

Matthew 13:24-30 New Revised Standard Version (NRSV)

The Parable of Weeds among the Wheat

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.'"

Matthew 13:36-43 New Revised Standard Version (NRSV)

Jesus Explains the Parable of the Weeds

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^[a] listen!

Sermon:



I spent a lot of time this week thinking about this new parable from Matthew. I kept thinking I had a solid interpretation and then finding holes in it... and I wrestled and wrestled. During my wrestling throughout the week, I ended up driving by this field on the way to Wayland a few times, and it occurred to me that this field is a

demonstration of what happened in this parable! Some seeds got mixed up and ended up where they ought not to be, but yet, this farmer similarly knows as the farmer in the parable, that it is not worth uprooting this corn as it would disturb the crops that they did mean to grow around it. Now, God must have disagreed with this field being the perfect illustration for my sermon, because when I stopped on the side of the road to take this picture, this large bug **flew in**, and we later figured out that it was a LOCUST. You know, like one of the plagues sent upon Egypt. I had never seen one in person before. But here we are, and there he was on my knee. Thankfully he hopped back out the window before I had to figure out how to get him out myself. Though I am not usually one to believe in an omen from God like this, perhaps this little guy was trying to tell me something, because it turns out I had a bit to learn about the wheat and the weeds that are described in this parable. This field here makes it a lot easier to see which seeds were out of place, but that is not the case in the parable, which is an important thing to remember when interpreting the passage. Let's dig into the details of what is happening in this parable and what could have been meant by it, before we apply it to ourselves for today.



This morning's parable brings us back to the fields and sowers, but this time we are talking about the seeds instead of the soil. The main characters in this parable are the two sowers, the farmhands, and the seeds themselves. Similar to last week's parable, the good sower is once again Jesus who plants the Good News in the world and in us. The farmhands may not have a direct interpretation, maybe we are all like the farmhands sometimes, helping God sow the Good News, but also often asking God what to do. But we are really supposed to see ourselves in the wheat and the weeds this week. As I indicated before, there are some important things to know about the wheat and the weeds that are not made immediately obvious in the scripture text. In our modern translations, the plant that opposes the wheat is simply called weeds, but in older English it was called Tares which is the direct translation for the Greek Zizania,

which does give us a more direct indication of what kind of weed Jesus meant. This kind of weed is what is now called Darnel, which is a type of weed that looks very similar to



wheat, all the way up until the both are ripe for harvest. [Indicate to pictures on slide]. They both grow up in an almost identical stalk, it is just when the grain is fully ready for harvest that the wheat bows over and the Darnel stays sticking straight up. The important difference between the plants is the inside, which makes it important for them to be sorted after harvesting. The darnel grain is poisonous to humans, and if not sorted from the grain going to be used for replanting, means that it will spread with the next sowing. So, the Darnel is not harmful to the wheat while they grow together, but the fruit from each have very different results and the fruit from the two not being recognized as different can cause a bigger problem for the next generation of wheat.

There is a bit more complexity to the interpretation of this parable than it seems on the surface, so I have been very careful with the conclusions I make about it. I was also really careful because I have seen how harmful some interpretations and applications of this passage have been. For example, one of the ways that this passage can be interpreted is to read it as God's judgment on injustice and sin, which will ultimately be answered with punishment at the end times, not before then. That leaves us with why Jesus would tell those who want to do something about the sin and injustice to let it continue on, doing nothing about it until the end of their life, or the end times. This maybe feels okay in the world of the parable, to know that God's got this and we don't have to worry that justice and righteousness will win out in the end. Which does have truth in it, but when we start thinking about how this plays out in our lived reality, this interpretation is easily taken to mean that we do not have to join in on seeking justice during our time here on earth: God's got it all, we have it easy. I have heard people use this interpretation of the passage to say they don't have to do anything about the problems in our world like poverty, racism, sexism, genocide or violence.

Another issue with this interpretation of God being okay with us not doing anything about injustice, is what it means for those who experience injustice and oppression. It is one thing to do nothing about injustice if it wasn't hurting anyone, but injustice actively oppresses and harms so many people in our world who are no more

deserving of that quality of life than any of the rest of us. I know from Jesus's two main commandments that that cannot be how God wants us to be. If I am to truly love my neighbor as myself, then I cannot sit by and do nothing, watching them suffer because of reasons they cannot control or cannot get out of. God's promise to vindicate that injustice later does not help those that are living a life under the weight of oppression and injustice right now. It indicates that God does not care about their suffering here and now.

