

Confessions of a Weed Killer

Matthew 13: 24-30

I have always been an enthusiastic gardener. When we sold our home in Raleigh and moved to Charlestown, our close friends and all of our neighbors on Springdale Drive, said, “I know how much you’re going to miss your garden.” They were right. I knew I would miss the annual appearance of the perennials that pop up after the cold and dead of winter as if to say, “I’m back! Did you miss me?” But while I’ve always thrilled over the flourishing and proliferating of the flowering plants, what I’ve missed most about gardening is pulling up weeds. Truth be told, there are few things I find more therapeutic than grabbing each intruder by the hips and pulling ever so patiently until the roots lose their grip on the soil. And now, despite the fact that we’ve moved to an apartment, the war on weeds continues as I conduct regular reconnaissance to vanquish anything that tries to grow through the cracks in the sidewalk.

I’m sure that somehow my zeal for ridding the world of weeds betrays a false sense of being in control, of being able to eradicate anything that threatens to get in the way of the good life I’ve worked so hard to cultivate. On the one hand, I would love to spend more time enjoying the natural world and less time surveilling it. On the other hand, if I went AWOL and didn’t report for duty with my cobra head and scuffle hoe at the ready, I would not be able to sleep at night, thinking about the weeds out there spreading their roots and tendrils, competing for real estate and nourishment – as if they had every right to thrive.

All of which causes me to approach Jesus’ parable about the wheat and the weeds with caution.

As uncomfortable as this parable makes me, I have to say that of all the stories Jesus told, this one has probably had the greatest impact on me. Not only is it intriguing, it’s also one of Jesus’ most profound object lessons in the way it tells the truth about God, the truth about the human situation, and the truth about the church.

But before we go digging for those insights, I just want to highlight the fact that Jesus was a Master Storyteller. And every story he told was tailored to fit a particular audience. So the crowd that gathered around Jesus when he first told this parable knew exactly which tares he was referring to. These were not your generic garden-variety weeds. They were a poisonous weed called the **bearded darnel**. In the early stages of growth the darnel so closely resembled wheat that it was impossible to tell them apart. By the time the two were distinguishable, the roots were so entangled that you couldn’t weed out the tares without uprooting the wheat. If you’ve ever tried to grow peas and had to contend with pigweed, maybe you can appreciate the choice this farmer faced.

Another striking thing is that Jesus seems to be relying on a pretty unlikely set of circumstances to spin his story - after all, who would come during the night and sow tares in your wheat field? Well, as it turns out, this sort of mischief happened all the time in first century Palestine. We know this because both the crime and its penalty come up repeatedly in Roman law. For the life of me, I can't fathom why anyone would go to the trouble to do something so senseless and destructive, but then I can't understand why people plant computer viruses either.

Finally, I'm really curious to know what was going on in Matthew's church that prompted him to give this parable such a prominent place in his gospel? Using an old Methodist term to frame the problem, Matthew's concern was what to do about *Backsliders*. You've probably heard the word - it refers to people who were baptized and then slid backward into a lapsed lifestyle that the more "high-minded" members considered reprehensible. Interestingly, a similar conversation has been going on in the Presbyterian Church ever since our "new" form of government took away the category called *inactive members*. Consequently, you're either a "member in good standing" (having met whatever benchmarks are laid down for that) or you're removed from the roll. The only reason I mention this is because it brings to light the fact that most of the issues we're dealing with today have been around in some form or other since the very beginning of the church's existence. That honeymoon period we imagine in the early church is exactly that: *imaginary*.

So these were some of the things that were intended to strike a chord with the original listeners. Now we can ask: **How does this parable speak to us today?** As I wrestle with this story, it helps me think about the way I tend to look at several important things.

The first one being *the way I look at God's role in history*. Have you ever felt frustrated over the stubborn persistence of evil in the world or become impatient with God for taking so long to show up and turn things around? Have you ever cried out: "How long, O Lord? How long will it take to see some sign that you're in the driver's seat?" If you have, then this parable speaks to you, because it asks us to look at things from the perspective of a God whose love for goodness outruns his hatred of evil. In the Greek tragedy that bears her name, Medea kills both of her sons in an act of revenge against her unfaithful husband. When he asks how she could have done such a thing, Medea replies, "Because I hated you more than I loved them."

For God, the realization of human fruitfulness is always more important than the eradication of human faults. And where God is concerned, hatred can never become stronger than love. What's more, in God's very strange-to-us economy, nothing good is ever expendable. Lenin once said it is better to execute a hundred innocent persons than to have one guilty person go free. God is a different kind of

farmer. God is like the shepherd who leaves the flock to go in search of one lost sheep. God is like the woman who turns the whole house upside down to search for a single lost coin. God is like this landowner who values the wheat so much that he refuses to risk losing any of it just to get rid of the weeds. God is like my 10th grade English teacher, Mrs. Bradley, who patiently put up with a roomful of heedless rowdies so a handful of budding Anglophiles could fall in love with Shakespeare and T.S. Eliot.

