

WEEDS
Matthew 13:24-30

A sermon given by Dr. Larry R. Hayward on the Sixteenth Sunday in Ordinary Time, July 20, 2008, at Westminster Presbyterian Church, Alexandria, Virginia.

Focus Text

He put before them another parable: ‘The kingdom of heaven may be compared to someone who sowed good seed in his field; but while everybody was asleep, an enemy came and sowed weeds among the wheat, and then went away. So when the plants came up and bore grain, then the weeds appeared as well. And the slaves of the householder came and said to him, “Master, did you not sow good seed in your field? Where, then, did these weeds come from?” He answered, “An enemy has done this.” The slaves said to him, “Then do you want us to go and gather them?” But he replied, “No; for in gathering the weeds you would uproot the wheat along with them. Let both of them grow together until the harvest; and at harvest time I will tell the reapers, Collect the weeds first and bind them in bundles to be burned, but gather the wheat into my barn.”’

The parable we have just read is called “The Parable of Weeds Among the Wheat.” It is not as famous as the parables of the Prodigal Son or the Good Samaritan, though it comes from the same source, the teachings of Christ. Like many parables, its storyline is short and simple, yet the questions it raises are profound.

To get at these questions, I ask you to follow me through the parable, not from the point of view of the main character – the planter – but from the point of view of the workers, who are called “slaves” in the parable, but whose role is closer to that of farmhands.

I.

A group of workers work for a man who owns a large enough plot of land to be a planter.

One season they notice the man plants the wheat himself. They wonder why, but they do not ask, respecting the man’s desire to engage in as much physical labor as he wishes on the property that he owns.

When the wheat sprouts, they notice that alongside the wheat is a nice, juicy crop of weeds.

Truth be known, they may feel vindicated by the presence of weeds, as when a laborer feels vindicated when a manager tries to do her job and botches it because it is more complicated than the manager assumed.

But whatever the workers feel, they approach the planter with respect:

“Sir, didn’t we see you sowing seed in your field a few weeks ago?”

“Yes,” the planter says.

“Well, we don’t want to tell you how to do your job; it is, after all, your field; but are you sure you bought the seed at Latham’s Seed, or did you go to Wal Mart and get that cheap overseas stuff?”

An aside here: I don’t usually talk about particular brands in a sermon, but both Latham Seed – a giant in the Midwest – and Wal-Mart were started by Presbyterians, so I don’t think I’m out of order here.

“I bought the good seed,” the planter says. “I even kept my receipts if you would like to see them.”

Then one worker holds out a handful of weeds. “Then where did these come from?” he says, while the other workers stare at their sandals.

The planter says: “An enemy has done this.”

The workers don’t know what to make of this answer:

“Maybe the planter has had a run-in with one of the neighbors,” they think.

“Maybe he’s had some sort of religious conversion, and has become obsessed with the power of the devil.”

“Maybe he has too many pictures in *The Washington Post* of the late Heath Ledger dressed up as ‘The Joker.’”

Whatever the workers surmise, they have a remarkable ability to focus on the problem at hand:

“Sir, would you like us to remove the weeds?”

To their surprise, the planter says:

“No. If you take the weeds out you might uproot the wheat as well. Let both of them grow together until the harvest. At harvest time, I will tell the reapers, ‘Collect the weeds first and bind them in bundles to be burned; then gather the wheat and put it in my barn for storage.’”

On these words, the parable ends.

- We don’t know if the workers protest further.
- We don’t know if they just walk off, shaking their heads, making plans to seek work under a more stable manager.
- Neither do we know if in fact, when harvest time comes, there is enough wheat to gather into the barn or if the weeds are so strong they choke out all the wheat.

The fate of the weeds and the wheat, the workers and the planter are left for us to surmise.

II.

Experiencing this parable from the point of view of the workers, we face several sets of questions:

First, what do we do when we think someone in authority, like the planter, is making a mistake, potentially a destructive mistake?

