

LIVING IN THE ALREADY BUT NOT YET

Let us pray: Let the words of my mouth and the meditation of my heart be acceptable to you, O Lord, our rock and our redeemer. Amen.

Nancy and I are having extensive landscaping done in our front yard. One of the problems we are addressing is an infestation of dollarweed. We've always had small patches of this weed among the zoysia grass and other weeds that cover our big front lawn. However, this year the dollarweed seems to be taking over. I'd love to know which enemy came during the night and sowed the dollarweed seeds in our front yard!

According to one agricultural school source, "dollarweed is a water-loving plant that can float. The presence of dollarweed indicates that there is excessive moisture in the area."¹ That's the other main problem we're trying to fix in our front yard. When it rains hard, we automatically have waterfront property! We're hoping that by grading the yard and replacing the grass, we can control the dollarweed and the water problem.

For the second week in a row, we hear Jesus tell a parable about someone sowing seed. Last week it was a sower indiscriminately throwing seed here, there, and everywhere. Some seeds fell on hard ground and the birds ate them up. Some seeds fell on rocky ground and, because their roots didn't run deep, the plants withered when the sun scorched them. Some seeds fell among thorn plants and the thorns choked the life out of the sprouts. But some seeds fell on the good soil and produced an astonishingly large crop – thirtyfold, sixtyfold, even one hundredfold!

As Jesus said in last week's story, so he says again this week: "Let anyone with ears listen!" Today's parable is about a landowner who sowed some good seed in his field. By night, his enemy sowed some weeds among the good seeds. When the plants grew up, the landowner's servants realized they had a problem. The landowner's advice to his servants is where we find the meaning of the story for our lives, but it's also where we find the greatest challenge in having ears to hear!

Once again, Jesus used a familiar situation. But first, a word about someone sneaking into a field at night to plant weeds among the wheat. When you hear about that enemy making such an effort, you might wonder where in the world Jesus got that idea. Do you mean to tell me that somebody would actually do that? Well, apparently so. The Romans even had a specific law in their massive collection of laws called "The Digest of Justinian" that addressed this very situation: "If you sow tares or wild oats in another man's crops and spoil them, not only can the owner bring the interdict against damage caused secretly or by force, but he can also proceed under the *lex Aquilia*," which provided compensation to the landowner for damages done. Interestingly, the Roman law distinguishes between damage done by sowing weeds that requires compensation and adding something "that is a nuisance to separate, but without any other change being made."²

Don't think such things happened only 2000 years ago. When Nancy and I served at the First Presbyterian Church in Rocky Mount, NC in the early 1980's, Vernon Sechrist was a member of the congregation. He was the managing editor of *The Rocky Mount Telegram* and something of a local legend. He wrote a weekly column called "Relax." I used to enjoy hearing him tell his very entertaining stories.

He and another man in town had a good-natured and long-running rivalry as UNC and Duke fans. Their rivalry included playing practical jokes on each other, related to their school loyalties. Vernon told me about the time he went to his friend's house late one night and sowed grass seed of a distinctly different kind and color than the grass already in his friend's yard. When the seed germinated and began to grow, his friend saw a big UNC spelled out right there in his front yard!

Jesus' story about the weeds in the wheat begs the question: Why did the landowner tell his servants not to pull up the weeds when they asked, "Do you want us to go and gather them?" According to the parable, the landowner has a very practical reason for saying "No!" – "No; for in gathering the weeds you would uproot the wheat along with them."

I don't know why my English translation of this story left out what, to me, is very important information. The Greek version of this story says that the enemy "came and sowed in addition weeds resembling wheat among the grain and went away." Scholars are pretty confident that "the weeds" in this story are probably what's called *Lolium temulentum* or Darnel Ryegrass. The name comes from the Latin word for "drunk," because eating the ears of *Lolium temulentum* can, in small doses, make you feel drunk and, in large doses, poison you. The thing about *Lolium temulentum* is, it looks almost exactly like wheat as it is growing, so much so it is sometimes called a mimic weed. Until modern seed sorting machines were invented, it was very difficult to separate the seeds. Once the plants started growing, you couldn't tell the difference until they matured. And, on top of that, the root systems of the true wheat and the mimic weed would get intertwined underground. So, the landowner in the parable is correct when he tells his servants, "No; for in gathering the weeds you **would** uproot the wheat along with them. Let both of them grow together until the harvest time. . ."

