

Aldersgate UMC

Sunday, July 20, 2025

The Lesser of Two Weevils

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Matthew 13: 24-30, 36-43

The Parable of Weeds among the Wheat (New Revised Standard Version Updated Edition)

²⁴ He put before them another parable: "The kingdom of heaven may be compared to someone who sowed good seed in his field, ²⁵ but while everybody was asleep an enemy came and sowed weeds among the wheat and then went away. ²⁶ So when the plants came up and bore grain, then the weeds appeared as well. ²⁷ 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?' ²⁸ He answered, 'An enemy has done this.' The slaves said to him, 'Then do you want us to go and gather them?' ²⁹ But he replied, 'No, for in gathering the weeds you would uproot the wheat along with them. ³⁰ 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.'

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³⁶ Then he left the crowds and went into the house. And his disciples approached him, saying, "Explain to us the parable of the weeds of the field." ³⁷ He answered, "The one who sows the good seed is the Son of Man; ³⁸ the field is the world, and the good seed are the children of the kingdom; the weeds are the children of the evil one, ³⁹ and the enemy who sowed them is the devil; the harvest is the end of the age, and the reapers are angels. ⁴⁰ Just as the weeds are collected and burned up with fire, so will it be at the end of the age. ⁴¹ The Son of Man will send his angels, and they will collect out of his kingdom all causes of sin and all evildoers, ⁴² and they will throw them into the furnace of fire, where there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth. ⁴³ Then the righteous will shine like the sun in the kingdom of their Father. Let anyone with ears listen!

Today's reading invites us to explore the second of seven parables in Chapter 13 of Matthew's gospel – the Parable of the Weeds, sometimes called the Parable of the Tares, "tares" being a weed that resembles young wheat. So here we go, deciphering another parable. In my experience, the exploration of parables is typically equal parts fascinating and frustrating. Or as Pastor Nadia Bolz-Weber figuratively explains, "a parable is like getting directions to a big city airport in the form of a bunch of riddles." And we might add..." while speaking in a foreign language."

Today's reading and possible interpretation is no exception. We hear the dilemma unfold. An enemy has sowed weeds into a wheat field and now that the plants are growing, it's a question of how to handle this evil and unfortunate situation... should they try to remove the weeds and risk damaging the good wheat or wait and remove the weeds at harvest time. Then there's

layers of symbolism and metaphor woven into the story. We hear the explanation stated so succinctly...the planter of good seed (the wheat) represents the Son of Man, the devil is our villain and planter of the weeds, the field represents the world, the harvest is the end of the age and God's angels are the harvesters sent out to collect all the evildoers (the weeds) and burn them in the furnace (aka hell) while the righteous are selected to live with God (and reside in heaven). There it is...so straight forward... if "x" happens, then "y" will become the outcome. End of story! Or is it?

I found myself feeling unsettled while trying to prepare this sermon. This scripture text is an uncomfortable one – you're either good or evil, worthy of heaven or doomed to hell. And let's not gloss over another reference in the text, that of hierarchies and oppressive systems and the farmer owning slaves. So be it out of either avoidance or frustration, I gave myself permission to just sit with the text and not try to wrestle with textual interpretation. It would have been easier to investigate scholarly explanations and theological understanding during the period in which this text was written. I have lots of books full of commentary on biblical passages. But I'm more of a contemplative, so instead I let the text rest in my heart and gave my head some time off. And an interesting process emerged.

I started making two lists, one list was for the weeds and the other was for the wheat. I started sorting through what these two symbols might represent first from our scriptural text, but then from the context of our world today as well. Here's what unfolded:

WEEDS	WHEAT
Evil – Satan	Good – God
Poisonous	Nourishing
Unhealthy	Beneficial
Them	Us
Oppressed/Mislabeled	Accepted/Affirmed
Disloyal	Faithful

And the list could go on and on. What I discovered while compiling my side-by-side list was what I both love and hate about church. By that I mean, I love how we as a community of seekers come together to wrestle with tough stuff, and support one another, and discuss humanity and Christianity from all sides. But what I hate about church (or shall I say, organized religion) is the constant debate about who is accepted, worthy, good enough, holy enough to be considered Wheat and what must be done to eliminate the Weeds. We heard reference to this dilemma in our reading – the separation of two elements and how the destruction of one might lead to the demise of the other. Roots are intertwined below ground – pulling the weeds will uproot the wheat.

