

WE WEEDY WHEATIES

Sermon, July 23, 2017

Texts: Genesis 28:10-22, Matthew 13:24-30, 36-43

"All the world is God's own field, fruit as praise to God we yield;
Wheat and tares together sown, are to joy or sorrow grown;
First the blade and then the ear, then the full corn shall appear;
Lord of harvest, grant that we wholesome grain and pure may be."

That's the second stanza of the hymn we just sang, a hymn normally reserved for the Thanksgiving holiday, which draws imagery from the Parable of the Weeds we read from Matthew's Gospel; or, as more precisely translated in the King James Version, the Parable of the Wheat and Tares (*tares are a very specific type of weed, I'll get to that later*). As alluded to in the Time with the Children,¹ where did those weeds in the wheat field come from? What are they doing there in God's own field? Why does God permit weeds in His field, anyway? It's a question the church has asked for two thousand years. Why are there some in the community of God's people who are so ... weedy? Why in ministries around the world and over the centuries have there been the Elmer Gantrys, philandering pastors, pedophile priests, elders involved in business scams, embezzling treasurers, and the many forms of hypocrisy found in the average congregation (*not here, of course, as we're above average ... not*)? We know there have been and are and will be many in the church's leadership and membership living lives that are a far cry from being "whole wheat." What are we to do about such people? Discipline them? Excommunicate them? Get them to transfer to the Methodist church in the next town? Or, are we to let them be, even though we know one bad apple has the potential to harm the entire barrel? Where does this "weedy" growth come from, anyway? Jesus' explanation is pretty straightforward: The Sower has sowed good seed, but an enemy ... and there IS an enemy ... has come in and sown weed seeds in the field as well.

The weed in today's parable was a certain type of weed called a tare, or darnel, a weed indigenous to the Mediterranean region. Tares look a lot like wheat, especially in the early stages. Tares/darnel grow like wheat. But in the end tares/darnel are poisonous to people and livestock, capable of causing blindness and even death if ingested. So it's important to weed out the DARN-el weed from the wheat, or to "TARE" out the darnel, before you eat it and it poisons you. However, in the early stages tares so closely resembled wheat stalks that it was impossible to tell them apart. As tares and wheat grew together, differences would start to emerge; however, by that time the roots of the tares and the roots of the wheat had become so intertwined that the tares could not be pulled up and weeded out without tearing some of the wheat right out with them. Even some of their stalks would be intertwined together above-ground. So, in the Palestinian fields of Jesus' time, wheat and tares would be left to grow together until the time of harvest. In the end, the separation would come. But prior to that time, in the various stages of the plant's growth, it was often hard, if not impossible, to distinguish between weeds and wheat. (*As an aside, you may know Murphy's Law of Gardening: When weeding, the best way to make sure you are removing a weed and not a valuable plant is to pull on it. If it comes out of the ground easily, it is a valuable plant.*)

Jesus intimates to His disciples that if we were to go on some sort of special weeding campaign to clean up God's "field," if we were to embark on a purge to rid churches of all those who did not measure up to "whole wheat" standards of conformity, creed and behavior, we might wind up uprooting a great deal of good wheat along with the weeds and just might do more harm than good. When we in the church get preoccupied with "weeding," we tend to damage young wheat in the church ... many good people can have their growing faith injured or undermined or

¹ In the *Time With the Children* I paraphrased a story from my July 14, 2012 sermon on this passage: "I had a summer job in the early 80s, just before my final semesters of seminary. I was hired by Don, a semi-retired landscaper and nursery owner, who had purchased a ten acre plot upon which he had built a family home and was now cultivating the land. My job description was basically to weed and mow where Don directed me to weed and mow. One powerful tool at my disposal was a huge Gravely mower, a self-propelled, thick-bladed, difficult-to-maneuver machine which had a slight resemblance to a monstrous mine sweeper. It would mow down and mulch anything and everything in its path: tall grass, thick weeds, small saplings ... and unfortunate small, slow-moving animals hidden in those weeds. I worked with another friend, George. I should mention Don and his wife Carol had three stunningly gorgeous daughters living at home at the time. George actually ended up marrying the oldest a few years later. The youngest was really too young at the time for our interests, still in her mid-teens. The middle daughter was in a somewhat rocky, up and down relationship with a boyfriend, so ever the optimist, I held out hope. Anyway, one particular day on the job I went above and beyond what was directed, perhaps in an effort to impress Don ... or Linda ... or both ... and I thoroughly cleared about a tenth of an acre of what I thought were long, leafy, tough and somewhat stringy weeds, a portion of the property beyond where Don had initially directed me. I meant well. I thought I was being helpful. Unfortunately, I was to discover later I had cleared a field of rhubarb planted by the previous owner, a field Don had hoped to preserve. I learned later good rhubarb production takes at least two years from planting to achieve; the best rhubarb fields take a decade to cultivate. In my zealous efforts to please the boss (or the boss's daughter), I had completely uprooted and decimated a productive garden of rhubarb in its third or fourth year. It was a good lesson for a young seminarian and future pastor to learn: Make sure you have the Boss's clear direction before proceeding to uproot and tear out what you think are weeds, because you can do more harm than good ... for not all that looks like weeds is weeds."

even uprooted in the process. Now, that doesn't mean we shouldn't do all we can to take care of the wheat field; that doesn't mean we shouldn't do all we can to cultivate good and strong roots for the wheat. We want to cultivate, we want whole wheat. We want wholeness, holiness; we don't want "weediness." We want to encourage moral, ethical and spiritual ideals; we want to discourage destructive weedy growth. And there are situations where weed growth can choke off and smother and otherwise harm what is good and wholesome and fruitful; then, drastic measures may be called for and we may have to uproot, as painfully dangerous and difficult as that action can be (*denominationally speaking, some think we may be there; but that's almost another sermon*). If "weeding" must be done, it needs to be prayerfully done with the utmost care and only as a last resort. Ultimately, it is at the Harvest the judgment will be enacted by the only One who is qualified to judge, and at that time weeds will be suitably purged from the wheat.