The God that I know does not desire for people to suffer and be oppressed. So much of the Good News, the Gospel message that Jesus shares with us teaches us to feed the hungry, cloth and house the homeless, visit the sick, shake up the institutions that deal in unjust systems, and treat the outcast as one of our own. Based on the rest of the teachings of Jesus and the Bible, I know that I cannot interpret this passage to mean that we do not have to do anything about injustice. So, then what does the weeds stand for if not all injustice/sin/or those who make that happen?

To answer that question, I think we should start with a refresher on all that happens in the parable. I know I needed to read it multiple times over this week to make sure I caught it all. 1) A farmer sows good seed in his field. 2) without his knowledge, weeds are planted with the wheat 3) It wasn't until the wheat was mostly grown that the weeds became apparent, and the farmhands then told the farmer, and they offered to pick them all. 4) the farmer turns down their offer, saying that if they were to pull up the weeds at this point, the wheat would also be uprooted. Instead they will let them grow together until the harvest. Then the weeds can be separated from the wheat safely, favor going to the wheat.

Two of the things that stood out to me after multiple readings of the parable was what it means for the wheat and the weeds to be indistinguishable until the end, and that the weeds in this parable are different from the thorns in the parable of the soil last week that choked out the good seeds, the Darnel does not hinder the growth of the desired crop from the wheat seeds. So, to interpret this parable for us today, whatever the weeds or Darnel stands for must be similar in appearance to the good seed, not actively harm the growth of the wheat, but ultimately be something that God does not like or want to continue, but there is some kind of value in allowing it to continue growing amidst of the good seed. I thought and thought about what this means for us today, inserting different meanings and then re-reading the passage to see if it worked. I kept hitting dead ends. Then I was reading a few articles reflecting on John Lewis' life and legacy. He was a Civil Rights Icon, devoted Christian, and Georgia State Representative, who passed away within the last couple of days. A couple quotes shared at the beginning of an obituary by BBC sure makes it seem like Mr. Lewis had this parable all figured out. The quotes said, "Hold only love, only peace in your heart, knowing that the battle of good to overcome evil is already won." and "Choose

confrontation wisely, but when it is your time don't be afraid to stand up, speak up, and speak out against injustice." These quotes reminded me of something that we discussed often inside and outside of the classroom during seminary, which is that as Christians we are called to know that God's justice and righteousness will have the last word, but that we also have a duty to do something about it while we are here on earth. That doing something about it is the tricky part. With the amount of evil and injustice that we have in this world, baked into the foundations of our systems, if we are not actively working against it, we are letting it happen, and that makes us complicit to that injustice being done.

Perhaps that is the difference between those who are the wheat-like weeds and those who are the real-deal wheat. This parable isn't about those that are causing, creating, or supporting injustice versus those who are against it. It is about those who are actively working to make God's kingdom on earth for everyone versus those who perhaps have good intentions or believe what they are supposed to believe but don't do anything about it, and so by the inaction, the fruit that they bear doesn't build God's kingdom, it strengthens the injustice. Both groups may look very similar in the day-to-day, as they both believe strongly in their heart that injustice is bad, but if those feelings are not lived out, the fruit of those people will not be multiplying God's Kingdom, instead allowing for injustice to continue happening now, and be more likely to continue in the future, like the weeds in the harvest. For example, the Civil Rights Movement began almost 70 years ago, but here we are in 2020 with some of the same conversations being had over again. Racism being understood as bad by a majority has not changed, but for years now so many treated racism as a problem that was solved in 1968 and we didn't need to do any more work on it. That inaction has led us to the boiling point that was hit in late May of this year. Those actively fighting for racial justice produced fruit of continuing action, but those who believed in it but didn't do anything about it, started generations of weeds, that didn't do active harm to the movement or to others, but in the inaction, allowed injustice to keep on living.

So, the weeds are the things and mindsets that allow for injustice to continue on, what does it mean for this parable to tell us to not pluck out the weeds earlier? I believe this is less about saying the weeds should stay weeds and are just fine to stay, but instead is a reminder of how God is at work in this process. The first important way is that it is not up to us to decide the exact difference between the wheat and the weeds. To make ourselves the ultimate judge of who is and who is not doing what is right in the eyes of God. When we make ourselves the judges, especially when the difference between the weeds and the wheat is something as subjective as "action versus inaction," it is too easy for us to become gatekeepers of identifying yourself as a wheat and others as weeds, and these people who are just like us get to be a part of our group working for justice and these others cannot. When we give ourselves the power to be

