

24 Jesus told them another parable: "The kingdom of heaven is like someone who planted good seed in his field. 25 While people were sleeping, an enemy came and planted weeds among the wheat and went away. 26 When the stalks sprouted and bore grain, then the weeds also appeared.

27 "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?'

28 "'An enemy has done this,' he answered.

"The servants said to him, 'Do you want us to go and gather them?'

29 "But the landowner said, 'No, because if you gather the weeds, you'll pull up the wheat along with them. 30 Let both grow side by side until the harvest. And at harvest time 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."'"

31 He told another parable to them: "The kingdom of heaven is like a mustard seed that someone took and planted in his field. 32 It's the smallest of all seeds. But when it's grown, it's the largest of all vegetable plants. It becomes a tree so that the birds in the sky come and nest in its branches."

33 He told them another parable: "The kingdom of heaven is like yeast, which a woman took and hid in a bushel of wheat flour until the yeast had worked its way through all the dough."

34 Jesus said all these things to the crowds in parables, and he spoke to them only in parables. 35 This was to fulfill what the prophet spoke:

I'll speak in parables;

I'll declare what has been hidden since the beginning of the world.

-Common English Bible

once read a story, written by Landon Whitsitt, a man who is now a Presbyterian pastor, about an experience he had as a 19 year old Southern Baptist. He was working at a ranch in Colorado as a member of the housekeeping crew, balancing early morning labor with afternoons of hiking and biking. He mostly kept to himself both because he is an introvert and because he was a Baptist. Most of his co-workers were not religious, which didn't bother him, but he did find it complicated friend-making. But another Baptist joined the crew a couple weeks into the summer and he thought this might change things.

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Landon wrote “One day, we were piling out of the work van when the other Baptist (let’s call him “David”), literally, out of nowhere began screaming at me. Here’s what David said: ‘YOU’RE GOING TO HELL, LANDON! YOU’RE GOING TO HELL! YOU’RE WORSE THAN AN UNBELIEVER BECAUSE YOU KNOW THE TRUTH AND ARE IGNORING IT!’”

It turned out David was a different kind of Baptist than Landon, one who considered Southern Baptists to have “strayed too far from the fold.” Landon suggests that as a 19 year old he was not “a paragon of openness,” but as he writes, “I knew that someone thinking differently than me didn’t constitute a death sentence for their mortal soul. I knew people could be right and wrong, and I was starting to understand that the difference between those is a subtle, nuanced thing most of the time.” He found it severely jarring to be placed on the other side of a dividing line just when he was beginning to discern the oneness of humanity. He says that he remembers that experience every time he’s tempted to denounce someone for anything he deems to be wrong. They may well be wrong, but he knows, having been on both sides of such judgment, it’s an easy thing about which to be mistaken.

Landon shared this story in a reflection on the Parable of the Weeds and the Wheat. He paraphrased Jesus’ message in this parable in this way, “Once harvest comes, all the evildoers will be gathered up by the angels and God will throw them into the fire. Me and Abba have got this covered. You just focus on you.”

His last thoughts begin to open up the teaching I feel called to offer this week. He wrote, “I don’t know about you, but I’m pretty quick to label someone as a ‘weed’ or ‘wheat.’ But what gets me into more trouble is when I forget that there are weeds sown amongst the wheat in my own person. I’m glad that God is around to sort that out. I’d probably make a mess of it.”

More than once I have heard people say that when they hear the label “Christian” they automatically think “judgmental.” Isn’t it interesting, or perhaps better put— tragic

— that so many perceive us in this way, we who received the teaching about specks vs. logs— could there be a stronger teaching on the dangers of judgment? In case we missed it in the sermon on the mount we have the parable of the wheat and the weeds to drive the point home. It's interesting though the way that we can read that parable as a justification for judgment— like Landon said, freely identifying some as weeds and others as wheat. This is, however, a misapplication of this teaching.

This parable is unique to Matthew's Gospel. The other two we read today, about the mustard seed and the yeast, those are shared with other Gospels, but this is in Matthew alone. And it reflects a particular theology in Matthew, an idea of two kingdoms, the kingdom of heaven or God and the kingdom of the world. In this parable, the kingdom of heaven is compared to good seed planted in a field, a field in which an enemy subsequently planted bad seed. I've heard that there is a particular weed that looks a lot like wheat, particularly in early stages of growth. There was a Roman law forbidding the planting of this weed in an enemy's field of wheat. So it was an imaginable scenario in Jesus' day. The response of the servants to the appearance of weeds among wheat when the seeds began to grow is a strong desire to remove the weeds. But the master cautions that there is too much risk of uprooting fragile new wheat growth in the process. The recommendation is that separation happens at the time of harvest. Harvest was a classic metaphor for the end of time, so when Jesus throws that into his story it likely would have evoked reflection on the end of earthly reality.

