



“Growing Together”
Scripture – Matthew 13:24-30, 36-43
Sermon preached by Sudie Niesen Thompson
Sunday, July 23, 2017

I’ve spent the past couple weeks staring out the window at my overgrown vegetable garden. There are the tomato plants (which are positively bursting from their cages) and the Resurrection Cucumbers (which – I swear – were dead a month ago, but have now come back with a vengeance). The veggies are going gangbusters, and we are enjoying the harvest.

But in between the vegetables, which we’ve purchased and planted and watered and watched, are those pesky interlopers. Those verdant opportunists. You know what I’m talking about: The weeds. Until yesterday there was a bright green carpet of them, covering every last inch of fertile soil. Oh, how they taunted me! I finally went out in the 90 degree heat, to reclaim my garden from the weeds.

Now, I’m no green thumb. But I do know this: a gardener must spend plenty of time plucking up that which was not planted. If not, the weeds will choke out the desired plants. This is conventional wisdom: For a garden to flourish, the weeds must go.

But, conventional wisdom does not govern this parable. In fact, the Master in the Parable of the Weeds makes a decision that sounds rather foolish to our ears: “Let both [the weeds and the wheat] grow together until the harvest.” Wait until then, he tells his workers. At that time I will have the reapers gather the wheat into the barn, and set apart the weeds to be burned.

It seems like risky business, letting the wheat and the weeds grow together. Won’t the weeds compete with that precious crop? Won’t they choke out the stalks bearing good fruit and threaten the harvest? Really, how hard would it be to go out and gather the weeds right then and there?

As it turns out, ridding this field of weeds is not as simple as plucking the wild strawberry from the garden bed. For the seed the enemy has sown under the cover of darkness wears better camouflage than your garden variety Crabgrass or Clover. The weed Jesus references in this parable is the pervasive and poisonous Dandelion, which closely resembles wheat. It is the chameleon of the botanical world — masquerading as wheat until the day the plants mature and the ears appear. Only then — only when the plants have borne fruit — can the workers distinguish the weeds from the wheat.¹

¹ See: Warren Carter and Elizabeth Johnson’s commentaries on Matthew 13:24-30, 36-43, www.workingpreacher.org

Here's the problem: By this point in the season, these plants have grown together for months, and their roots are entangled within the soil. To destroy one would be to destroy the other. The Master has no choice. He must let the weeds and wheat grow side by side until the harvest, then leave it to the reapers to separate the noxious plants from the grain that feeds the world.

So, you see, there is some logic to the story. Given this information, we can make sense of the Master's decision to let the weeds and wheat grow together until the harvest.

But the interpretation Jesus gives is a bit harder for us to wrap our minds around ...

"The good seed are the children of the kingdom," he says. "The weeds are the children of the evil one." And — just like the weeds — "all causes of sin and all evildoers" will be plucked from the kingdom and thrown into the fire. In other words, it seems the Lord will allow the forces of evil to flourish among us until the end of time, when all that is wicked will be condemned to destruction and all that is good will be gathered to God.

I admit, I struggle with this parable. I imagine many of you do as well. It's one of those tricky texts that leaves us feeling perplexed and conflicted.

On the one hand: Many of us wish the Son of Man would be more proactive. Given the persistence of evil in this world, we long for God to root out the bad seed, to purge the field of hatred and violence and injustice, and the evil that sows them. Why let the weeds grow among us, when the Lord of the Harvest could toss them into the fire today?

And, yet, the image of the final reaping seems inconsistent with the God we know in Christ — the one who will leave the ninety-nine to chase after a single sheep who has gone astray; the one who forgoes the tables of the rich to dine with tax collectors and sinners; the one who sits at table with friends who will betray and deny him, only to offer them the cup of forgiveness. How could this God separate the field of the world so neatly into weeds and wheat, evil and good, those to be condemned and those to be saved?

Yes, this parable leaves us feeling perplexed and conflicted. How are we supposed to feel about those noxious weeds?

And therein lies the problem with our reading of this text: That we so quickly imagine ourselves to be the wheat, and others — the weeds. We fall into the trap of thinking that we can divide the world into children of the kingdom and children of the evil one. And, in doing so, we overlook the primary lesson of this parable: That we are all bound up together — a mixed up crop of good and bad seed, left to grow as one until the harvest. Our roots are hopelessly entangled, and will be until the end of time, when God — and God alone — will divide the weeds from the wheat.

It's not a fact that we like to dwell upon, that our lives are a tangled mess of weeds and wheat. For we are people who strive to be good seed. That's why we're here today! We are seeking a community that will nurture us in faith, hope, and love, so that we might grow as disciples of Jesus Christ. Many of us give generously of time, talent, and treasure — both here at Westminster and throughout our communities — so that God's field of this world might flourish. We endeavor to live faithful lives — in our homes, our schools, our workplaces — so that we can bear fruit for the Kingdom.

And yet, we know that we also have the capacity to bear noxious fruit, just like the Darnel that runs rampant in the Parable. For, as long as we are growing in the field of this world, good seed will be tangled up with bad, and the causes of sin will continue to flourish. This is the reason we confess our sin when we gather for worship; we

recognize that — without the Spirit’s help — we cannot root out the seeds of indifference, of anger, of injustice, of fear. Like the wheat, we are bound up in systems that choke out life, and prevent others from flourishing.

