

Sunday, July 19, 2026
Eighth Sunday after Pentecost (Proper 11A)
Matthew 13.24-30, 36-43
The Rev. Michael K. Fincher

“The Holy Ambiguity of Weeds Among the Wheat”

For the second week in a row, we have Jesus telling a parable involving the scattering of seed. And for the second week in a row, this parable is a bit of a head-scratcher. So, for the second week in a row, we have the telling of the parable to the crowd followed up with a private session between Jesus and his disciples in which he explains the confusing parable. While both today's Parable of the Wheat and the Weeds and last' week's Parable of the Sower entail the scattering of seed, that's about where the similarities end. The Parable of the Sower entailed the scattering of seed with wild abandon so as to maximize potential growth. Today's Parable of the Wheat and the Weeds, on the other hand, entails a much more methodical, intentional, and nefarious sowing of seed. A sowing, not with the intent of maximizing potential growth, but with the intent of maximizing potential damage. And the meaning of the seed differs, as well. In the Parable of the Sower, the seed represents the word of God, and we—those who receive God's word—are represented by the various types of soil. In today's Parable of the Wheat and the Weeds, we are represented not by type of soil but by type of plant—by the wheat and the weeds.

As we heard in the parable, a householder sowed his field with wheat. With seed he knows to be good. When the crop comes up and begins to bear grain, it is obvious that there is a second type of plant present, as well. A weed that, up until the grain begins to develop, appears to be the same as the good wheat. It is obvious that an enemy, wishing to destroy the wheat crop, has purposefully sown bad weeds among the good wheat.

It helps to understand that in this parable, when Jesus talks about weeds, he is not talking your garden-variety of weeds (pardon the pun). These weeds are a very specific type. In previous times, we often referred to this as the Parable of the Wheat and the Tares. Tares being more accurate, as it refers to a particular type of weed. Tares are also known as bearded darnel or poison darnel. Darnel is a weed native to Eurasia and North Africa that closely resembles wheat in its early stages of growth. In fact, it is virtually indistinguishable until the plants start to bud and grain develops. And by then, it is too late. The darnel has grown alongside the wheat and the roots have become entwined with those of the wheat stalks. As rightly observed by the householder in the parable, pulling out the darnel plants would also uproot the wheat plants, destroying the crop. The particular danger of darnel is that it is often infested with a fungus that produces a toxin that can cause severe dizziness, nausea, trembling, and impaired vision when ingested by humans and livestock. In sufficient quantities, it can even cause death. So the danger of darnel was that, if undetected—and, again, it is very hard to detect, particularly in early stages—it can end up being harvested along with the wheat, accidentally milled into the flour, and result in illness or even death when then eaten.

The householder in the parable wisely recognizes that the only thing to do if the wheat crops is to be saved is to wait until harvest time, harvest the wheat and the darnel, and then to go through the laborious and painstaking process of separating the good from the bad. In his

explanation of the parable, Jesus tells the disciples the good seed represents the children of God's kingdom, while the bad seed represents the children of the devil. Classic situation of good vs. evil. Recognition that good and evil exist—that good and evil people exist—side-by-side. Only, who is good and who is evil are often not readily distinguishable. Not until intended harm is done. Jesus goes on to explain that the reaping process, the process of harvesting all the plants together and then sorting them by type—by good and by bad—is an eschatological image. An analogy for the end times, when the only One who can adequately judge who is truly good and who is truly evil, when the only One who can truly separate the good from the evil, exercises final judgment. Referring, of course, to God's judgment.

At its essence, the Parable of the Wheat and the Weeds illustrates the pernicious nature of evil, how it can and does exist, often undetected, in our midst. And the necessity of eradicating it, but the difficulty of actually doing so. Particularly since, by the time the evil is revealed, it is often too late to take action without potential harm to that which is good. Given Jesus' explanation of the Parable of the Wheat and the Weeds as an image for God's final judgment, does that mean we have no choice but to just sit around and do nothing while we wait for the "harvest" and for God to exercise final judgment? I think not. In the parable, the householder and his servants do not, strictly speaking, do nothing while they wait for harvest time. They continue to work in the field, tending and nurturing the crop—wheat and darnel alike—until the harvest and a safe sorting can occur. Which gives us a clue as to what we are supposed to do in the field of our own lives.