Someone has pointed out that the landowner does **not** say to his servants, "You might or you could uproot the wheat along with the weeds." Instead, he warns them, "You **would** uproot the wheat along with the weeds." This is one way the parable can speak powerfully to us as followers of Jesus Christ, even if our literal encounter with troublesome weeds involves nothing more than trying to have a nice-looking front lawn.

Several years ago, when Dr. Mott Blair's office was still on E. Main Street in Wallace, I waited to check in for an appointment. Among the many signs about silencing your cell phone, HIPAA regulations, and insurance, I saw a quite different notice on the ledge in front of the receptionist's desk. Although I don't know the origin of the saying, the words have stayed with me over the years. It read, "There is some bad in the best of us, And there is some good in the worst of us. But there is not enough good in any of us To talk about the rest of us."

Since in his explanation of this parable to his disciples Jesus talks about ultimate things involving a judgment and sorting out of the weeds and the wheat, the sign in Dr. Blair's office seems pretty appropriate for applying Jesus' words to our lives. In many ways and in different places throughout the gospels, Jesus warns his listeners not to think too highly of themselves. In fact, in his Sermon on the Mount, he point-blank says, "Do not judge, so that you may not be judged. For with the judgment you make you will be judged, and the measure you give will be the measure you get." (Matthew 7:1-2)

In other words, Jesus' story about the weeds in the wheat warns us against making ultimate judgments about each other. Usually, maybe even inevitably, we end up doing the work of the angels when we separate the weeds from the wheat in this life. We can end up doing more harm than good when, in our zeal to decide who is in and who is out, we pull up a handful of weeds, only to realize too late that the roots of the wheat are mixed in.

That's right, we live in a world that's a mixed bag, but you don't really need me to tell you that. Some scholars suggest that the explanation of the parable is Matthew's attempt to address the harsh reality of the church in his community – that all was not hunky-dory in the church, that the church itself was a mixed bag. Maybe you don't need me to tell you that either. But before we get too offended and self-righteous, we might do well to realize that we might be the weeds in someone else's estimation!

"No," said the landowner, "don't do anything about the weeds. Leave that to the harvest time and the reapers." Those instructions trouble many people today. Is Jesus teaching us to be passive in the face of evil and not to resist the enemy? Is Jesus teaching us just to sit by and hope for the best some day in the future?

Well, it might seem that way, except all of these parables here in Matthew 13 are about "the kingdom of heaven." Notice how Jesus begins his story, "The kingdom of heaven may be compared to someone who sowed good seed in his field. . ." It's a comparison. It's Jesus' attempt to describe for us earthly minded disciples what it means to live as part of the kingdom of heaven which, according to all of the gospels, *is already right here in our midst!* So, if God's kingdom is already among us, with all of God's expectations about how we are to live as citizens of his kingdom, then we can't really be passive and sit idly by in the face of the evils around us.

It's what has been described as the "already but not yet" aspect of God's rule. Despite the way the world is (and there is no denying it is a mixed bag), we are not hopeless. There is already wheat growing alongside the weeds, because Jesus, the Son of Man, has sown the good seed and God's power is present and available to us here and now. The not yet part also brings us hope. In the parable, God is the one who sorts everything out in the end. That should come as a warning to us in the present day, but it should also be heard as good and freeing news – we are not ultimately responsible! As one preacher has said, "Like those workers in the field, we may think it's our job to pull the weeds, to judge who is worthy to flourish in God's kingdom and who should be rooted out. But that is not our job. Judgment is God's job. God will take care of removing evil in God's own good time. We live in the meantime, in the already-not-yet."

The kingdom is becoming . . . and we are part of that kingdom. The kingdom comes with limitless grace in the midst of an evil world. Our job is to offer that grace – to offer Christ – with the same kind of abundant generosity God has offered to us.”³

From a horticultural point of view, it’s impossible for a weed to turn into wheat. Even in the parable itself, there is nothing about the weeds-sown-at-night somehow being transformed into good wheat because of the landowner’s wise and patient advice to his servants.

