

SERMON TITLE: "Parables of Growth: Wheat and Weeds"  
SERMON TEXT: Matthew 13:24-30 and 36-43  
PREACHER: Rev. Kim James  
OCCASION: July 23, 2023, at First United Methodist Church

## **INTRODUCTION**

In the news this week, we've heard about severe flooding in several northeastern states. One set of pictures I saw was from the state of Vermont, where the plant rows were barely visible through the water. Corn, blueberries, flowers, and other crops were all destroyed by the two months' worth of rain that fell in just a couple days. These were crops that the farmers had planted and cared for. They had invested their time and a lot of money. But now, mixed in with the plants is a whole lot of water and debris. This disaster of monumental proportions means that whole crops will be lost.

Fortunately, such total devastation isn't the norm in agriculture, and God blesses us with abundant food from America's vast farmland. In this late July time, when our home gardens are busy producing summer squash, and the corn stands are already opening up for business, we are reminded of the importance of agriculture. Even if we aren't farmers or gardeners ourselves, we do eat food. So, we value what happens in this season, and we can appreciate Jesus' several parables of growth that are found in Matthew chapter 13. Last Sunday we discussed the parable of the seeds and soils. Today, let's see what we can learn from Jesus' parable of the wheat and weeds.

## **1—THE PROBLEM OF EVIL**

In this parable of wheat and weeds, we begin with what theologians call "the problem of evil." Actually, theologians call it "theodicy," because they are trying to explain how a good God could have created a world that has so many problems. Theologians and regular folks alike want to know how a good God can tolerate so much evil in the world. But before we even get to those weighty questions of how and why, we need to start with the reality that evil does exist in our world. Whether you call it an act of God, the Devil, Mother Nature, cosmic fate, the sinful behaviors of your wicked neighbor, or the

greed of powerful corporations, we all know the enemy is out there planting weeds and messing up our piece of paradise. Some of us suffer more and others suffer less, but all of us know this to be true. The problem of evil exists in our world.

Once we acknowledge the presence of these weeds in our garden patch, then we can begin to ask the how and why questions. In Jesus' explanation of the parable, he clearly says the enemy who planted the weeds is the devil. The Son of Man is the representative of God who planted the good seed, not the bad. But the Master does instruct his slaves to allow the weeds to grow alongside the wheat until the time of harvest.

It's interesting that, in Jesus' explanation of his parable, the children of the kingdom are the good seed, and the children of the evil one are the evil seed. In other words, humans are acted upon and are not the actors in this story. Even at the time of harvest, it isn't humans who are doing the work, but angels. In Jesus' parable, the humans aren't responsible for anything.

Sometimes we prefer it that way, don't we? Then we can complain like innocent victims. We can moan and groan about what happens to us, but we don't have to do anything about the problems we experience. And, like I said last Sunday, there's a lot of truth in that. The world is a big place, and each of us is just one little person. None of us alone has much power to fight against the evil and injustices that surround us. Sometimes, for our mental health, we just have to accept what is and go with the flow. Ever since the first humans sinned in the Garden of Eden, thorns and thistles have been part of the human experience. Jesus' parable of the wheat and the weeds gives us the perspective that—to some extent, at least—the problem of evil is going to continue until the final harvest occurs, and that the final outcomes are in God's hands, not ours.

## **2—USE CAUTION IN PULLING WEEDS**

While we might prefer that God would clean up the evil much sooner, it's a relief, in a sense, to think that we're off the hook. The problem of evil is theodicy, after all. It's about *theos*, which is the

Greek word for God. God is the one in charge, not us. And, honestly, isn't that better? Because how do we even really know the difference between the good plants and the bad ones?

Sure, veteran farmers and gardeners can easily recognize baby seedlings and know a weed when they see one. But the rest of us might be more confused. One piece of gardening advice I've seen goes like this: "When weeding, the best way to make sure you're removing a weed and not a valuable plant is to pull on it. If it comes out of the ground easily, it's a valuable plant." Oops! A sure way to distinguish flowers from weeds is to "simply pull up everything. What grows back is weeds."<sup>1</sup> Ouch!

Of course, those methods of learning to distinguish the good from the bad—if taken to the extreme—could result in a total loss of crop. Maybe that's why Jesus included caution in his parable. When we become overly zealous about weeding out what we think are the problems, we might accidentally do more harm than good. As we saw in the Davis School District recently, when we're weeding the so-called "dangerous" books out of the library, we might accidentally pull out the Bible too. We might throw out the baby with the bathwater. When we're condemning certain types of people, where do we stop? It's a slippery slope that risks destroying all of human life.

