

God's Weeding Strategy

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Matthew 13:24-30 — 13:24 Jesus put before them another parable: "The kingdom of heaven may be compared to someone who sowed good seed in his field; 13:25 but while everybody was asleep, an enemy came and sowed weeds among the wheat, and then went away. 13:26 So when the plants came up and bore grain, then the weeds appeared as well. 13:27 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?' 13:28 He answered, 'An enemy has done this.' The servants said to him, 'Then do you want us to go and gather them?' 13:29 But he replied, 'No; for in gathering the weeds you would uproot the wheat along with them. 13:30 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.'"

When I was in college, one of my roommates once asked me, out of the blue, what my favorite of Jesus' parables was. (Remember, I went to a Christian college, so the question wasn't quite as weird as it sounds.) Being put on the spot like that, I couldn't remember more than a few parables, but I did remember this one here, in Matthew 13, and I told my roommate that this parable was my favorite. This morning, I want to share with you what I liked about it back then, and then I want to share with you how I see it differently now.

Like so many of Jesus' parables, and like the one we read last Sunday, this one gives us an agrarian scenario. A landowner sows seed in his field, Jesus says, and while the landowner does everything right, something goes very wrong. One night, an enemy sneaks into his field and plants weeds, which are meant to compete with the crop and ultimately diminish the yield. So, unbeknownst to the landowner and his workers, the seeds of weeds are taking root and beginning to grow alongside his wheat. For weeks, the whole household is eagerly anticipating a bountiful season—until one day, someone notices that something doesn't look quite right in the field. The workers exchange their opinions on the matter: "It's nothing," one of them insists, "it'll start looking normal soon." So they all hope.

But soon, everyone can see that what's happening is not normal. Where they thought they had planted a uniform field of brown wheat, they now see a messy hodgepodge of young plants competing with each other. Now, for us today, when we think of weeds, we likely think of our flower beds. But the landowner isn't trying to grow a pretty flower display; he's trying to grow food for his family, for his workers, and for many more. If the weeds choke out too much of the wheat, the livelihood of the landowner and of those close to him is in jeopardy.

Bewildered and afraid, the workers confront the landowner, hoping that they won't be blamed for the disaster. And luckily, they aren't. Turns out, the landowner has a strong intuition. "An enemy did this," he says, in a soft and dignified voice, like a general who knows that he is losing a

battle. The workers, of course, are eager to help, desperate to save the crop, and so they respond, “Well, do you want us to go and fix it? Let’s go, let’s get rid of those weeds as fast as we can!”

In Jesus’ parables, there is almost always a catch, a surprise, and in this parable, the landowner’s response to his workers would have surprised Jesus’ audience. “No. Don’t do that,” he says. “If you try and pull up the weeds now, you’ll inevitably pull up some of the wheat as well. Wait. Let the weeds and wheat grow up alongside each other. And when the time is right, I will send the reapers in to separate the two.” The landowner knows that the weeds are dangerous, but he also knows that the time isn’t right and that his workers aren’t cut out for the task right now. Enthusiastic though they are, they just aren’t able to rightly distinguish between weed and wheat at this stage. And so, the act of separating one from the other, of discerning the good from the bad, is not for them, not for today.

When I was in college, I sensed that a lot of people—including myself, in fact—had a mindset similar to that of these workers. Many of us were heavily invested in identifying and in separating the good and the bad, the right and the wrong, the saved and the damned. We thought that we—being the “good Christians” that we were—could draw a clear, stark line between these two. We thought that we could prove that we were a part of the better half. And we thought that justice meant defeating or erasing the other side. I assume that you can empathize with this mindset. You’ve seen it in politics. You’ve taken part in it, one way or another. Sometimes, it feels like the whole world is made up of wheat and weeds, and sometimes, we are quite happy to divide them up and judge between the two.

But in this parable, Jesus pushes back on that desire—not because the weeds and the wheat are the same thing, and not because the weeds aren’t a problem, but because of two other reasons. First, you and I aren’t especially qualified to play judge here. Sometimes, our judgments are hasty, ill-informed, partial. We think we see a weed when we are actually seeing wheat, and vice versa. Of course, we all have our own understandings of what’s right and what’s wrong, and it is good for us to hold to those understandings with conviction, as we seek to grow more and more into the truth, but at the end of the day, Jesus reminds us, have some humility. Just because you call it a weed doesn’t make it so.

The second reason: the time for this separation between wheat and weed, the time for judgment, is not now. Just as the landowners tell the workers to wait until the plants grow tall and the reapers come, so also Jesus tells us to be patient. When the time is right, God will make the ultimate judgement between good and evil. As a college student, I needed reminders like these to be patient, to be humble. This parable reminded me that I’m not called to go and pluck out everything that I think looks like a weed; rather, I’m called to nurture the wheat, to do my best to help good crops grow, in spite of the threats surrounding them.

That’s what I learned from this parable in college. But recently, I’ve been seeing it in a different light as well. Rather than seeing the wheat and the weeds as “good people” and “bad people” in the world, or good things and bad things in the world, I’ve been seeing the wheat and the weeds

as two elements within every person. Each of us, friends, is a field containing a mixture of good seeds and bad seeds. Everyone has some wheat, and everyone has some weeds.

Hear these words of wisdom from Russian novelist Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn: “If only it were all so simple! If only there were evil people somewhere insidiously committing evil deeds, and it were necessary only to separate them from the rest of us and destroy them. But the line dividing good and evil cuts through the heart of every human being. ... The line separating good and evil passes not through states, nor between classes, nor between political parties either, but right through every human heart.”

Friends, Jesus tells us that before we try to take the speck out of our sibling’s eye, we should worry about the plank of wood in our own. Instead of focusing on all of the weeds in the world and how we wish that we could just rip them out, Jesus invites us to focus on the field of our own heart, tending to the wheat and the weeds we find there. So, may we enter this week trusting that God is the only one who can judge in perfect truth and in perfect love. May we enter this week striving to be gracious with others when we brush up against their weeds, because God is gracious with us. And may we enter this week ready to meet the Spirit down in the dirt of our hodgepodge hearts, trusting that the Spirit will help us to tend our field with humility and with patience. Amen.