Though it doesn’t quite fit the logic of the parable (or, for that matter, the laws of nature), it seems none of us are purely weeds, or purely wheat. We are some mixture of both — good and bad seed growing together under the watchful eye of the Lord of the Harvest. Ever patient, our Master gives us the grace to grow, waiting to see what fruit we will bear.

In the end, it is the grain we bear that will set us apart as weeds or wheat. So, as we grow together in the field of this world, this becomes our charge: to nurture good seed within and among us, so that the whole field might flourish and bear fruit for the kingdom of God.

Prior to coming to Westminster, I served a church in one of Philadelphia’s most desperate neighborhoods. This was a corner of the field that was overgrown with weeds ... Not because the people of this community were “bad seeds” (we’ve already established that it is never that simple). But, the seeds the enemy had sown had developed strong, winding roots, which choked out the good seed and threatened the harvest. In this neighborhood, the weeds had names like: poverty, drug abuse, hunger, crime, underfunded schools, lack of opportunity. The list goes on.

Early in my ministry there, I met Billy — a boy whose life was utterly entangled with these weeds. The first time I laid eyes on Billy was during a day of service at the church. He flew through the open doors of the sanctuary, grabbed a paint roller from the tray, and began flinging paint on the walls before any of the adults could contain his reckless enthusiasm. Billy was on his own that day, like he was most of the time. It was an all-too-common scene in a neighborhood with many single-parent families that struggled to make ends meet.

As we got to know Billy, we learned just how persistent the weeds pervading his life were. There was rarely enough food at Billy’s house, so — most days — he and his little brother would rush to the kitchen to see which snacks were up-for-grabs. He was grade levels behind in reading, and — at 10-years-old — still had trouble making out simple signs posted on the door. Some days, Billy would talk about the gun shots he heard at night, and how afraid he was to walk down the street.

But, at church, Billy found a space that was welcoming and safe, and that allowed him the grace to grow. At the after school program, mentors nurtured within Billy a love of learning and helped him grow in confidence. At worship, members shepherded Billy, teaching him how to hold the bread during communion, and to enact the stories of Scripture. Through their guidance, Billy found he had gifts to give, and he delighted in the opportunity to offer them freely.

Bit by bit, this community helped untangle Billy from the weeds that threatened to choke out life, and nurtured seeds of hope and joy within him. And, through their care, the field flourished a little bit more, as good fruit appeared in unexpected places.

Day by day, we grow in God’s field, striving always to nurture good seed within and among us through our work and witness. And, by God’s grace, the field does flourish and bear fruit, despite the weeds. One day (so the parable says) the God of infinite patience and grace will free us from the weeds that choke out life. Until then, we will grow together — a mixture of good seed and bad, of wheat and weeds. But together we strive to bear grain that feeds the world — a harvest that gives glory to the God of abundant grace.

Prayers of the People ~ Greg Jones

Eternal God, we live in polarizing times and on most days it is not difficult to divide the world between the wheat and the weeds, the righteous ones and the sinners, those destined for your heavenly light and those condemned to the outer darkness. Surely it is obvious that those who think as I do are wheat and those who disagree are weeds!

Gracious God, at this moment in the life of our nation, when there are seemingly intractable divisions on nearly every issue, it is natural to place ourselves in the category of the blessed and to condemn others as cursed. Remind us of the danger of arrogant certainty. Overconfidence and an unwillingness to even attempt to see things through the eyes of others escalates suspicion and scuttles the possibility of striving together for the common good.

God of mercy, we pray for the determination to become as wheat-like as possible, while possessing the humility to recognize that not one of us is entirely weed-free. Remind us of your ways, especially the challenging teachings of Jesus and the prophets that continue to be a struggle for us.

Revenge comes much more naturally than forgiveness. When we have been hurt, it seems instinctive to retaliate. Yet, you expect us to forgive others as charitably as you continually forgive us.

Self-indulgence comes more naturally than generosity. We often fear that we will not have enough for ourselves, or we envy the abundance of others. It can be a struggle to cultivate a truly generous spirit.

Indifference toward strangers is easier and safer than extending hospitality. We are not cold-hearted, but we find it more comfortable to divert our eyes from those we do not know. God, we need you to push us, so that we draw outsiders into our circle of kindness.

Giving up on someone who continuously makes bad decisions is tempting. Help us tame our frustration and grant us the patience to not abandon one who needs our help.

God of wisdom and truth, it is easy to presume our personal angelic qualities and to suspect that others are agents of evil. Grant us the resolve to create a society that is fair and free, compassionate and safe, and brimming with equal opportunities for all. May our thoughts reverberate with respect and reverence, and let us hand over to you the business of separating the weeds from the wheat, knowing that in the end, nothing can separate us from your love.

Now, as one church family striving to be the finest wheat – while cognizant of weed-like lapses – we pray the prayer Jesus taught us to pray together, saying, **“Our Father...**