

“Long Live the Weeds”

Matthew 13:24-30, 36-43

July 14, 2019

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Tell Me the Stories of Jesus

“Let the weeds and the wheat grow together until the harvest!”

- Matthew 13:30

Prayer of Preparation

O Lord, help us to believe where we have not seen, that the seeds planted in our hearts may only grow into the likeness of your Son Jesus Christ, in whose name we pray. Amen.

Message

Perhaps you have heard that it has been a difficult spring for many farmers. The rains have really caused a major disruption to crops. From Nebraska to Virginia – all along the Corn Belt – it is figured that over one-third of the corn and soybean crop has been affected by flooding, which means, of course, that we will feel the affect later in the fall. Many farmers are hurting, a reminder that farming comes with risks.

There was a day, of course, when many families were more connected to the land and to farming. Living patterns changed, though, after World War II and the family farm is not what it used to be. As a society we have become more mobile, and as we have become more mobile, we have become more isolated from the land, from our primary sources of food.

Thus there is a concern that we have become more disconnected from what sustains us. When most persons do not know where fish come from, or where eggs come from, or milk, or corn, or meat, we are in trouble. That is, if we think our food comes from Kroger, we may want to ask where we have gone wrong.

God created us to be stewards of the earth, not simply consumers of it (Genesis 1-2).

To be sure, though, we live in highly mobile, quick fix culture. We live in a microwavable, fast-food, 30-minute sitcom, 24/7/365, round-the-clock-do-it-my-way world. It is highly technological and mechanical, even isolationist, and all but out of sink with the natural rhythms of creation as depicted in Genesis, when God created the world and on the seventh day rested (Genesis 2:2).

In such a world, as Stanley Hauerwas of Duke Divinity School has reminded us, violence can, and often does, take the upper-hand, as we become more impatient with each other, losing the capacity to understand one another as persons. Our judgmental, impatient spirits can lead to conflict. In such a world, God often becomes a useful tool in our hands, not the One who bears with us in our weaknesses (2 Corinthians 12:9-10).¹

Review of the Parables

How odd, then, that we have been spending the last five weeks sharing some of the parables of Jesus, which come out of a radically different culture than our own and reveal a God often at odds with us, a God who embraces the outcast and the sinner and who sacrifices honor and prestige to forgive us, and who loves us through and through.

In Luke's Gospel in particular, in the parables we have read, we have witnessed a God whose pursuit of us will not stop, no matter how dysfunctional our families are or how out of whack we are with each other, or how far adrift we have gotten from God (Luke 15).²

The parables of Jesus we have been reading remind us that God's purposes are not always what they appear to be, or as the prophet Isaiah once said, God's ways are not always our ways (Isaiah 55:8-9). And yet, in every parable we have read, we have gotten a glimpse into the nature of God and into the workings of the Spirit. In every parable, we have heard Jesus tell us something about God's kingdom and the ways of life in that kingdom.

How appropriate, then, that as we end our sermon series on parables, we end it with the parable of the wheat and the weeds in Matthew's Gospel. This parable

¹ See Stanley Hauerwas, *Living Gently in a Violent World* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2018), 7.

² See Pastor Andy Kinsey's sermon "Tell Me the Stories of Jesus: Prodigal Spirit (July 7, 2019) at www.franklingrace.org.

also communicates to us something very unique about who God is and how God acts.

And though, as I shared earlier, we have moved away from our farming roots in our country, we can hopefully hear something of what Jesus is seeking to teach about God as seed-planter, as farmer, especially when we wonder why God does not appear to be acting to set the world to the rights when things go wrong.³

As a pastor, I often receive questions about God when tragedies happen, or when accidents take place, or when tyrants and bullies try to force their plans on others and seek to crush the opposition and no one seems to be held accountable.⁴

Sensitive persons will ask, time and again, why is God silent? Why doesn't God *do* something? Is God really just? Is God really concerned?

We need to understand the parable of the wheat and weeds in light of these questions.

Indeed, there are several parables here in a row in Matthew's Gospel that are not direct answers to these questions, but are indirect ways that speak to how God rules over this world and seeks to rescue it (Matthew 13).

For example, in the parable of the sower, we hear about the way a farmer scatters the seed on all kinds of ground. The farmer scatters the seed, but it does not always take root. Nevertheless, the farmer (i.e., God) plants the seed deep within those who will respond. The promise is that the seed will someday bear fruit, but that it will take time (13:18-23).

The parable of the mustard seed is also part of this section. The mustard seed, of course, is one of the smallest of seeds in the world, but it also takes time to grow, becoming one of the biggest of shrubs, providing shelter for birds. Again, such growth does not happen overnight, but when it happens it is full and beautiful (13:31-32). A similar thing happens when a woman bakes bread: it takes time for the leaven to rise (13:33-34).

Wheat and Weeds Together

³ N.T. Wright, *Matthew for Everyone: Volume One – Chapters 1-15* (Louisville, KY: John Knox Press/Westminster, 2004), 168.