Now, whenever you set up a binary, two sides, two kingdoms, two crops, two parties, two anything... this tends to encourage division and categorization. This is why, I think, people can read Matthew and get to an us and them place from it, why they can feel justified in naming and rejecting weeds. But... the very story that gives us the binary of weeds and wheat, cautions against early discernment of who is a wheat and who is a weed. What I hear the story saying is that the kingdom of God is growing on earth, but it is growing in a field crowded with weeds. What we experience here on earth is always a mixed phenomenon. I believe it is impossible to have a pure experience of God's

kingdom on this side of glory. And I believe this is so because, as Landon suggested, all of us have both wheat and weeds growing in us. I don't think anyone who has ever lived has been pure wheat. And I am also hesitant to say that anyone who has ever lived has been a pure weed. Some lives may be more entangled with weeds than others, but all of us have weeds in us. All of us. We have good and beautiful and life giving things growing in us, and also competing character defects that are death dealing. All of us.

One of the things I learned from the writings of Karl Barth, a prominent 20th century theologian, is that there is a dividing line in humanity, but that it is a line that runs down the middle of all of us, of each of us. It is not a line that divides humans one from another, it is a line that divides humanity, all of humanity from God— division bridged by the person and work of Jesus Christ, whose life, death, and resurrection is powerful enough to repair the relationship between all of humanity and God.

Now, we know that there are definitely divisions between human beings. We are really good at dividing. Let's just think about Christians, shall we? Focus on us? There aren't just multiple kinds of Baptists, there are 13 separate Presbyterian denominations, the newest one formed not long ago. In the community of my first call there were lots of Mennonites and Amish. There was every kind of Mennonite— Mennonites who use buttons on their clothes and those who do not, Mennonites who drive cars, Mennonites who only drive cars with black bumpers, Mennonites who use horse and buggy. Infinite varieties of Mennonite, often separate churches existing because of differences over what clothing is appropriate to wear or what vehicles are appropriate to use. I happen to love Mennonites. I'm not telling this to make fun of them, but as an illustration of how readily and copiously even deeply faithful Christians divide.

Often division is justified by the sense that this is the way to achieve a pure community untainted by evil. But Jesus' parable of the weeds and the wheat suggests we can't achieve this this side of glory. The Kingdom of God is here and is growing, but on earth it grows amidst other stuff, sometimes some pretty nasty stuff. And when you yank out a weed, even with the best of intentions, you are likely to yank out the good wheat

growing alongside it. Whenever a Christian determines that another Christian is a weed and calls them out or publicly rejects or shames them, this has ripple effects through the whole community. Often those new to Christian faith are revolted and turn away. Sometimes those established in Christian faith are revolted and turn away. Certainly those outside the community who see this are often even further distanced from Christian faith. The act of calling out particular people as weeds, or of gossiping with others about the weedy character of kindred, or of writing kindred off completely because of your certainty, even quiet certainty, that they are weeds... all these breed ill will, resentment, hurt, pain, distrust; it serves to sow seeds that grow into weeds of discontent.... And leads to the world's perception that we Christians are a judgmental lot.

The Jesus we meet in the pages of Matthew does seem to acknowledge a division between good and evil, but he also calls those who follow him to love our enemies, to pray for those who persecute us, to tend to the logs in our own eyes before working on the specks in the eyes of others, to do unto others as we would have done unto us... and to work for reconciliation between human beings at every turn. This is what it means to be a disciple of Jesus. This is part of what we are to model in our church life. Part of what makes for a safe community where all can find their paths to wholeness, is a willingness of the entire community to remember that not one of us is perfect, there is not a single stalk of pure wheat in this room, not even on this chancel, not even in this pulpit. The Spirit of God is yet working on each of us, working to make more wheat than weeds grow in us. When the character defects of others are particularly irritating to us it is most often because they are character defects that are present in us. Even when they are not, it's not ours to classify others as weeds and treat them as disposable. Indeed, sometimes they or the situation of conflict can, by God's grace, prove the small mustard seed that produces an unexpected, magnificent tree or small amount of yeast "hidden" in a massive quantity of flour that is going to produce a huge amount of bread. God's

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kingdom does tend to radically exceed expectations, taking what seems disposable and showing it to be of great value.

In any case, I'm pretty sure that, if nothing else, all three parables make it clear that God has good intentions for this world and that good will grow despite threats to it, it will grow beyond reasonable expectations of it, it will grow because of the love and power of God.

So though the wrong seems oft so strong, though sometimes our own hearts feel overgrown with weeds, though sometimes our own church seems tangled in weeds, God's wheat is growing in us, among us, and God's will shall be done. Don't be discouraged by the apparent smallness of the good. Don't be discouraged by the tangled mess that is life on earth. Take heart in the God who loves us and in Christ who is working right now to reconcile the world and each of us to God. God is able to do infinitely more than we could ever ask or imagine. And God is doing it, the seeds are planted, take heart, dear friends, take heart.

Resources in addition to scripture that influenced or were cited in this sermon:

This sermon is revised from one delivered to St. A's in 2019.

The story from Landon Whitsitt, was the feature story in a weekly newsletter from 2019 in *Two Good Spies*, the e-news of the Synod of Mid America.

The reference to Karl Barth represents takeaways from several of his writings notably *The Epistle to the Romans* and *Church Dogmatics*, Vol IV.

https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Parable_of_the_Tares

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