

Wheat and Weeds

A Sermon by the Rev. Patti Davis
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Matt. 13:24-30, 36-43
Year A, Proper 11
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While the 40's were referred to as "The Age of Anxiety," there are enough articles on the news and in the paper to make us think we may be revisiting that time, a time when every day seems to bring new things to worry about. Which would put us squarely in the company of the early church, a church besieged on all sides and trying to figure out who properly belongs "in" and who is "out." And this parable of the wheat and the weeds is given to address that anxiety, though Matthew also uses it to carry the idea through to its apocalyptic conclusion. The quest for purity in first-century Jerusalem resulted in the rise of all sorts of groups, from the Zealots who dreamed of purifying Israel of Roman occupation through violent uprising, to the Essenes who withdrew to the desert so as not to be contaminated, to the purification movement of the Pharisees, with their rigorous attention to the Law and lists of people to be avoided. And right alongside was this budding Christian community, originally made up of Jews but going through a painful transition as they saw God leading them to admit Gentiles. It was all very stressful and if, right about now, you're trying to figure out which group you'd join, I'm heading out to the desert for some peace and quiet and you're welcome to come along!

Enter Jesus, who insists on preaching a gospel of radical love, breaking Sabbath law with impunity and consorting with every conceivable variety of unclean people. Enter Jesus, telling a parable of wheat and weed. The parable offers some answers, in the mysterious way that parables do, to the pressing questions of every age of anxiety: Why is everything such a mess? And what do we do about it? And the answers, such as they are, are hard to live with. But we get ahead of ourselves.

Jesus says in this story that good seed, wheat, is sown in the field and it's growing along just fine, except that the field becomes infested with weeds. This weed was an especially aggressive sort found in the Middle East, a weed whose roots became entangled with the wheat and which looked so much like the wheat that it was hard to distinguish until both were grown. Additionally, this weed would be poisonous if ground in with the wheat. So, the slaves want to do the right thing: "Let's pull those weeds out before we have big problems!" And the landowner says, "No, you'll just uproot the wheat as well. Leave it alone until it's time to harvest and then the reapers can do their work." Simple enough for a parable right? God is the farmer and we are the wheat. Well actually, we're the slaves and the wheat because we want to be identified as both having good intentions and bearing good fruit. And we know who the weeds are.

At least we think so. One thing we know how to do is identify weedy people. The weeds are the people who drive in the left lane, 20 mph below the speed limit, talking on the cell phone. They are the people who come to work with the express purpose of doing as little as possible to collect a paycheck. They are the people for whom winning means someone else must lose. They're the people who haven't a kind word to say about anyone, who have all the answers, who suck the air out of the room just by being there. We know who the weeds are. Except that weedy people have a way of surprising us, like the great big, intimidating man in the nursing home who is prone to resist anything asked of him and who sometimes strikes out at the smaller, female aides. The only problem with categorizing him is that he's also the one you'll find

holding the hand of a panicked and demented old woman and soothing her with his voice. And then there's the woman who is all sweetness and light, her mouth oozing love and kindness, except that she'll gossip about anyone and everyone and is so terribly hurt if you neglect to greet her every time you see her. If I had my way, the only people allowed in my nursing home would be sweet old people who love Jesus and love each other. But so far, our admissions director hasn't figured out how to do that. Because the problem is that wheat and weeds look a lot alike.

And then, if we're honest, we have to admit that we're not all wheat either. There is much in us that is still weedy, that still needs plucking out, though we try mightily to look like pure wheat. And we can tell you how we came to be a little weedy, how life wrapped its tendrils around us and squeezed until we got all prickly so that we became what we didn't want to be, a field that was originally sown with wheat but before we knew it, had weeds galore. And try as we might, we can't pull those weeds out with our own bare hands. We're caught in an adversarial dynamic, within ourselves, within our church, within our world. And if God would just give us the go-ahead, we'd take on the job of the reapers and try to clean up this mess, create a field of pure wheat. . . . except that wheat and weeds look a lot alike sometimes.

And so Jesus urges restraint. Did you notice in the parable that the farmer's slaves weren't allowed to pull up the weeds, even at the end there? God alone has the wisdom and discernment to sort things out and he has chosen His angels to help with that. So all our well-intentioned desire to help out the good Lord by separating wheat and weeds for him is decidedly refused. Which sounds just like Jesus. In a culture obsessed with ritual purity for their very survival, Jesus goes around healing on the Sabbath and forgiving people who don't even ask for it and going to dinner with loan sharks and crooked politicians. Not that Jesus doesn't know that their souls are full of weeds, but that he knows they dearly want to be wheat.

But we have to wonder, isn't this just counseling passivity in the face of evil? Is Jesus just saying here that we shouldn't fight against what's wrong with the world, with our community, with our church? It's a troubling question but I think the bottom line, the subtlety of this parable, is that we are not meant to live our lives on "Orange Alert." We are meant to live this life grounded in the "exuberant generosity"¹ of God, who casts seed about with reckless abandon, who showers rain on the just and the unjust alike, who clothes the lilies of the field and knows the fall of even one sparrow. It's enough for us to concentrate on removing the log from our own eye, on turning the other cheek and walking the extra mile, on cultivating that within us that is strong and healthy. It's enough for us to work on growing into a crop of patient, kind, humble, unselfish people.² While it's not nearly so glamorous, it's enough for us to be about feeding the hungry, clothing the naked and visiting the sick and in prison. We have enough to do. And so we place the harvest in God's hands because it's His field, not ours, because God is God and we are not. "Our job is to be wheat, even in a messy field – to go on bearing witness to the One who planted us among those who seem to have been planted by someone else."³ Living like that is hardly passivity but enough work to keep us busy all our days, figuring out how to live in Christ-like humility with people we are sure are weeds.

And just so we don't forget, Jesus invites us here every week to practice. He begs us to gather around His table -- not ours -- to look around at the motley crew He's invited, and then to give thanks that we get to come and be fed too.

¹ Walter Bruggeman

² See Paul's letter to the Corinthians on love.

³ Barbara Brown Taylor, *Why the Boss said No*, Bread of Angels, p 150