In exploring what this means, the question becomes, what is the field we are talking about? Is it the church? Is it our workplaces? Is it the public square? Is it the halls of government? While some commentaries caution against attempting to apply this parable and its imagery to the broader world, stating that this is not about the presence of evil in the world but about its presence in the faith community, I would wholeheartedly disagree. First off, in his explanation to the disciples, Jesus explicitly states, "the field is the world." Not, the field is our lives of faith or our faith communities or our particular denomination or parish. The field is the entire world in which we live and move and have our being. Because, as we all know, our lives and our world are not easily compartmentalized into various sectors: private life, family, work, school, church, secular organizations, civic arena, and so on. As Christians, we live and move among a variety of places and people. And if we are true to our calling to be Christians, if we are true to our baptismal vows, we carry our Christian values and perspectives with us into every venue and sector of life in which we find ourselves. We carry our Christian values and perspectives with us in our interactions with every person we encounter. The reality is that we can and sometimes do encounter both good and evil as we move throughout our lives. Sometimes the presence of evil is painfully and blatantly obvious. But more often than not, it is subtle, perhaps barely perceptible, if perceptible at all. Of course, we need to be careful about what and who we declare as evil. After all, as noted in Jesus' explanation of the parable, it is ultimately God's job and God's alone to make that final judgment. Our job, our approach, as Christians, is to carry with us the knowledge of our places as opposed to God's place when it comes to such judgment. But at the same time, to find ways to navigate the situations we find ourselves in, informed by the tenets of our faith and the teachings of our Lord. Which includes Jesus' injunction in the Sermon on the Mount to "love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you" (Mt 5.44).

Part of this is also being cautious about assuming an either/or, good vs. evil, holy vs. unholy, perspective. Certainly, this would have been the common, prevailing perspective among the people of Jesus' time. Although, in our own time, we generally recognize that things are rarely absolute, black and white, right or wrong. And for that matter, absolutely good or absolutely evil. If we are brutally honest with ourselves, each of us has the potential for and indeed is a mixture of good and bad, wheat and weed, holy and unholy, potentially fruitful and potentially destructive. That is the complexity of the human psyche. That is what it means to be flawed, imperfect human beings. That is part of why we are here. Which is precisely why Jesus gives us such parables as that of the wheat and the weeds. Why he presents them in such absolute terms, even as he knows and recognizes that very few things in our human existence are absolute. Presenting the absolutes as a way of calling attention to the dichotomy. As a way of then inviting us into struggling with not only the black and the white, but also with the shades of gray where we live a substantial portion of our lives.

The direction of the householder in the parable provide us with wise guidance as we navigate the gray areas of our lives. That we are called to recognize the presence of good vs. evil, yes. But that we are, at the same time, to not be too quick to rush to judgment. There is the challenge of distinguishing good from evil, because ultimately, the failure to deal with evil allows it to spread. But discerning also with the ideal of helping to facilitate potential change—to facilitate a turning around, a redemption—so that what is evil might find its way to the good. Augustine of Hippo, one of the great theologians of the early Church, who fought against a variety of heresies, certainly argued that the Church should not just sit by and do nothing, leaving the ultimate sorting to God. That as the Body of Christ, we have a part to play. He “concludes that it is impossible to maintain absolute outward holiness in the visible church and that an unholy action by a member does not disable the possibility of future holiness.”¹ That there is always the possibility for change.

Perhaps the role of the Church, and our role as members of the Body of Christ, is not to wait for God to sort things in the final judgment, but rather to work as a community and as individuals to “tip the balance,” as it were, to increase the potential for holiness in our midst. Certainly through our own words and actions, modeling our faith. But also in being willing to speak out where necessary and appropriate, calling out what we witness that is not in accordance with our Christian values and the teachings of the Church.

While we can do our part to effect change, we also must recognize that some things are just above our pay grade. Running throughout the Parable of the Wheat and the Weeds is the tension between being aware of the realities in our midst, working where we can to bring about redemption and conversion, all while being patient for the determination of the final outcome. For the exercise of restraint, where appropriate, recognizing that even as we confront matters of good vs. evil, the reality is not always black and white, change is not always possible, ultimately requiring judgment and action by God. As one commentator so aptly summarizes:

There is a strategy in these words of restraint that pushes away from premature clarity regarding such matters of discernment and makes room instead for a holy and purposeful ambiguity. This is not a vague and underground “whatever” kind of ambiguity, but an ambiguity that is both wise and intentional. In our impatience with others, we often want to bring matters to a head and so determine whether others are in or out; but the God who is

glimpsed in this parable models for us an infinite patience that frees us to get on with the crucial business of loving, or at least living with, each other . . .

It is toward this very God that we are forever moving—individually, collectively, and as a cosmos. On such a journey as this, it is not our job to determine who is within and who is beyond this God’s attention. It is rather our job to imagine everyone as belonging to this God, and therefore, with all that we can muster, to endeavor to embrace, through Jesus Christ our Lord, God’s holy and purposeful ambiguity.²

¹ Gary Pelouse-Verdend, “Proper 11, Theological Perspective,” in *Feasting on the Word: Preaching the Revised Common Lectionary*, Year A, Volume 3, ed. David L. Bartlett and Barbara Brown Taylor (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2011), 264.

² Theodore J. Wardlaw, “Proper 11, Homiletical Perspective,” in *Feasting on the Word: Preaching the Revised Common Lectionary*, Year A, Volume 3, ed. David L. Bartlett and Barbara Brown Taylor (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2011), 263, 265.