



SERMONS AT SAINT MARK'S

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THE EIGHTH SUNDAY AFTER PENTECOST: PROPER 11A, JULY 23, 2023
ISAIAH 44:6-8; PSALM 86:11-17; ROMANS 8:12-25; MATTHEW 13:24-30,36-43

DOWN IN THE WEEDS



When our family has extended time together, like Christmas holidays or summer vacation, we often work a jigsaw puzzle. Each of us has different skills in finding and matching pieces, so it's truly a collaborative effort.

When it's done, we all stand back and admire it for a day; then it gets broken down and put back in the box, almost never reassembled again. Because a second go feels like recreating a prior experience rather than making something new together. It's just not as much fun.

Jesus' parables are a bit like jigsaw puzzles. They are intended to reveal God's vision for the world, and because they are often paradoxical and opaque, they want to be considered piece by piece *and* as a whole.

It's tempting to treat parables like puzzles with one solution, one fixed meaning. Our problem-solving minds want to unlock the mystery once and for all and then move on to the next challenge. But parables are not two-dimensional jigsaw puzzles; they are multi-layered stories that are literally "cast alongside"

our lives, like a moving stream that reflects both the one peering into the water and the landscape that surrounds them.

So, in different times and places, parables draw a multitude of responses.

In Jesus' time, and today, parables are meant to surprise the hearer, challenging us to look at hidden parts of our lives and values. Sometimes that can lead to uncomfortable realizations or tough questions, and when it does, we're probably on the right track. The Biblical scholar Amy-Jill Levine suggests that rather than ask what a parable "means," we are better off asking what it can "do" – how it can remind, provoke, confront, or console, us.¹

So what did this parable of the weeds and wheat *do* for its original hearers? Matthew's gospel was written for a 1st century community increasingly at odds with religious leadership and threatened by Roman imperial power. The second half of today's gospel is Matthew's interpretation of the parable, which would have encouraged and strengthened his community.

Wheat and weeds growing side by side mirrors their reality of both justice and oppression on a daily basis. But Jesus assures them that God's kingdom of freedom and peace will eventually

prevail. That is the promise of the harvest, the culmination of the story.

Our context is different than these Christians, though. How does the parable confront us?

In the Bible, the story of the wheat and weeds only appears in Matthew's gospel. And this was all we knew until 1945, when the Gospel of Thomas was found in a cache of manuscripts hidden in Nag Hammadi, Egypt. Thomas's version is much shorter than Matthew's and offers no interpretation. He simply writes,

Jesus said, "The Kingdom of the Father is like a man who had [good] seed. His enemy came by night and sowed weeds among the good seed. The man did not allow them to pull up the weeds; he said to them, 'I am afraid that you will go intending to pull up the weeds and pull up the wheat along with them.' For on the day of the harvest the weeds will be plainly visible, and they will be pulled up and burned."

Here, the focus is not on the harvest, but on the farmer's decision to allow the weeds and the wheat to grow together, giving them time to reveal themselves. And I think that's where we find our way into this story.

First, we need to talk about weeds. Anyone who is a gardener knows that no matter what you plant, you are going to get weeds as well. Their

¹ Amy-Jill Levine, *Short Stories by Jesus*, 2014.

spores and seeds are constantly on the move, not sown by an enemy, but by the wind or birds. Weeds are unavoidable, and when newly sprouted, they are hard to tell from other plants.

Furthermore, weeds are not bad in and of themselves. If left untended, they can crowd out the plants you want to grow, but weeds have good properties as well: Some are medicinal, like horsetail, borage, and chickweed. Many are nutritious with lots of vitamins and antioxidants – think dandelion, red clover and stinging nettle. Other weeds are protective and beautiful, keeping away pests and adding color to the landscape.

Still, many of us gardeners consider weeds a thing to eradicate, immediately and completely. And while a tidy, weedless garden may be harmless, this parable exposes a deeper fixation that isn't harmless at all when applied to the complexities of being human – the quest for perfection and control, which we have to admit is a deeply rooted value in our culture.

We see this quest clearly on social media, even in exchanges among trusted friends. The posts of humble brags and shiny, curated lives set impossible standards and stir up comparison and self-judgement. I long for the social media platform that invites and normalizes the messy

truth of our lives – our parenting stumbles, challenges of loving relationships, resistance to forgiveness, the aches of aging, fear of mortality, all of it.

These experiences are the weeds of being human – our imperfections and unhelpful ways that are impossible to eradicate and when left unattended can crowd out the rest of the garden. When we treat imperfections like an enemy by trying to deny or repress them, though, we are essentially counting *ourselves* as the enemy. And the lost energy and pain from that stunts the fruitful growth of creativity, love, and service.

The fact is, we are a mixture of weed and wheat, and that will always be so.² We are as individuals, families, and communities.

We are made in God's image, and we are fully human, which means we have the potential for wholeness and holiness even as we are flawed, and at times, broken.

Many wisdom teachers have known that when we embrace the tension of this mixture of wheat and weeds, and we do it with patience and curiosity, we open ourselves to spiritual growth.

From Jesus on to the Desert Fathers and Mothers (3rd C), Julian of Norwich (14th C),

² Richard Rohr, *Falling Upward*.

Twelve Step programs (20th C), and Richard Rohr and Brene Brown today, these wise ones have taught from their own context that spirituality is not about exemplary piety but about letting go of the things we cannot control and learning to live with imperfection – our mistakes, limitations, and the confusing passions of our souls.

Salvation, they insist, is not a future event, but is happening here and now. In fact, it is precisely the place of our limitations and imperfections where the holy enters our lives. God comes to us through our wounds, sowing compassion, connection, and perseverance, and teaching us to release the need for control or judgement of self and others. Which allows healing for self, family, and community.

Matthew 13:24-30,36-43 [*Jesus put before the crowd 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.’” 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.” He answered, “The one who sows the good seed is the Son of Man; the field is the world, and the good seed are the children of the kingdom; the weeds are the children of the evil one, and the enemy who sowed them is the devil; the harvest is the end of the age, and the reapers are angels. Just as the weeds are collected and burned up with fire, so will it be at the end of the age. The Son of Man will send his angels, and they will collect out of his kingdom all causes of sin and all evildoers, and they will throw them into the furnace of fire, where there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth. Then the righteous will shine like the sun in the kingdom of their Father. Let anyone with ears listen!”]*

The reality is that the seeds of the weeds remain. They will always be on the wind and their life cycle will always be part of the story of the abundant wheat in our lives. But here’s the difference – when we learn to appreciate their healing and nourishing properties, we find spaciousness and freedom and give thanks we did not reject them.

So, what are the weeds of imperfection and misplaced control in your life? In your family? In this community?

How are you tending them, or ignoring them?

What would it be like to accept them for what they are and invite the Holy One to show their role in your healing?