Let me ask a question: how would you count yourself at this particular moment? Do you look more like a weed or wheat ... or somewhere in between? We would like to think of ourselves as "Cheerios," made up only of whole grain ... but if we're honest, we know the roots of the wheat and the tares go down deep and are entwined in our own hearts. Even the best of us harbor some pretty weedy thoughts and characteristics; weedy tares such as resentment, bigotry, envy, bitterness, lust, anger, greed and so on have pretty tough roots wrapped around the good roots in our own hearts, and we can (*and do*) produce an awful lot of weedy thorns and other barbs along the course of our day to day lives. If the "harvest" were to take place today, some of us may be more than a bit anxious as to our own fate! I believe one purpose of Jesus' parable is to call all His disciples to patience, patience with others and with ourselves. In short, resist the temptation to focus on the weeds, and focus our energies on growing good wheat. Resist the temptation to go on a campaign to purge the church of all but the most faithful, because we might very well uproot a great deal of good wheat right along with the weeds. Churches tend to lose good people when we get preoccupied with weeding. When we go on heresy hunts, some innocent people can have their faith injured or undermined or even uprooted in the process. The fact is we can't always tell wheat from weeds.

Take our Old Testament reading today. Jacob certainly appeared to be a "weedy" guy. On the face of things, he comes across as something of a scoundrel, a cheat, even a thief. In previous chapters we read how he tricked his brother Esau into selling his birthright for a bowl of stew. Later, in collusion with his mother, he deceived and defrauded his old, blind father Isaac into giving him the firstborn blessing, which belonged by rights to eldest brother Esau. Esau had enough of his weedy brother's underhanded ways and had decided to kill Jacob as soon as their father departed this life. So at his mother Rebekah's urging, Jacob took off to his uncle's land of Haran, a distance of some five hundred miles (*where his mother had watered the camels two weeks ago; see July 9 sermon*). So that's the background to our Old Testament reading this morning; Jacob is running for his life! He is trying to put as much distance between himself and his brother as possible. This is not about a wholesome, holy man going to a holy place to meet God. It is about a weedy fugitive, scared of a brother's deserved wrath.

As the sun sets, Jacob comes to "a certain place." Taking a large stone, Jacob makes a head rest and lays down to sleep. But before the night is over he discovers that Someone greater than his brother Esau is after him; Jacob is being pursued by God. In this remarkable dream, Jacob sees the original Stairway to Heaven (*with apologies to Led Zeppelin*), and angels ascending and descending this stairway, this escalator, this contact point between heaven and earth. At the top of the stairway was God, who speaks to Jacob in the dream and promises, "... I am with you, Jacob, and I will watch over wherever you go, and ... I will not leave you until I have done what I promised." God promises to stay with Jacob until the promise God made to his grandfather Abraham comes to fulfillment through Jacob. Now think about that for a moment. God has chosen what we see as a self-absorbed, conniving, weedy cheat to be the bearer of the divine Promise, and God promised not to leave him alone until God has finished with him. We may look at Jacob and see "weed," but God looks at Jacob through the eyes of grace and sees "wheat." That is often the way God works ... its good news when God keeps after you! At times, it may seem like a threat, especially if you've been involved in weedy behavior. But God is determined by His grace to do you good. And I think we all know how the story ends. God does continue to work on, in and through Jacob, until Jacob's name is changed to Israel and he becomes the faithful patriarch of the twelve tribes of the people who to this day bear his name. (*I left the following excerpt out due to time constraints – "As we now know from the perspective of history, this dream was both an immediate promise to Jacob and a prophecy ... in John 1:51, Jesus says, 'I tell you the truth, you shall see heaven open, and the angels of God ascending and descending on the Son of Man.' Jesus is saying, 'I AM the incarnation of Jacob's dream; I AM the link between heaven and earth. No one comes to the Father but by Me.' In short, this dream is a prophecy/foreshadow of Jesus, THE stairway to heaven."*)

Now, what would have happened if the criteria of wheat or weed had been applied to Jacob as he was dreaming at Bethel? The verdict would have been, "*Weed! Pull him up by the roots; he is a worthless weed!*" But, God had other ideas, larger plans, and persisted in His work of grace. And I am convinced God is doing the very same thing with every single person He brings through the doors of this church. He is at work with you; I sincerely believe you wouldn't be here this morning if that were not the case. He is at work with you, and with me, and I always operate on the ministerial assumption that God will continue to work on you and me until He sees His work through to completion. We are all works in progress. God is not done cultivating any of us yet. The Lord has planted us in His field and promised to tend to us, to cultivate us, and the last thing He wants is for any of us to be prematurely uprooted before He has finished His cultivating work of grace.