts together with no logical connection. He obviously hadn't prepared. He just showed up to grab the honorarium. Afterward, Harris told his family, "The man is a palpable fraud."

Three weeks later while reading The New York Times, he saw a little headline. "McLuhan Enters Hospital in Boston." Reading on, it said that he had undergone several hours of brain surgery to remove a large tumor. The next day, Sydney Harris wrote in his column:

The chastening message I took from that was, first, not to make private assumptions from public conduct, and second, if we have to judge, let our judgments be provisional, not ultimate. We really do not know why people do what they do.

Whenever I am tempted-as I often am, being by temperament a judgmental person-to pass a hasty verdict on unattractive or bizarre behavior, I think back to that night in Detroit and the nervous figure pacing the stage with that ugly thing growing minute by minute inside the delicate brain. "Debate? It's a marvel the could stand at all."

Experience alone ought to be enough to show us that we don't have the whole story about the actions and motivations of others. Appearances are deceiving. Behavior can be misconstrued. The saint may be an ain't. The person who ignites our ire may carry a cross undetected by our limited sight and insight. There is a reason we must leave the judgment up to God. We don't get it right, and more often than not, end up doing more harm than good.

I was recently called for jury duty. For me, it was a first. The defendant was charged with a particularly loathsome felony, and on the basis of the evidence given, we were to decide the defendants guilt or innocence. We were given no information

about prior arrests, only the facts pertaining to the case that was before us. The evidence seemed conclusive, and after two hours of discussion, we reached a verdict.

As we were seated in the jury box in front of the defendant, I felt the weight of our decision. Our guilty verdict would determine this man's future, and even though I think our decision was correct, I have no stomach for making final judgments. I used to think I know, but I don't know which is which or who is who anymore. When it comes to deciding the state of people's souls, God can have the job.

The Pharisees spent a lot of time passing judgment on their neighbors while being smug about their own squeaky-clean records. They wanted their houses of worship full of other squeaky-clean people, which meant that a lot of riff-raff had to be weeded out. Jesus didn't like it a bit. What kind of church do you suppose we would have if we weeded out all the imperfect, inadequate, and sinful people? An empty one, that's what!

The church is made of wheat and weeds. The more I consider it, the more I think that Marilyn had it right, not as far as gardening goes, but when it comes to being the church we leave the wheat and weeds alone. We let them grow together. I am in no position to judge you. You have neither the wisdom nor the right to judge each other. That is why we must open the door wide to receive everyone and exclude no one.

What are you? Wheat or weed? If you are wheat, keep growing and bear a harvest. If you're a weed, you don't have to stay one. You know what you are and aren't. I hope you also know what you can become by the grace of our good judge. Like those who heard this parable first time, let's go home and think about it.