

A Weedy World

Matthew 13:24-30; 36-43

Whitefish UMC

July 20, 2008

- † In case you haven't noticed, our valley is infested with mosquitoes. The late, wet spring created pools of standing water perfect for hatching mosquito larvae as the hot weather arrived. In the meantime, county budgets are strained to the limit with high fuel costs and other public necessities.
- † Frustrated with the failure of local government to take care of the problem, residents have taken matters into their own hands. They've had enough of these awful pests, and so they are buying the deadliest chemicals and using them in concentrations well over the recommended amount.
- † The result? Fogs of toxic chemicals used at the wrong time of day, in the wrong concentrations, at the wrong targets. And no relief from the adult mosquitoes swarming from one property to the next.
- † This Thursday's *Daily Interlake* featured headlines warning citizens of the dangers of using Malathion, one of the most toxic pesticides for insects, to combat the pesky critters—all the time endangering children and pets and not doing much good.
- † Sounds like a twenty-first century version of the parable of the wheat and the tares that Jesus told in today's Gospel lesson. Of course Jesus was talking about weeds and wheat instead of mosquitoes and people, right? Or was he?

- † In his parable, Jesus tells of a farmer who sowed good seed in his field, but in the night an enemy came and sowed tares (weeds) with the wheat. When the crop began to mature, it became obvious that the noxious weed had been sown with the wheat.
- † The servants offered to pull up the tares, but the wise farmer said: “No, let them both grow together till harvest time. Then we will separate the tares from the wheat.”
- † Now if you’ve ever lived on a farm or had even a small garden, you know what a bad decision it is not to weed the field or the garden until harvest time. It cuts down your yield considerably, and the people of Galilee, a rural area, knew that.
- † They also knew that people did in fact go into a neighbor’s field and deliberately seed it with weeds, in order to get even for some real or perceived injury. We know that was true because the crime and its punishment were actually codified in Roman law.
- † In a society where tenant farmers survived only if crops yielded fruitfully at the harvest, the disciples were puzzled by Jesus’ parable. It didn’t, they thought, make any sense.
- † Of course Jesus explained that he wasn’t really talking about weeds and wheat, but about people—the good and the bad. Jesus says, “The one who sows good seed is the Son of Man, the field is the world, and the good seed means the children of the kingdom.”
- † So the good seeds are the beloved children of God. And the weeds sown by the evil one? Well, they are people, too. In the parable Jesus tells us that the good seeds and bad weeds will grow up together, side by side until the harvest.

- † And we are not supposed to pull or chop or spray the weeds lest we destroy the good with the bad—a lot like our situation with the mosquitoes. Now, the disciples knew this was bad farming, just like the frustrated bite-covered citizens of the valley know they just have to do something to get rid of those voracious pests!
- † Jesus’ disciples probably resisted this parable as much as we do. When a problem arises, we want to fix it. When evil surrounds us, we want to get rid of it. Let’s face it, we live in a weedy world—a world full of the evils of injustice, greed, suffering, poverty, and violence—some of it done in the name of God.
- † Are not we as followers of Jesus meant to resist evil and injustice—is that not one of the questions we ask those preparing to be baptized? What, then, is the Christian response to evil? What should good people do about bad things?
- † Before we attempt to answer that question, remember that by their very nature, parables are meant to confront and surprise the hearer to think in new, unconventional ways. This is the place in this story where that happens.
- † What Jesus is really saying is that God doesn’t have any immediate plans to uproot all the evil in the world. God’s plan, for now, is to let it be. And here’s why.
- † When the servants volunteered to pull up the weeds, the master said, “No, for in gathering them, you would pull up the wheat too.” In other words, you’ll do more harm than good. Why?
- † It helps to know that when Jesus told this story, he spoke of a specific kind of weed (or tare in the King James Version). It’s called Lolium

Temulentum, also known as “darnel,” an annual grass with long, slender bristles that looks a lot like wheat.

- † Have you ever been weeding a field or a garden—or even weed whacking—and destroyed a healthy, desired plant? I seem to do it all the time. Can you see how the same caution might apply to dealing with evil in the world? Sometimes it’s hard to tell the difference between the good and the bad, and sometimes, in pulling up what you think is a weed, you may be pulling up wheat.
- † Think of the times in history where that has happened. In the days of the development of Christianity when heretics were condemned; during the Crusades; in the Inquisition (for a compelling portrayal, see the film *Goya’s Ghost*); the trials of women healers who were considered “witches,” to name a few.
- † In our own country, think of the destruction of native people, of slavery meant to “civilize” Africans, of Jim Crow laws, of young white men beating Asian migrant workers to purify their homeland.
- † In the story, as Jesus tells it, the enemy sows his evil seed and then goes away. He seems confident that the damage he intends will be done. One preacher quotes Robert Farrar Capon who says that “the enemy doesn’t have any real power over goodness anyway: the wheat is in the field, the Kingdom is in the world, and there is not one thing he can do about it.
- † But he can sucker the forces of goodness into taking up arms against the confusion he has introduced, to do his work for him. That is why he goes away after sowing the weeds. He has no need to hang around. Unable to take positive action anyway—having no real power to muck up the operation—he sprinkles around a generous helping of darkness

and waits for the children of light to get flustered enough to do the job for him.”