What do we do when a boss or manager over us, a leader in our family, a political or religious leader is about to stumble?

Do we speak up, or remain silent, and let the destructive path take its course?

In the parable, these workers feel they have the *duty* and *power* to speak up. So they do speak up:

- “Sir, did you not sow good seed?”
- “Where, then, did the weeds come from?”

But as the parable proceeds, they believe the planter’s explanations are becoming more and more bizarre and his plans less likely to succeed. At that point, they grow silent.

The questions the parable raises about the workers can lead us to raise questions about our own lives, about the situations we face.

- When do we feel that you have the power to speak up?
- When do we feel that we have the duty to speak up?
- If we have the duty, but not the power, what do we do?
- If we have tried to speak up once, and not been heard, do we try again?
- At what point do we give up?
- And what do we do when we give up? Do we stay in the situation in silence, or do we seek to leave the situation?

The parable does not resolve these questions for us. But I believe that because the parable itself comes from Jesus, because it is included in the book through which we get to know him, it invites us to wrestle with these questions in the context of his teaching, in the context of our experience of him through the spirit, and in the context of our life together in the community of the church he has commissioned. His parable may not directly resolve the dilemmas we face, but it points us to the resources he provides: His teaching, his presence, and his church.

II.

Second, the words in this parable that ring in my ears are these: “Let both wheat and weeds grow together.” The planter speaks these words; the workers do not refute them; and they raise additional questions for us.

- Is it ever appropriate for us to allow a problem, a negative trait, a weed, to remain in place?
- Is it ever wise for us to allow something potentially destructive to continue?

Many of us know those aspects of our personality that are destructive:

- Our penchant for addiction
- Our inability to express our anger in helpful ways
- Our tendency to clam up during conflict
- Our habit of avoiding difficult subjects

We know when we are escaping the world through sports or video games versus taking a legitimate break.

We know when virtual reality is the only reality with which we are comfortable.

We know when the waters in which we have been surfing on the Internet are filled with sharks and undertow, waters unfit for any human surfing.

We know

- Our greed and our gossip
- Our mood swings and our sadness
- Our wandering eye and our roving hands
- Our resentments and our envy
- Our secret prejudice
- Our insecurities which hold us back and in doing so make us more insecure

We know the momentary pleasure buying brings and the loneliness that soon returns.

Aware of these destructive tendencies, these weeds, are we ready to take the advice of the planter: “Let both weeds and wheat grow together”? Is this really the wisdom Christ is imparting to us in telling this parable? Are we ready to allow all the weeds in our lives to grow up alongside the wheat, for fear that in removing the weeds we might remove the wheat as well?

Once again, the parable doesn’t answer directly the questions it raises. But it raises them for us, that we may draw on the moral code we inherit from Christ, the experience of grace with and from him, the opportunity for prayers in his name, the depth of friendship in the community of the church which he has commissioned and in which he has placed us. All these

we can draw on to decide which weeds to eliminate from our lives and which to allow to grow under his watchful eye. Again: his teaching, his presence, his church.

III.

A few verses after Jesus gives this parable in Matthew, he interprets it for the disciples alone, in the privacy of a home.¹

- He uses allegory to equate wheat with “children of the kingdom” and weeds with “children of the evil one.”
- He cautions the disciples against making this distinction themselves and instead calls them to trust God with the determination of who is wheat, who is weeds, and what the fate of each shall be.
- And he promises that upon his return, he will sort out the weeds and the wheat in such a way that the weeds do not threaten and the wheat flourishes.

Christ’s interpretation of his own parable is the subject of another sermon, not this sermon. This sermon closes where the parable itself closes: with two questions that float up and out from this text, landing on our laps as we listen, on our Bibles as we read, on our heads as they are bowed:

- In your situation, it is time to speak up?
- Are there weeds that you need to remove from your life for wheat to flourish?

¹ Matthew 13:36-43.