

First Presbyterian Church
Bozeman, Montana
Jody McDevitt, co-pastor

July 23, 2017
16th Sunday in Ordinary Time
Matthew 13:24-30, 36-43

Wheat Among the Weeds

If I were a preacher more like Jesus, I would tell more stories. Jesus is famous for his storytelling. We call his stories parables, simple and memorable stories, often drawn from nature yet with a spiritual meaning. Some are not more than an image, such as “The kingdom of heaven is like a treasure hidden in a field,” and some are more elaborate, such as “There was a man who had two sons.” which begins the story of the prodigal son and his elder brother. There are 37 unduplicated parables told by Jesus in the gospels of Matthew, Mark, and Luke. If I were a preacher more like Jesus, I would more readily see the heavenly truth in earthly situations, and speak in the parables which convey such truth.

Then again, if I were a preacher more like Jesus, I would speak more often about the kingdom of God. The gospel writers tell us that this is the good news Jesus preached—the kingdom of heaven, the realm of God, the reign of God. He did not preach about himself. He taught both the crowds and his close followers about God’s rule on earth as it is in heaven, that it is coming, that it is near, that it is even among us, within us, in the midst of us now. The kingdom of God was his #1 sermon theme, told over and over. The gospel writer Matthew uses a pious formulation, following the tradition that God’s name is too holy to be spoken, and almost always calls it the “kingdom of heaven.” It’s the same thing. “Seek first the kingdom of God,” said Jesus. This was his primary message.

So Jesus begins, “The kingdom of heaven may be compared to someone who sowed good seed in his field. . . .” and his listeners recognize that what’s coming up is a story in which something in the everyday world is about to show us something about the eternal rule of God. And since most people in Jesus’ day were subsistence farmers, his first listeners would also have recognized the plants he was describing. There was wheat, and there were weeds, and the weeds were very likely a plant called darnel. Its seeds look like wheat seeds, it grows like wheat grows, and it can fool almost anyone into thinking that it is wheat until it produces its fruit. But it also can choke off the wheat at the root, and it can be deadly poisonous to people and animals, too.

If I were a preacher more like Jesus, I would be less afraid of scaring people with talk about evil and judgment, the devil and the harvest that represents the end of time. To be honest, I looked at this lectionary-assigned scripture a few weeks ago and thought, “Oh, no. I don’t like this one, with its talk of the enemy, a furnace of fire for evildoers at the end of the age, the way it divides people into good and evil. I don’t like this kind of judgmentalism.” Perhaps you had the same reaction when you heard the scripture. But Jesus doesn’t hold back when it comes to speaking of God’s judgment. If I were more like Jesus, I’d be more courageous, less worried about the history of overemphasizing the horrors of hell to scare people into conversion. I would see that God’s “judgment is ordered towards redemption.” (Anna Case-Winters, 2015, *Matthew*, Westminster John Knox Press, Louisville, p. 281)

But I’m not Jesus. There are weeds growing in me which resemble the wheat which also has been planted in my soul. Counterfeits. I am a mixed field, not pure, producing some fruit worthy of the good farmer’s efforts to grow hearty, nourishing, worthwhile grain. And at the same time, I am infected with thoughts and ideas, motivations and actions which diminish the flourishing of what is good in me. I don’t like to think that I may even produce poisonous fruit, that which will harm others. But I am

enough of a Presbyterian to appreciate that we always confess our sin before entering into the fullness of worshipping God. It's there—the potential, and the reality, of sin.

Perhaps you recognize yourself in this field, too. One way this parable speaks to us is by showing us the truth of our human nature. We are, each of us, a mixed field. Weeds grow in us alongside the wheat, the bad with the good, the evil among the righteous. When we recognize ourselves as the field, it's a bit of a relief that the farmer tells the workers not to spray the Roundup or pull the weeds yet, for it could destroy the entire crop. Give it time. There is goodness in this field growing alongside the bad. With encouragement, the good growth may overtake the weeds. Give the field a chance to self-correct, to bear good fruit, to overcome the invasion of weeds. Avoid a rush to judgment; this could turn out to be a righteous life, a life well-lived, one which glorifies God.