- † I think this is one of Jesus’ most difficult parables. I’m a person who likes to combat injustice. I am intolerant of intolerance. But do you see the problem? Sometimes when I attack what I perceive to be injustice, I don’t have the whole picture. I don’t understand where the alleged perpetrator of injustice is coming from. And sometimes, I do more harm than good.
- † Does that ever happen to you? We are so quick to judge, as if we were sure we knew the difference between wheat and weeds, good seed and bad. But the reality is that we encounter both kinds of “plants” in ourselves, our neighbors, and the world. They have grown together so long that a hybrid is more likely, a mongrel seed that is neither one nor the other. Which is it? Wheat or weed? Blessed or cursed?
- † In this parable, Jesus teaches us that sometimes there are situations in life that are so tangled that they cannot be untangled in this world. There are knots that no mortal can untie.
- † In Thornton Wilder’s story, “The Bridge of San Luis Rey,” there is an old monk who tries to keep books for God. He did his best to be conscientious and correct, but things got so mixed up that he finally had to ask for divine forgiveness.
- † I wish I could tell you that if you lived a good and careful life, you would not have any serious problems. And I wish I could tell you that love, and love alone, will conquer any problem that might rear its ugly head. But you know that’s a myth—a myth that causes a lot of pain to a lot of good people.

- † Jesus knew this only too well. Jesus loved extravagantly and widely, and he still was murdered on the cross. Don't you wonder how he could have done it? Borne the pain of the world all the way to Good Friday and beyond? The scriptures tell us that he, too, cried out to God in frustration, doubt, and grief.
- † Where, then is our hope? How can we live out our baptismal covenant and resist evil and injustice while refraining from passing judgment on the world and those whom we view as evil?
- † It takes us a long time to realize that there are certain problems and situations that we cannot fix. Only God can fix them—separate them at the ultimate harvest. In Shakespeare's early plays, all issues are settled in the play itself. In later plays, not so much, even though divine intervention occurs at the end to adjust inequities.
- † But when you read the great tragedies, Hamlet, Othello, and King Lear, the dramatic dilemmas are so complex that closure doesn't come at the end of the play. The problems are pushed forward to the next world.
- † All well and good, but what does this parable have to say to people who live each day with problems that are beyond their power to fix? The Gospel solution is not a quick fix. It is a life-long commitment to the kind of faith and love that is so clearly seen in Jesus.
- † A Methodist minister from Monroeville, Alabama tells this story: The first African-American baseball player in the American League was a rookie named Larry Doby. He played for the Cleveland Indians in 1947. He was reputed to be a good player, and an excellent hitter.

- † He came to bat in his first game, and the fans waited to see. It was a disaster. He swung at the first three pitches and missed them all by at least a foot. He struck out. The fans booed him off the field.
- † Larry Doby stared at the ground as he walked back to the dugout. He went to the end of the bench, sat down, and put his head in his hands. The next batter was second baseman Joe Gordon, an All Star hitter, who had always hit this particular pitcher well.
- † Everyone knew Joe Gordon could hit the ball and in fact put it out of the park. He stepped up to the plate, swung at the first three pitches and missed each pitch by at least a foot. The fans could not believe it. A huge silence fell over the crowd.
- † Joe Gordon stared at the ground as he walked back to the dugout. He went to the end of the bench, sat down by Larry Doby, and put his head in his hands.
- † Now this is the stuff of which baseball legends are made. Even today people wonder, did he strike out on purpose? Of course nobody knows for sure except Joe Gordon. But it is reported that from that day on, Larry Doby never went on the baseball field but that he did not reach down and pick up the glove of his teammate, Joe Gordon, and hand it to him.
- † What kind of love is this? Even if this act on the part of Joe Gordon meant so much to Larry Doby, it did not cure the problem of racism in the stadium that day. But it did represent everything that one person could do at that time and place and circumstance.
- † Jesus told us that there would always be trouble, evil, even, in the world. But he reminded us that we could take courage from the fact that the power of God is greater than even death itself. Through his

resurrection and life with us yet, Jesus offers us the promise that God's kingdom will come, on earth as it is in heaven.

† In the meantime, we are meant to resist evil and suffering in the ways that we can—in healing, comforting, challenging, and loving even the pesky and weediest among us. We do it together, not on our own, but by the power of the Holy Spirit.

† Amen.

Sources:

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