But you can only push a parable so far when you interpret it. After all, we’re talking about God’s super-abundant, amazing grace – a grace that can produce a thirtyfold, sixtyfold, even a hundredfold crop yield from some seeds that are nurtured in the good soil.

So, what are we to do in this already-but-not-yet time? We can certainly keep from pulling up the wheat with the weeds by not making ultimate judgments about “those other people.” But we can also live as if we are the good wheat – not in a self-righteous, “Thank God I’m not like other people” sort of way, but thankfully and obediently and willingly. Who knows? When we live and act that way, maybe some weeds (even us) will somehow, by God’s grace, actually turn into good wheat.

Let me tell you another story – a parable, really – that just might help us understand this parable about the weeds and the wheat.

There once was a monastery that had fallen on hard times. As the years passed there were fewer and fewer novices. Some of the younger monks began leaving in dissatisfaction. Few people from the surrounding villages would visit any longer. Eventually only a handful of elderly monks remained and they constantly argued among themselves. Each blamed the problems and the monastery’s decline on the other monks. The abbot didn’t know what to do.

One day the abbot went to visit his friend, a Jewish rabbi who lived nearby. As they drank tea, the abbot shared with his friend what was going on at the monastery. He asked if the rabbi had any advice he could share with the monks. The rabbi sat quietly, sipping his tea. As the silence stretched on uncomfortably, the abbot pressed his friend, “Don’t you have any advice that will save the monastery?” The rabbi put down his cup and said, “I don’t think the monks will take my advice, but perhaps they will pay attention to an observation.” “Oh, yes,” said the abbot, “have you noticed something about the monastery that we haven’t?” The rabbi said, “Yes. The Messiah is among you.”

The abbot was astounded. “The Messiah is among us? Who is it?” The rabbi said, “I cannot say who it is. But share this observation with the monks and, in time, the truth will be revealed.”

The abbot almost ran back to the monastery. He was so excited to share the news with the monks. After they had gathered, the abbot said, “I have incredible news. I have just been told, without any room for doubt or question, that the Messiah is among you.”

Naturally the monks were amazed and began to ask, “One of us? Here? But who? How can that be?” The abbot encouraged them to resume their daily tasks and to think

about what the rabbi had said. So, for many days and weeks, as they went about their chores, they would wonder:

“It couldn’t be Brother Samuel, could it? He always forgets when it’s his turn to do the washing up after meals. But then, he brings such lovely flowers to decorate the tables.”

“Surely it’s not Brother Albert! He’s always muttering to himself, and when he’s not muttering it’s because he’s being rude. But then, he’s always the first there to look after us if we get sick.”

“What about Brother Leo? He’s always dirty, and he smells bad, too. But then, that’s because he works so hard in the field, growing the most delicious vegetables.”

“And I can’t believe it’s Brother Thomas! He always spills ink all over the desk where we write out the scriptures. But then, his drawings and decorations of the scriptures are so vivid and beautiful.”

The monks continued to try to figure out which among them was the Messiah, but none could draw any conclusions. But they realized that sometimes they did see the Messiah in one another’s faces. They could sometimes hear the Messiah in one another’s voices. And they began to treat one another more kindly and more fairly.

The villagers noticed the difference at the monastery and began to visit more often. More young men came to inquire about the training and chose to stay. And the elderly monks and the abbot found themselves at peace, doing what they loved to do, while their beloved monastery thrived.⁴

As Jesus says, “Let anyone with ears listen!”

Let us pray: Gracious God, Sower of life, help us to trust that you are work in the world and in our lives. Nourish the life you plant within us, that we might keep seeding the world with your truth and grace; in the name of Jesus who gave his life out of love for the world. Amen.

NOTES

¹ “Dollarweed: Fact Sheet, HGIC 2317, Updated Aug 9, 2018,” at www.hgic.clemson.edu.

² The Digest of Justinian, Book 9, Section 2, Chapter 27, Paragraph 14.

³ JoAnne Taylor, “When Not to Pull Weeds: Sermon on Matthew 13:24-30, 36-43,” July 19, 2020 at www.pastorsings.com.

⁴ This story can be found in numerous sources. This version is taken from a sermon by A.C. Millard, “The Messiah Is Among You,” January 31, 2013 at www.acmillard.wordpress.com.