⁴ *Ibid.*, 168.

And the parable of the wheat and weeds? Well, if these other parables are about waiting, then this parable is also about waiting: it is about servants who want to act quickly, especially in the face of wrongdoing; but it is also about a farmer whose patience wins the day. That is, it is about a farmer who is willing to let God have the final say, even when the temptation to rush to judgment is so present.

For who wouldn't want to go after the enemy who sowed weeds among good seed? Who wouldn't want to settle the score right then and there (Matthew 13:25)? After all, isn't it tempting to want to get out the *Roundup* or *Weed-B-Gon* and simply spray the weeds and get rid of the problem once and for all?

The problem is, as the farmer says, when we do so we can kill the good stuff too (Matthew 13:30). This is *not* how God works. We can do more damage by pulling up the weeds too soon than by letting the weeds and wheat grow together until the harvest (Matthew 13:29). Yes, it will take more time, but the wait is worth it. That's what Jesus is teaching.

Translation: make sure you ask your spouse what to spray before spraying *Roundup*! Better translation: in our zeal to judge, we can do more harm than good.⁵

Like the birds who wait for the mustard seed to grow into a large tree, or like a woman baking the bread waiting for the leaven to rise – God's kingdom is not going to arrive and get here the way we thought (Matthew 13:32-34). God's judgment is not going to occur the way we expected. Indeed, the more we try to force God to judge and fix the wrongdoing the more we will probably mess it up.

Yes, says Jesus, God's judgement is going to happen, and it is something for which we will need to be prepared, but it will happen in God's way, in God's time, which means that it will require great wisdom and restraint on our part (Matthew 24:22-34).

Perhaps Jesus knows something about how our good intentions may go in different directions: we may mean well in wanting to set the scales of justice right, but there are moments when the consequences of our acting in haste can lead to the unforeseen – to the not so good. In the words of one of my grandfathers, "Our cure can be worse than the disease!" Better to let God take care of the judgment on the harvest day than us, which is typically beyond our pay-grade anyway!

⁵ Ibid., 169.

It is why we may also want to remember the context in which Jesus is teaching this parable, and how in Jesus' day many persons expected a Messiah who would deliver a final blow to the Romans. There were many revolutionary groups wanting an immediate end to the Roman occupation. Zealots and Pharisees longed to see God act decisively and act quickly.⁶

Part of Jesus' whole ministry, however, is to teach folks like us that God's kingdom does not come like that; it doesn't come like that because God himself is not like that. It is not in God's nature to act against God's nature, as God is slow to anger, but abounding in steadfast love (Psalm 103:8).⁷

To be sure, God does not relish the sight of weeds amidst the wheat. That's not in keeping with God's ways. But God also does not relish the thought of declaring the harvest-time too soon, destroying the wheat with the weeds in the process; that's also not in keeping with God's ways either. Better to let the weeds and the wheat grow together.

Frustration with the Weeds

Let the weeds and the wheat grow together. The question is, do we have the patience and wisdom to allow it?

For I know I have wanted on occasion to get out my own *Spiritual Roundup*, to eliminate the weeds around me! To act to get rid of my "enemy" – or, whoever that enemy may be (Matthew 5:44).

But wait a minute! It is not just about me. Think about how we raise our children amidst the weeds. Everyday! Isn't that why we want to see our children surrounded by good friends with positive influences, not to be contaminated? I know Peggy and I tried to do so. We sought to raise our children on how to act wisely, to do good, to live amidst the weeds.

Because we know the weeds will grow! The temptations come. The drugs, the foul language, the cheating, the stealing, to name a few, come. That old devil is deceitful (Matthew 13:39). What do we do? Where do we go to get away from the weeds? Build more walls? Have more police? Or just eliminate the problem altogether by getting rid of people? No people, no problem!

⁶ Ibid., 169.

⁷ Ibid., 170.

I know that in church history we typically separate into different churches, or congregations, or denominations, thinking we have gotten away from the weeds. The problem is that with so many different churches it is sometimes hard to know where the bad weeds stop and the good wheat begins.

Maybe this is why Saint Augustine thought that if we really understood the human heart we would realize that it is a mixture of weeds and wheat together, a mixture of good and bad together, sinner and saint together, wheat and weeds together – waiting for the harvest.⁸

Put differently: if I really wanted God to act the way I wanted God to act toward my enemies, would I survive as well?

Perhaps Jesus was right all along: Better to confess the log in my own eye than to bring more harm upon an already blind world (Matthew 7:3-5). Better to let the weeds and the wheat grow together. Better to let the harvest come and let God judge. Better to let weeds live a bit longer and enjoy life in the kingdom!

Translation: Long live the weeds!

⁸ Augustine, *Concerning the City of God against the Pagans*. Translated by R.S. Bettenson (New York, NY: Harmondsworth-Penguin Press, 1977), 832.