You're probably familiar with the quotation from the Lutheran pastor Martin Niemöller who lived in Germany during Hitler's reign of terror. During that time when the Nazis were weeding out everyone they thought was undesirable, Pastor Niemöller said,

First they came for the socialists, and I did not speak out—because I was not a socialist.  
Then they came for the trade unionists, and I did not speak out—because I was not a trade unionist.  
Then they came for the Jews, and I did not speak out—because I was not a Jew.  
Then they came for me—and there was no one left to speak for me.

Our human discernment about what's good and what's bad is frequently prone to error and in need of large amounts of humility and enlightenment. Maybe it's better to be cautious, to accept some imperfections in life, to leave some weeds with the wheat, in order that there might, in fact, be some measure of wheat left in the end for God's angels to harvest.

### **3—THE CHALLENGE**

The problem of evil in the world is a big conundrum, and if that's all Jesus were talking about in this parable, that might have been enough. We all want to understand and make meaning of this life we have been given. And some days it's enough simply to ponder the deep questions and leave well enough alone.

But I suspect that Jesus might have had more in mind than just urging caution. Based on Jesus' other teachings about loving our neighbors as ourselves and praying that God's kingdom would come on earth as it is in heaven, I suspect that Jesus was also telling this parable of the wheat and weeds as a kind of challenge to his listeners. I don't think Jesus wanted us to just sit idly by, watching life unfold like a movie on a screen. Certainly, Jesus didn't stand around with his hands in his pockets. Sure, Jesus took time to pray, sleep, eat, and relax. Yes, Jesus allowed others to care for him sometimes, as we all need. But most of the stories we have about Jesus are about him teaching the uneducated, healing the sick, feeding the hungry, including the outcasts, and defending the powerless. Because Jesus instructed his disciples to go and do likewise, I think Jesus did want us to be engaged and involved now. I believe Jesus does want us to be solving the problems of evil in whatever ways we can in this present age.

I appreciate Jill Trenholm's song that she sang. From the perspective of Mother Earth speaking to her children, we heard the words, "I gave you everything, . . . I gave you seeds, I gave you everything you grow, simple pure and clean. . . but you've made a mess, and it's time to clean your room."<sup>2</sup>

None of us can carry the weight of the whole world, but sometimes we do need to wake up and realize that some pretty horrible weeds are growing in our garden. We can't allow ourselves to become apathetic and let the bad weeds take over. We can't just throw up our hands in despair and check out. We can't just turn off the news and disconnect. If we're feeling impotent, and like nothing we do matters, then we're listening to the wrong sources of information and allowing ourselves to fall into a crisis of faith. In our baptismal vows, we promise to renounce wickedness and resist evil. So, we need to

remember that the children of the master are the good seeds. The only way there will be a harvest of wheat at the end of time is if the wheat continues to grow and doesn't give up.

So, while we don't need to pull out everything that we think it might be a weed around us, we do need to do our best to grow like our divine planter intended for us. We need to mature into the plants and produce the fruits that we were designed to grow. Just like the saying, "The apple doesn't fall far from the tree," if we are children of God, if we are the good seed planted by Jesus, then our lives should be of the same type that his was. We will speak truth, not falsehoods. We will responsibly do what we say we will do. We will be kind and compassionate. We will care for those who are sick, hungry, homeless, and vulnerable. We will share our bounty with those who have too little. We will include those who have been left out. We will defend those who have been treated unjustly. We will welcome the immigrant. And we will clean up the mess that we have made on this earth, so that we can curb the climate change that is fast threatening to destroy the harvest.

In telling this parable, Jesus was offering a challenge to the good seeds. Worry less about plucking out weeds and put your energy into doing your part to grow a good crop of wheat for God.

## **CONCLUSION**

Earlier in the service, we sang the hymn, "A Farmer in a Field." I like the prayer in the final verse:

God, may we humbly see  
the harvest still is yours;  
and one day we'll be blessed to find  
that love is what endures.<sup>3</sup>

Quite likely the problem of evil will be with us until the end of this earthly reality. But if we rise to the challenge to grow as good seeds, maybe we'll see a harvest that matches the will of our master. This, I believe, is the point of Jesus' parable of the wheat and weeds.

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<sup>1</sup>These quotes are from an email from Sermons.com on July 18, 2023.

<sup>2</sup>Jill Trenholm composed this song. Date and copyright info unknown to me.

<sup>3</sup>Carolyn Winfrey-Gillette, c. 2010.