

*“Wheat AND Weeds?”*  
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*[Jesus] put before them another parable: "The kingdom of heaven may be compared to someone who sowed good seed in his field; but while everybody was asleep, an enemy came and sowed weeds among the wheat, and then went away. So when the plants came up and bore grain, then the weeds appeared as well. And the slaves 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?' He answered, 'An enemy has done this.' The slaves said to him, 'Then do you want us to go and gather them?' But he replied, 'No; for in gathering the weeds you would uproot the wheat along with them. 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.'"*

*Then he left the crowds and went into the house. And his disciples approached him, saying, "Explain to us the parable of the weeds of the field." He answered, "The one who sows the good seed is the Son of Man; the field is the world, and the good seed are the children of the kingdom; the weeds are the children of the evil one, and the enemy who sowed them is the devil; the harvest is the end of the age, and the reapers are angels. Just as the weeds are collected and burned up with fire, so will it be at the end of the age. The Son of Man will send his angels, and they will collect out of his kingdom all causes of sin and all evildoers, and they will throw them into the furnace of fire, where there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth. Then the righteous will shine like the sun in the kingdom of their God. Let anyone with ears listen!"*

Here we are again with another parable about planting and seeds and wheat. Last week, the focus of Jesus' parable was on the quality of the soil. It gave me a chance to share about some epic gardening failures and to invite us all to consider the soil quality of our own spirits. This week, the focus isn't on the soil, it's on the seed—wheat and weeds. While the farmer waited until harvest to separate the wheat from the weeds, it only postponed the inevitable—the weeds were gathered into bundles and burned.

Jesus then told his disciples that all causes of sin and evildoers will be cast into the furnace of fire, where there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth. It's a terrifying image—one that haunted my childhood, as I doubted my own righteousness and that of my friends, and one that haunts my present reality because this doesn't sound like *my* Jesus. This morning, I'd love to tell a couple of self-deprecating gardening stories and send you on your way with something to think about. But, when the choice is the barn or the burn pile, the Kingdom of God or the furnace of fire, the stakes seem too high for that.

Let's start with what this parable meant to Jesus—what the Jesus of Matthew's gospel told his own disciples that the parable was about. First and foremost, this parable is about the Kingdom of Heaven. As I shared last week, the Kingdom of God or the realm of heaven wasn't just one among a number of favorite talking points for Jesus. It was his singular message. His preaching proclaimed it, his teaching explained it, and his healings and miracles illustrated it. For Jesus, this realm wasn't a place we go after we die, it was his dream of life on earth, here and now.

With that information as his foundation, Jesus told the disciples that he is represented in the parable by the farmer—the sower of good seed. The good seeds are the children of the kingdom. The bad seeds are the children of the enemy—the evil one. The harvest represents the end of the age. And the reapers represent angels. Jesus told them that he “will send his angels, and they will collect out of his kingdom all causes of sin and all evildoers, and they will throw them into the furnace of fire, where there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth. Then the righteous will shine

like the sun in the kingdom of their God.” This explanation gives us a glimpse into what this parable meant to Jesus.

So, what should it mean to us? A lot of preachers, like the ones I grew up listening to, will tell you that the world around us is a field full of wheat and weeds, the righteous and the damned, those who are children of Jesus and those who are children of Satan. Furthermore, they will tell you that the church is full of wheat and weeds. And some will suggest that it’s your job, our job, to rid the field of weeds. That kind of thinking has justified historical atrocities like the Crusades, the Spanish Inquisition, the Salem Witch Trials, and the Holocaust. It’s dangerous and, quite frankly, unchristian. It’s impossible for me to believe that the Jesus of the New Testament or the historical Jesus of 1<sup>st</sup> century Palestine could’ve imagined that his words could be twisted to such nefarious ends.

Remember, his dream of the Kingdom of God, the Realm of Heaven, was foundational for all that Jesus said and did. It was a dream of life on earth, here and now. It was a dream of redemption and wholeness. It was a dream of the end of suffering and the beginning of eternal peace. It was a dream for all people in all places at all times. Any interpretation of this parable that justifies human attempts to separate the so-called wheat from the weeds, completely ignores the context and content of Jesus’ preaching: the Kingdom of God, the Realm of Heaven. If this parable is even about human wheat and human weeds, it is a cautionary tale and we would do well to follow the farmer’s lead and never try to separate the wheat from the weeds. That’s a job for someone else—God, I think.

Even so, how often do we find ourselves playing God’s part? Judging between the wheat and the weeds? If I’m honest with you, I’ve noticed myself doing it quite a bit lately as economic uncertainty, hot and unpredictable weather, international tensions, and issue-based politics seem to continue bringing out the very worst in so many of us. It feels so good knowing that we are wheat, doesn’t it? That we are righteous, while so many others are weeds destined for the burn pile. It feels good to label others as weeds, so long as we’re wheat. It feels good playing God—

judging between the two. It feels good because when we're the judge, we will always be the wheat. But it's not that simple, is it?

The beauty of Jesus' parables is both their profound simplicity and their unfathomable depth. Perhaps, on the surface, we assume we are either wheat or weed, but when we cast ourselves as the field, the soil, as Jesus did in our text last week, rather than the seed, we see that both wheat and weeds are present in us. Human beings are a frustrating mash-up of both and our spirits are fertile ground for all kinds of seeds.

The life of faith is that of a constant gardener, weeding out the seeds of our own greed, lust, hatred, indifference, and fault-finding. The life of faith is that of a constant gardener, nurturing the seeds of generosity, good will, love, empathy, and forgiveness. In Jesus' parable, we are both wheat *and* weed. Jesus' dream of the realm of heaven can only be realized when we nurture the seeds of life in ourselves, in others, and in our world. Let's leave the judgement to God and work together to realize Jesus' dream of heaven's realm for all people in all places at all times. Friends, we've got a lot of work to do. Amen.