judge, we humans tend to let that power get away from us, and we can start to weed too much that we end up tossing away those that were wheat, but weren't in the same growth stage as us. It can easily happen that our rules to be a wheat become more strict than God's and suddenly we are judging those who have the right idea in their heart and are trying their best to act on it, but maybe don't know how, and so this person who is or could be a fabulous stalk of wheat is uprooted in the weeding spree. Another reason we may not want to weed the inactive weeds too early reminds me of John Lewis' quote: "Choose confrontation wisely, but when it is your time don't be afraid to stand up, speak up, and speak out against injustice." Confronting someone, by identifying them as a weed and not a wheat, often has an opportune time, and when it is not that time, confronting them can cause them to be offended and defensive and can turn their inaction into opposing action, thus hindering the wheat's ability to produce good fruit. It is still not our job to judge anyone as a weed, but it is our responsibility to our fellow brothers and sisters to call out behaviors and mindsets that support injustice. But Mr. Lewis gives us wisdom, we should pay attention to when our moment to speak up against injustice is, it may not be every moment of every day in every situation, and it is important to know when we are getting nudged by the Holy Spirit to speak up and when is a moment that fighting it wouldn't be productive all around.

The last reason I have for why the weeds are allowed to grow with the wheat, only works because this is a parable that we are supposed to apply to our human lives. You see, good news everyone, we are more complex beings than wheat or weed plants. Wheat and the weeds are predetermined from the moment the seed is created to when it is planted, sprouts, grows, and then produces fruit itself, they will always be a wheat or a weed and nothing they can do will change that or the grain they produce. We are not predetermined. God created us unlike plants, able to learn, grow, and change throughout our lives so that we can come to produce the good fruit of God's kingdom and not the less than useless weed grain. God created us so there is always hope that anyone can become a wheat in God's field. And, how else are weeds supposed to know how to be a wheat unless they have wheats to show them? That does not mean that we as individuals have to keep around people who do harm to us because we might be a good influence from them. God is not asking us to allow ourselves to be beaten down, bullied, or oppressed for the better good of them and the world. But it does mean that we as a whole of God's people cannot write people off as weeds and remove them from the opportunities to learn about what God wants for them and for the world.

So, we've made it through the complicated and confusing analogy of this parable. This leads me to the ultimate question that Jesus is posing to us by giving this parable: are you a wheat or a weed? Once again, I am unsure if our answer has to be I am 100% a wheat! Or I am 100% a weed! Little in our lives is so black and white and not a gray area. But the question remains to be important. Are you someone who is actively

living out the ways that God wants us to be, Jesus taught us to be, and the Holy Spirit helps us to be? Or have you gotten a bit inactive, content that you are not causing harm and letting yourself off the hook because God's gonna handle it? Are you a bit of both, active about specific things, but holding back on others? Obviously we cannot all be running 100 mph on every issue, we don't have the capacity to do that. The nuance here is the difference between being active, doing all that you can for all those you can, and being picky and choosy about which causes you contribute to and then ignoring the existence of others. The good news truly is that we are not stuck being who we are now, God created us all so beautifully and complexly, that we can change. We are not stuck contributing to sin and injustice. We can look around at the wheat around us and see what being active against sin looks like. We all must look inside ourselves and with God's help above anyone else's, find the ways that we are contributing to injustice and sin living amongst us and work on it until we bear the grain of God's kingdom. Let us all be willing to put in the work to better ourselves and be a part of bettering our world, so that we can all "shine like the sun in the kingdom of our Father" (Matt. 13:43).

Will you pray with me?

Loving and Just God,

Thank you for making us more complex than a Darnel weed and for the fruits of your work in our world that are much bigger than a grain of wheat. Thank you for giving us incredible leaders like John Lewis who share with us wisdom and guidance. Though it can be hard to understand sometimes, thank you for giving us your Word through our scriptures, a text that we can read again and again and find new meaning for our lives today. Help us in our attempts to be your wheat, help us to fight against the inaction that is the easier choice and make the difficult choice to put in the work to become like you want us to be and to make this world, your world, more like your son taught us it should be. Help us to not make ourselves the judges of who is in and who is not. Help us to trust that you have that part covered and that your justice and righteousness will have the last word no matter how much we screw up making it happen here. I pray blessings on those who have been mistakenly labelled as the wheat. For those who have been written off by individuals or society as past the point of help. We pray for those who experience injustice, oppression, and inequality. Inspire people anew to do something about it. Give them the energy and assurance to do the hard work of dismantling those systems. Help us all to see how we can contribute to the building of your Kingdom and not sin's here on earth. We pray these things in your son's name, Amen.