There is also a second level of interpretation which has been favored by the church since its early centuries. Imagine the days when the followers of Jesus were forming into cells of believers. The book of Acts tells us their life was filled with signs and wonders, that all who believed were together and had all things in common, they broke bread together and ate with glad and generous hearts, they praised God and had the goodwill of all the people. (Acts 2:43-47, summarized) These were the glory days, an idyllic commune of spiritually minded people who lived close to God and close to one another. They were a field of wheat sowed by Christ, nourished by the Spirit, growing toward God. And then they saw that among them, there were some who were less than generous, who took more than their share, who outwardly played the part but on the inside were far from pure. What should the church do when there was corruption in its midst?

The answer, given by this parable, is to let God be the judge in the end. Leave the sorting to God. How often have we been disappointed to discover that the church is filled with hypocrites, that it's no better than any other group of people, that the veneer of "holiness" is a thin disguise laid over people who are selfish, greedy, and sometimes downright nasty. How do you want us to pull the weeds, God, so we can be the pure and righteous exemplar of the kingdom of heaven on earth? How often has that been asked?

The parable Jesus tells advises caution, patience, even grace towards the weedy ones. Wait.

For the church is a mixed field, too. It's a hospital for the sick, a place where broken people come together to share their brokenness, a gathering of the faithful and those seeking faith.

The church is a microcosm of the world, called out to be a community of saints, the bearer of grace and forgiveness, a bulwark of righteousness against evil. The world, with all its beauty and fallenness, its wonder and its evil, its glory and its horrors, is a mixed field too. What are we to do about the presence of wickedness in the world? Can we trust that the world is moving towards its redemption, its reconciliation to the God who made it? The weeds grow among the wheat in the world, in the church, and in our very souls.

And yet, Jesus says, this is a story about the kingdom of heaven. A story about how God is at work in the world. A story about the ultimate triumph of goodness and grace, truth and justice, mercy and peace and love. "The kingdom of heaven may be compared to someone who sowed good seed in a field." (Mt 13:24) The kingdom has been planted, the kingdom is growing, the kingdom is good, and the kingdom is here, among us, in us, with us. This is a story to show us that God's will is being done even in a world invaded by evil, even in a church penetrated by wrong, even in a soul infected with sin. The wheat still grows. In the end, the weeds will be judged by the One trustworthy enough to purge away

injustice, wrongheartedness, cruelty, sin. Evil will be judged; evildoers will be transformed. In the presence of God, we will confront the ultimate truth of God, and be made whole by the grace of God. For, this parable tells us, God's judgment and mercy await us all.

My friends, my fellow weeds, my fellow wheat sheaves, Jesus gives us a story to motivate and orient our way in the world. When we see a world of wrong, we are not called to cynicism, to assume a bad ending, to be prematurely disappointed in the future. For the wheat has also been planted in the world, the kingdom of heaven is growing despite the threat of weeds. When wheat is growing amidst the weeds, there is reason for hope. And where there is hope, there is motivation to action, to nourish justice and goodness, life and love. These are the intentions of God's will, on earth as it is in heaven.

In the same way, when we recognize the errors of Christ's instrument, the church, we are not to abandon ship nor excuse its wrongs. The church is reformed and always reforming, by the guidance and grace of God, to become a field ripe with love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, generosity, gentleness, faithfulness, and self-control. When we experience an abundance of such surprising gifts, it is a sign that the kingdom of heaven is already present, in our midst, for Christ is with us. The seeds of heaven are sown in this imperfect community, a sacred space for peacemakers and justice seekers to grow.

And at last, the mixed field that is our souls has hope for its future. God is not finished with any of us yet. There is still time to grow toward the purpose God has given us, deepening our relationships, fulfilling our particular callings, using our gifts for the expansion of God's reign. For, as writer John Mogabgab said, "the kingdom of God is not a shining mirage in the desert of human distress, teasing us onward with its beauty yet remaining forever beyond our reach." (*Weavings*, Jan./Feb, 1995, p. 2) No, it is planted within us. The kingdom of heaven, Jesus said, is like someone who sowed seed in his field. We are God's field, which one day God will harvest in righteousness.

So it is enough to be growing to be like Jesus. It is enough to be part of the growing reign of God by being part of Christ's community. It is enough to stand for righteousness in the world, by affirming the seeds of heaven planted in it. It is enough to hear the heavenly truth present in earthly situations, and trust.

For the wheat will outlive the weeds.