Another adjustment has to do with *the way I look at life in this world*. One of the last things Jesus told his disciples was “In this world you will always have trouble”. I’m guessing they didn’t want to hear that any more than we do. The parable of the weeds helps us see that no matter how hard we work or how good we try to be, things happen in our world and in our lives that are beyond our power to prevent or fix. Are you familiar with the **Ohio Two-Car Collision Theory**? According to this theory, even if the odds against something going wrong in a particular situation are a trillion to one, the chances are pretty good that something will go wrong. This theory is based on the fact that in 1903, there were only two cars in the entire state of Ohio, and one day they collided. That’s right, they ran right into each other. What are the odds of that happening?

We tend to be a generation that believes we have the power to prevent anything from going wrong. And if, God forbid, something does go wrong, we demand an immediate solution, a quick fix. And if problems arise that lie beyond our power to solve or fix, we turn to the professional fixers to the tune of billions of dollars each year. Jesus never promised that if we behaved well enough or believed the right things or achieved heroic things, no tares would grow in our wheat fields. No, he said very clearly that for all our know-how, all our technology, all our might, there are forces afoot in the world which we cannot root out.

Finally, this parable compels all of us to consider *the way we view our calling as servants of Christ*.

Suppose I were to give you a multiple choice quiz:

In this parable, who poses the greatest threat to the Farmer?

- A: Is it the one identified as “an enemy” in vs.28, the one who came and sowed weeds among the wheat while everyone was sleeping?
- B: Is it the weeds that are threatening to take over the wheat field and compromise the crop?
- C: Is the real threat the mean parents who make their children go out in the yard and pull weeds? I’m not being serious – just wanted to see if you were paying attention.
- D: Is the greatest threat the one posed by the servants who were so eager to go out and pull up all the weeds, because they assumed that’s what the householder

wanted?

If you picked D, you get an A. What Jesus was driving toward with this parable is the recognition that far too often the real threat isn't the weeds or even the one who sowed the weeds while everyone was asleep. It's the impatience of the servants and their assumption that the farmer wants them to do the weeding.

I don't think you need me to point out the fact that time and time again the body of Christ has been torn apart by well-meaning servants who are on a crusade to "purify" the church by weeding out some threat or contaminant. Such people have the best of intentions. They are serving God. They are going to help God eliminate the weeds that threaten to harm the church or the world. In Jesus' day the zealous weeders were the Pharisees. And throughout history we have seen what can happen when people take it upon themselves to decide who belongs in the field and who should be weeded out. Hitler felt he had the wisdom to discern who should be allowed to live in his perfect world. So do those responsible for most terrorist attacks. What do you make of the fact that Jesus didn't weed out Judas from the twelve, even though he knew about the betrayal before it occurred? The reality is that we are all out here growing together in the field, but it's a mixed field – and sometimes we can't remove the evil weeds without damaging the good wheat.

In fact, we can't even be sure that the weeds about us will remain weeds and that the wheat will remain wheat. Consider Moses – a murderer. And David – an adulterer. The apostle Paul – a religious vigilante. And the disciple Peter – a hypocrite and a coward. Who would think that God would work with them, would be present with them, would love them, would make them fruitful? The difficult truth this parable forces each of us to consider is that there will always be people in the world who choose to embrace evil, and at times **I am one of them**. But by weighing every choice I make against what I see, feel, and discern through my faith and my faith community, I always have the choice to let what is good grow in me or what is evil.

I'll wrap this up with a story. The first African American baseball player in the American League was a rookie named Larry Doby. It was 1947, and Doby was signed to play for Cleveland. He was an excellent hitter, but when he came to the plate for the first time he swung at three pitches in a row and missed them by a foot. The fans booed him off the field. He stared at the ground as he walked back to the dugout. Then he went to the end of the bench, sat down, and put his head in his hands. The next batter up was Joe Gordon, an all-star player. Everyone knew he could not only hit off this pitcher, he could put it out of the park. He stepped up to the plate, swung at the first three pitches, and missed them by a foot. A hush fell over the crowd. The fans couldn't believe it. Joe Gordon stared at the ground as he walked back to the dugout, went to the end of the bench, sat down by Larry Doby, and put his head in his hands. Did he strike out on purpose? No one knows for sure,

except Joe Gordon. But from that day on, Larry Doby never went on the field that he didn't pick up Joe Gordon's glove and hand it to him.

Did Joe Gordon cure the problem of racism in sports? Did he launch an attack on the people who snubbed his teammate or come up with a plan to keep racists out of the ballpark? No. He simply lived the same love we see in Jesus – no explanation needed – and left it to God to finish the job at harvest time.

I suspect I'll still be a ruthless weed-puller until the day I die. But when it comes to God's garden, I've taken this parable to heart. God has not asked me to get the weeds under control. Does that mean I'll merely sit on the sidelines instead of standing on the side of the vulnerable? Does it mean I'll muzzle my mouth instead of sounding out like a trumpet for the sake of justice and change? It certainly does not. But because I am confident that one day every challenge to God's will and every resistance to God's reign will be overthrown, I can put down my weapons and call off my witch hunts and concentrate instead on cultivating goodness and wholeness in the world and in the church, and most importantly, in the soil of my own heart.

In the name of the Father and of the Son, in the power of the Spirit of love, let it be so.

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