

The Weeds and the Wheat
The Rev. Amy Spagna
July 23, 2023 – Pentecost 8A
Matthew 13:24-30, 36-43

It's late July, and that means a few things: one, we've pulled off the Fair successfully; two, many of us are planning for one last summer trip; and three, the lectionary has (once again!) served up lots of parables for us to hear and chew on. They're familiar to us by their metaphor-laden titles: the Sower. The Mustard Seed. The Pearl of Great Price. The Weeds and the Wheat. But what are they, other than pithy, multi-layered stories that Jesus likes to tell, and why does he use them as teaching tools so often?

The word "parable" comes from a Greek verb that means "to throw alongside." If you want a scholarly definition, it's along the lines of a comparison, often drawn from nature, which is intended to get the hearer's attention and force them to think a little. If you want a definition that's a bit more specific, it depends a lot on who you talk to and what day of the week it is. There are many linear feet of library shelf space devoted to the topic – and, as you can imagine, not all of those books agree on exactly what a parable IS, much less how to interpret one.

As a literary form, they're all over Mark, Matthew, and Luke, with significant overlap and repetition of some of these stories. The reason for that is, they all drew from the same source material, and each put their own unique editorial spin on things. In Matthew, and to some extent Mark as well, understanding Jesus' parables is a unique form of insider information. As Jesus tells the disciples in Matthew, he uses them because the average Joe will not understand exactly what he means. by the same turn, the disciples do get that information exclusively, as we saw last week with his

explanation of the Parable of the Sower, and again today with his explanation of the Parable of the Weeds and the Wheat. And yet, even with the explanations Jesus himself offers, and centuries of interpretation by scholars, theologians, and preachers alike, the meanings still remain elusive. It's doubly the case for us, because we don't live in the same context as the one where those stories were originally told. Their metaphors often don't work well for us at all, if for no other reason than that what we know about the world around us has changed a lot, even if human nature hasn't.

Context is everything where understanding parables is concerned – as are the ears and brains of the interpreters. So what you think "the kingdom of heaven may be compared to someone who sowed good seed in his field..." means may not be what the person next to you thinks it means. It might not even jibe with the somewhat gloomy explanation that Jesus himself offers for this particular tale about weeds growing in a wheat field, especially not if "judgment" isn't your cup of tea, or you're looking for something a bit more positive as a takeaway.

The expert gardeners among us know all too well how easy it is for weeds to invade and choke off the "good" plants, and how hard it can be to get rid of them altogether. Just thinking about my own backyard, no matter how many I pull up, especially the kind that like to work their way up between the bricks on the patio, there are always more to take their place. And, I'm not always sure what I'm yanking out, how it'll affect what's around it, or even what manner of ants and earthworms I might disturb in the process. Spraying chemicals isn't an option, because that would kill everything, as well as discourage the birds, squirrels, and chipmunks from visiting. More often than not, I just leave things be till the frost kills them in the fall – either that, or the parish

cleanup crew comes through with their scythes and weed whackers and takes care of all of it.

Getting rid of the weeds, without damaging the wheat in the process, is the challenge for the servants/slaves in the parable. They don't know how the weeds got there in the first place, nor can they just pull them out, as the householder says: "No, for in gathering the weeds, you would uproot the wheat along with them. Let both of them grow together until the harvest" (Mt 13:29-30, NRSV). Only then can they be separated without damaging both... and both made use of, for food and for fuel. There is no sense in worrying about it until then – and, it's not your job, but that of the reapers.

Contained in the "it's not your job" speech the householder gives to his field hands is a warning that we don't necessarily have things figured out, even if we think we do. For starters, what looks like a weed to one person, doesn't to another, necessarily. Or the two plants might be so closely intertwined with one another that it's hard to know which is which without pulling both of them out, or getting other kinds of help to deal with them. The same goes for humans passing judgment and condemning one another: "Such is our human inclination, is it not? Our penchant for judgment and condemnation. For declaring the future of those we deem somehow inadequate in faith and Christian life. For assuming maleficence in another as if our own actions are above reproach. This parable is one that should stop us up short. Really? Who do you think you are? God? Yet many do. We do. A lot."¹

¹ Karoline Lewis, "Wheat and Tares and Other Truths about the Kingdom of Heaven." <https://www.workingpreacher.org/dear-working-preacher/wheat-and-ares-and-other-truths-about-the-kingdom-of-heaven> [accessed July 17, 2023].

In the end, this parable calls us to simply let things be what they will be, and trust that all manner of things shall be well. It asks us to at least think about putting aside our human tendency to want to feel like we're in control when we aren't. It's hard to embrace the kind of ambiguity contained in the field with weeds and wheat growing together in the everyday decisions we have to make about things like whether to get coffee from Maplefields or Cumbie's, what to wear, what medical treatments to choose for what ails us, or whether to just go along with colleagues or friends rather than sticking up for what we think is right.²

The risk of wanting the kind of certainty the householder's field hands do when they ask him about pulling out the weeds in the field is a big one. It closes us off to possibilities, including that God can and will show up in a given situation, and leaves us prone to underestimating both God and other people. It also shuts down our capacity to think and reason when things change in ways that make us feel uncomfortable. And sometimes it keeps us from recognizing that we really can't separate all the stuff out the way we want to organize and control it. "The thing is, you see, that we don't live in an ideal world and each week we're faced with a myriad of challenging decisions, some small and others large, to which there is no clear answer. Some decisions we'll get right, others wrong, and still others we won't know whether we were right or wrong for months or years to come. But we still need to make them. And then, each week, no matter how we fared, we can come back to church on Sunday morning to be reminded that God

² David Lose, "Pentecost 6A: On Weeds, Wheat, and Ambiguity." <https://www.davidlose.net/2014/07/pentecost-6-a-on-wheat-weeds-and-ambiguity/> [accessed July 17, 2023].

loves us anyway and promises that, in the end, God will hold all of our choices and all of our lives together in love."³

³ Ibid.