As Christians, we are disciples of a misfit, a Jew who was a thorn in the side of many – Romans, Pharisees, Jewish leaders and more. During his life and ministry, was Jesus the wheat, the weed, or the one writing the riddle (parable)? Have his memorable teachings allowed misfit sinner-saints like us to reflect on where we fall short and how we might strive to do better? This congregation has wrestled with shortcomings and has leaned into acceptance – becoming a

welcoming congregation for all is just one example. I've been connected with Aldersgate UMC a mere 5 years, many of you have decades more connection. Sometime, I'd love to hear stories of how you've experienced this community merge, and squirm and lean into becoming a place of sanctuary for all. Still this scripture was tugging at me, leaving me feeling restless and uncertain, so again I allowed more time for it to unfold in my heart. Lo and behold, I stumbled upon some insight while reflecting on my time working at Prickly Pear Land Trust.

I could recall a staff meeting where our Conservation Specialist shared some exciting news. She proclaimed, "we have weevils." Confession - - - at that time, I had no idea what a weevil is or what a weevil does. So I asked, "What exactly are you talking about? Is having weevils a good thing? What exactly is a weevil?"

Come to find out, weevils are little brown beetles with distinct elongated snouts. And they can do some serious damage to crops like corn, grain, and cotton, and even our own vegetable gardens. But, they also have been used to crunch and munch their way across acres of grasslands eating invasive weeds and their seeds, the most common of which are knapweed, rush skeleton weed and tansy weed. There's a fascinating article by the National Association of Counties about a project where weevils were purchased and introduced in Lincoln County, MT for this very purpose. If you want to learn more, just google "The Lesser of Two Weevils" and you'll come upon their fascinating work. What excited our staff person at Prickly Pear Land Trust was that she spotted weevils munching on knapweed at one of our park restoration properties. My co-workers lesson in entomology suggested that having hungry weevils is a good thing. With today's scripture still marinating in my heart I found myself questioning...which list do I put weevils on... the side of Weeds or Wheat? Sometimes determining what's good or evil is not so straight forward.

Sometime later, my co-workers provided an additional lesson, this time in the area of horticulture. Evidently, we had a new problem – someone spotted a henbane plant. Again, I was ignorant to what this meant. So once again I asked, "what exactly is henbane?" And the response was, "it's evil, it's nasty, it's got to go...NOW." Come to find out, henbane is a noxious plant that is poisonous to the touch and can lead to some horrible symptoms for humans and animals. When I first looked it up, I noticed how the flower looks very similar to a hollyhock flower. The same flower that my mother taught me to pick as a child to make little dolls, using the broad, colorful flower as the dress, peeling back the greenery on a newly forming bud and placing the bud on top of the flower to form the dolls head and hat. Again, my heart stirred... how can something that looks equally as pretty and stirs up such happy memories be so evil?

These happenstance teachings reminded me there's no definitive line between what to burn in the furnace and what is worthy of heavenly praise. It is not on us to judge one another or separate ourselves from each other. It's a continual process of discernment, learning from each other, and living God's message.

As a church community – what can we glean from today's parable? Have we drawn lines between who we allow in and who must be kept out to preserve our sanctuary of faith? Have we

placed side bars on the width of our church welcome? Matthew tells us the master in this parable has greater wisdom. Let both grow together until the harvest, he says, because one cannot always tell which is which. It's human nature to want to get to the root of a problem, bring matters to a head and come to a swift conclusion. Vague ambiguity is annoying, not to mention a waste of time, but maybe the master is calling for a different time of ambiguity – purposeful ambiguity. We're encouraged to have patience with others and ourselves repeatedly. Imagine if we were judged by our past actions, those that fall in the "weed" column, and were immediately labeled as throw-away material. Our nation, our families and our faith communities would be slim to none.

I went back to my two lists and spent some time reflecting on what unfolded during my weeks of contemplation. I discovered a very different picture:

WEEDS	WHEAT
Weevils	Weevils
My thoughts & actions	My thoughts & actions
My faith community	My faith community
Friends & Family	Friends & Family
My country (it's laws, leadership, actions, and citizens)	

Yep...all of these things fell on both lists and reminded me we're never a complete person, community, family or nation...we're a constant work in progress. There's no profound moral to today's parable story... it's more of a pondering of life's ongoing riddle – how to live into God's desire for us while loving and supporting others – it's about building up, not tearing down the kingdom on earth.

As Christians we believe God's realm will at last be completed and revealed in all its fullness, but in the meantime the realm of God is in all of us. We are to imagine everybody as belonging to this God, not judge those outside our understanding or outside the church. John Wesley said it simply 1) do no harm, 2) do good, 3) stay in love with God. In other words, let's avoid getting into a weeding frenzy and leave the weeding to the angels. Amen.