

Sermon – Matthew 13:24-30, 36-43  
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“In the Weeds”

Sisters and brothers, friends in Christ, grace be unto you and peace this day, in the name of God the Father and our Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ. Amen.

1. I'm not sure why, but people often seem surprised to learn that I'm not a golfer. Perhaps it's because I'm a pastor, and lots of pastors like to do “ministry” on the golf course. Perhaps it's because I've lived in both St. Andrews, Scotland, the birthplace of the game, and near Myrtle Beach, SC, a modern-day golfer's paradise. But such proximity never induced me to play. Sometimes I hide my reasoning behind what Mark Twain *didn't* say: “Golf is a good walk spoiled.” The quote's origin is a bit hard to track down, but my favorite early version is from the novelist Harry Leon Wilson, who in 1904 said, “Golf has too much walking to be a good game, and just enough game to spoil a good walk.” The truth of the matter is that I don't play golf because I don't like it, and I don't like it because I'm not good at it. I've played a dozen times, each round worse than the one before. Whatever my quitting attitude may say about my character, something else is true, too: My golf game was unenjoyable because it was such a good metaphor for the condition of sinful humanity: I always ended up in the weeds and could never figure out how to extricate myself.
2. Jesus' parabolic teaching once again takes on an agricultural tone. As there was last week, there is a sower, and again the seed is good. This sower, it seems, does not need to put up with bad soil, sandy or rocky or what have you. The whole field is in good shape, and the wheat takes root eagerly and easily. No, this sower has a different problem: His neighbor is a jerk. While

the sower sleeps, the enemy comes and plants weeds among the wheat. The weed is likely darnel, which bears an uncanny resemblance to wheat until the ear appears (or so I'm told). The servants are naturally worried about this turn of events. Won't the weeds take up precious resources? Choke out the wheat? Foul up the harvest? Perhaps, but these possible outcomes don't worry the sower, whose main concern is that the wheat continues to grow. Sure, the servants could pull up the weeds, but they will likely uproot the wheat, too. Better to leave it all until the harvest and sort it out then. Life in the weeds is better than no life at all.

3. At one level, the parable serves to simply explain reality. How hasn't asked some version of this question: If God spoke a good Word and created a good world, why is there so much evil? Why is there hunger and homelessness, racism and classism, sin and suffering? Well, because the enemy came and sowed bad seed among the good. If you need a different theodicy than this, a more satisfying explanation for evil in spite of God's goodness, you're going to have to look somewhere else. Why is there evil? Because there is. The enemy brings it. We bring it. Why? Because. The parable names the truth that there is evil in God's good creation, and that it's often hard to tell the bad from the good.
  
4. More interesting than where evil comes from is what to do about it, and this is where the parable truly surprises: *Let both of them, good and evil, grow together. We'll figure it out at the harvest.* Really? So, Jesus, your response to the evil in the world is to just let it be? Well, no and yes. Hey, if Jesus wanted to be straightforward and easy to understand, he wouldn't have taught in parables. No, Jesus does not want us to let evil be. He is not forgetting or overturning the long tradition of God's law, or saying that we should let widows, orphans, and aliens suffer because God will get around to fixing it later. God wants justice now. As a young John Lewis said at the March on Washington in 1963, "We do not want our freedom gradually, but we want to

be free now!" May the memory of Mr. Lewis continue to be a blessing. Our continued work to overcome injustice and oppression must continue. It is hard but holy work.

5. But as we do this work, Jesus wants us to remember a few things. First, we dare not be overzealous as the servants in the parable were inclined to be. We cannot just go around willy-nilly, uprooting everything that might be evil in pursuit of a perfect present. The problem with uprooting evil is that you tend to get rid of much that is good, too. History tells us that attempts to create a perfect world tend to end in tyranny. Second, and more to the point, such attempts are always organized around the idea that I, and those like me, are the wheat while others are the evil weeds. Hmm. If we say we have no sin, we deceive ourselves and the truth is not in us. Robert Farrar Capon writes, "since good and evil in this world commonly inhabit not only the same field but even the same individual human beings – since, that is, there are no unqualified good guys any more than there are any unqualified bad guys – the only result of a truly dedicated campaign to get rid of evil will be the abolition of literally everybody." There would be nothing left growing in the field.
6. The weeds aren't just out there. The weeds grow within us, inside our own divided hearts. But let anyone with ears listen! The weeds don't stop the wheat from growing, and the evil in the world will not stop the good from flourishing. And no, this won't last forever. The parable has an eschatological payoff. Those weeds will get good and burned, don't you worry. And this, too, is good news, for you cannot truly embody the *imago dei* until God purges and cleanses you, forgives you of your sin. This, finally, is not the result of any program on our part. It is the graceful work of the Sower, who incarnates himself as wheat planted amongst this world's weeds. Wheat who was born to die, as Jesus says in John's Gospel: "Unless a grain of wheat falls into the earth and dies, it remains just a single grain; but if it dies, it bears much fruit."

You, friends, are the fruit of the Kingdom, born out of the death of Jesus, and one day you shall shine with the brightness of the children of God. For now, it is enough to live among the weeds, bearing witness to good in the face of evil, trusting that God will one day sort it all out.

7. So what? Is there nothing to be done today? Of course there is! Paul proclaims that we did not receive a spirit of slavery to fall back into fear; you have been adopted as children of God, and that's what you are. Children of God who show forth God's glory by suffering in solidarity with those who suffer, and by proclaiming that the end of the world's weediness comes through the lifting up of the Son of Man on the cross of Calvary. Interestingly (at least to me), when the sower in today's parable says, "Let both of them grow together," that "let" is usually translated in the New Testament as "forgive." What did Jesus say when the weeds of imperial power and religious self-righteousness were choking out his life? "Father, let them be. Forgive them; for they do not know what they are doing." God deals with evil finally not by eradicating it, but by forgiving and remaking it for God's good purposes.
8. You, children of God, have been forgiven. You don't need to save the world; that's already been done. The work before you and me today is not to run around pointing out and pulling up everyone else's sinful weeds. It is, rather, the same work set before the church by Martin Luther in 1517: "When our Lord and Master Jesus Christ said "Repent," he intended that the entire life of believers should be repentance." You've got weeds enough in your own garden for today, and so do I. Perhaps if we each tend – faithfully, honestly, and with humility – to our own little patch of soil, the work we do together will add up to something. It will be a sign of the world that will come in God's good time, when the great harvest will happen and we, by the grace of God alone, will discover that we are wheat, growing strong to the glory of God, the eternal fruit of the single seed thrown into the earth to die. God's promises

and purposes will not be thwarted. Until then, it is enough to tend our soil, repent of our sins, keep faith in the Sower and his forgiveness, and give thanks that in the midst of this world's weeds and in the face of this world's evil, the Son of God has put down his roots with us. Amen.

And now may the peace that passes all human understanding keep your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus, this day and forever. Amen.