

WEEDING AGAINST THE GRAIN

Sermon, July 26, 2020

Texts: Matthew 13:24-30, 36-43; I Timothy 1:12-17

"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 our final hymn, a hymn normally reserved for Thanksgiving, which draws imagery from the parable from Matthew's *"The Parable of the Wheat and the Tares,"* or as other translations have it, *"The Parable of the Wheat and the Weeds"* (*tares are a very specific type of weed, I'll get to that in a moment*).

Now, from the context of the hymn, where did those weeds in God's own field come from? What are they doing there? Why does God permit those weedy weeds in His good wheat 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 churches and ministries around the world and over the centuries have there been the Elmer Gantrys (*actually, he was a fictional character of Sinclair Lewis, but Lewis had many living "models" to choose from*), the philandering pastors, pedophile priests, elders involved in business scams, embezzling treasurers, the crooked politicians, the womanizer cads, the catty gossips and other forms of hypocrisy found in the average congregation (*except here, of course*)? 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? Encourage them to retire and go away? 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 "weediness" come from, anyway; isn't this God's good field? Jesus' explanation is pretty straightforward: The Sower God has sowed good seed, but an enemy ... and there IS an enemy ... has come in and sown weeds in the field as well.

I've read that the weed in today's parable was a specific type of weed called a tare, a weed indigenous to the Mediterranean region. Tares look a lot like wheat, especially in the early stages. Tares grow like wheat. But in the end tares are poisonous to people and livestock, capable of causing blindness and even death if ingested. So it's important to "TARE" out the Tares, separate it from the Wheat, before you eat it and it poisons you! However, in the early stages of growth the tares so closely resembled the 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. To paraphrase an old saying from the world of carpentry, that would be "Weeding against the grain" (*the carpentry term refers to smoothing a piece of lumber with a hand plane; it's important to go with the grain of the wood, lest the wood splinter and the surface get even rougher as happens when you go against the grain*). Even some of the stalks of wheat and tares 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 weeds from the wheat, let alone separate them.

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 and creed, proper behavior and right politics, we might and just might do a lot 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 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 high and healthy moral, ethical and spiritual standards; we want to discourage low and destructive weedy growth. If "weeding" and "uprooting" must be done, it needs to be prayerfully done, with the utmost care and only as a last resort. Ultimately, though, 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 by the angelic harvesters.

For that matter, there are always weeds in the particular part of the field called our own life. If we're honest, we know sometimes it's hard to tell if we ourselves are "weed" or "wheat" at root. 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 ... these "tares" have some pretty tough roots wrapped around the good roots in our own hearts, and can grow to choke the joy and the life out of us while causing us to produce nothing nourishing or productive as we go about our lives. I like the old story about a young woman was assigned to write an essay on Evolution. She began, *"According to this theory, man descended from the apes ... and has been descending ever since."* I like that; after all, apes are not capable of the extraordinary destruction and downright evil to which people can resort *(as we are witnessing on any given day in the news of late in the "weedy" rampaging riots resulting in destruction, chaos and even outright murder disguised as "wheaty" peaceful protests)*. In our Epistle reading, Paul understood that. When he wrote he was a violent, blasphemous, ignorant man in need of mercy, he wasn't using hyperbole. He knew his need of grace.

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 ... pardon the pun, but that may just TARE you apart! We are called to focus our energies on growing and producing good wheat. Nourishing and productive 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; again, all of us are a mixture of weedy wheat. 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 readings the last few weeks. Jacob certainly appeared to be a "weedy" guy on the face of things; we can't know all the circumstances, but he does come across as something of a scoundrel and a cheat. 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 brother's weedy 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. That was the setting of the well-known account of Jacob's dream of a stairway to heaven we looked at last week. Jacob is running for his life! He is trying to practice as much "social distancing" as he can from his angry twin brother. This was not about a wholesome, wheaty, holy man going to a holy place to meet God. It is about a weedy fugitive, terrified of a brother's deserved wrath.

But Jacob learned that Someone greater than his brother Esau was after him; Jacob was being pursued by God. In that remarkable dream we looked at last week, God speaks to Jacob 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 Jacob's grandfather Abraham comes to fulfillment through Jacob. Now think about that. God has chosen what we see as a self-absorbed, conniving, weedy cheat to be the bearer of the divine Promise, and God promised He wasn't going 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 ... even when, and perhaps especially when, you've been involved in weedy behavior! God is determined by His grace to do you good. 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.

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 does the very same thing with every single person He brings through the doors of this church *(whether you've come physically or virtually, as so many are watching on line)*. He is at work with you; He will not leave you alone, I sincerely believe none of us would 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 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. So, may our continual prayer be:

"Lord of Harvest, grant that we ... wholesome grain and pure may be." Amen.