

“Where did the weeds come from?”

Matthew 13: 24-30 and 36-43

August 2, 2020

A Sermon Preached by Reverend Debbie S. Osterhoudt

This morning we are continuing to ponder the parables of Jesus. I have always been fascinated with the parables. The Greek word for parable means “to set side by side.” Jesus was a master story teller and he often told stories in the form of parables. Parables are like diamonds – if you turn them just so in the light, you see new colors and reflections of light. I invite you to join me in pondering some of Jesus’ parables. This morning’s parable is discovered in the 13<sup>th</sup> chapter of Matthew’s gospel. It is interwoven with the Parable of the Sower, which we considered last week.

Prayer for Understanding

Read Matthew 13: 24-30 and 36-43

My family has always celebrated the Fourth of July together – for at least several generations. I remember when I was growing up my parents, siblings, and I would attend, along with some 100 extended family members, a Fourth of July family reunion at my Aunt Rachel’s farm in South Georgia. My great, great Aunt Sis Jesse, who seemed to me to be about 150 years old, was always in attendance and everyone was expected to pay homage to her at some point during the day. Aunt Sis Jesse grew up on a cotton farm in South Georgia; everyone living in this small rural community attended the

primitive southern Baptist. Of course, as a child, I wasn't sure what that meant but I would hear my father tell stories about Aunt Sis Jesse. She believed that playing cards on Sunday, doing any sort of work on Sunday, drinking alcohol and dancing, were all the work of the devil. My father delighted in recounting the time when he and my mother visited with Aunt Sis Jesse (this was before they had us children and not long after they were married) and they spent the night on a Saturday night, agreeing to attend worship with her the next day. That Sunday morning the preacher spent over an hour railing about the evil of drinking alcohol. After worship, my parents agreed to Sunday lunch back at Aunt Sis Jesse's home— fried chicken, garden vegetables, biscuits, deviled eggs — you get the picture. And dessert and coffee on the front porch. As they were pleasantly rocking on the front porch, Dad took one sip of his coffee, which was served to him in an oversized coffee cup, only to discover, quite shockingly, that it was laced with rather strong alcohol. Dad loved telling this story long after Aunt Sis Jesse was dead, because of the hypocrisy; listening to and affirming the preacher's admonition against the evils of drinking alcohol, and then not two hours later, drinking those very same devil created spirits.

The truth is the world is not black and white. People are not all good or all bad. Weeds grow amidst the wheat in the garden of our lives. Otherwise decent and good people make bad, destructive choices; we tend to be a mixture of wicked and blessed. We live with good and evil. I have discovered after years of ministry that the people who are the harshest critics, adamantly judging and condemning the actions of others, are the very same people who are trying desperately to hide their own wickedness. Most of our fields are full of mixed plantings — weeds and wheat. So, this business of

gathering the weeds and burning them makes me nervous. In my yard, I am not even sure, at times, what is weed and what is wheat.

Let's take a look at what Jesus has to say about a field of wheat and weeds.

In this parable Jesus is the sower. The field belongs to God and we, you and I, are travelers through this world which belongs to God. The church belongs, not to you and me, but to Jesus Christ, the sower of the seed. We may like to pretend that we live in a world of our own creation, but that is not entirely, or even mostly true.

The weeds – well, they belong to the devil,

The wheat belongs to the sower.

The moral of the story – don't let the weeds consume the wheat.

The workers of the field are so eager to please that they ask "Do you want us to go and gather the weeds?" The type of weed which most often threatened a field of wheat in a Palestinian farmer's field was darnel. Darnel is wicked – nothing to mess with. Palestinian farmers learned to uproot darnel early, once or twice before the harvest, so that they did not have to worry about the darnel seeds at harvest time. If too many darnel seeds turn up in bread dough, it could cause blindness and even death. Best to deal with the weeds when you see them. To let the wheat and the darnel grow together posed an unnecessary risk, but one that Jesus was apparently willing to take. Why?

Do you know the story of kudzu? Kudzu was originally cultivated by the Japanese for its edible tubers and for its kemp-like fiber. In 1876 it was brought to America from Japan for use as a decoration at the Japanese pavilion at the Centennial Exposition in Philadelphia. In the early 1900's a Florida farmer, E.E. Pleas, became what

might be called an apostle of kudzu after growing the plant as a flower. It spread rapidly, and when his livestock took to liking the leaves, Pleas began to market the harvested plant leaves as fodder and to offer root stock by mail order. In the 1930's the US government distributed some 84 million seedlings in the southeast between 1935 and 1943. By 1943 the Kudzu Club of America would boast 20 thousand members, all devotees of this wonder plant. Southern belles competed for the coveted title of Kudzu Queen. The vine's chief virtue – its magnificent rate of growth; about a foot a day – would soon turn out to be its fatal flaw. Fruit growers began to complain that kudzu was choking their orchards, farmers reported that it broke their baling machines, and railroad engineers accused it of causing trains to slip off their tracks. It was not long before the kudzu nurseries shut down, the Kudzu Club was disbanded, and the United States Department of Agriculture demoted kudzu to weed status, a weed being defined as “a plant that does more harm than good.”

Sometimes it is mighty hard to tell the difference between a good plant and a bad one, especially when it can act both ways. We all have probably had the experience of uprooting a blackberry bush by mistake, or even a tiny rose bush, or perhaps protecting a plant that turns out to be thistle. I don't know what makes us think we are any smarter about ourselves or other people. We are so quick to judge, as if we knew, beyond a shadow of a doubt, the difference between wheat and weed. Turn us loose with our machetes and there is no telling what we will chop down and what we will spare. Meaning to be good servants, wanting the wheat to flourish, we go out to do battle with

the weeds and we may end up standing on a pile of wheat. Why not leave that judgment to the owner of the field?

This parable reminds us that it is not the responsibility of the field worker to determine which are the poisonous plants and which are good plants. The sorting out will be done at the harvest by the Gardener who sowed the seed in the first place. The function of the church, or the servants in the field, is maybe conversion and restoration, in keeping with Christ, the Sower, who came to call, not the righteous, but those who knew they were sinners in need of repentance. The very imperfection of the church proves its message: that good can overcome evil. In spite of the weeds, there will always be wheat. This parable is a story of grace. It reminds us to moderate our expectations about perfection. And as we think about weeds, it is important to remember that the gardens of our own lives have them. And most gardening books warn: Never trust weeds. They have become very clever at survival, and one of their cleverest tricks is to look dead after you have dug them up. The tiniest dead looking bit of weed may contain enough life to start a new plant while your back is turned. Those nasty imperfections, our sins, weeds in our lives, have a way of springing to life when our back is turned.

This parable reminds us that the field belongs to God and our human judgment is colored by our own weediness. So be careful about what we judge needs plucking up or chopping down.

The Reverend Barbara Brown Taylor, professor of religion at Piedmont University in north Georgia and adjunct professor of preaching at Chandler School of Theology in Atlanta, Georgia shares this twist on this parable. One afternoon in the middle of the

growing season a group of farmhands decided to surprise their boss and weed his favorite field of wheat. No sooner had they begun work than they began to argue. First about which of the wheat looking plants were weeds. And the blackberries – what about them? It was a shame to pull up something as sweet smelling as honeysuckle. About the time they had gotten around to debating the purple aster, the boss showed up and ordered them out of his field. Back at the barn he took their machetes away from them and made them sit down and watch the way the light moved across the field. At first all they could see was the weeds and what a mess the field was in. But as the summer wore on, they marveled at the profusion of growth – the tall wheat surrounded by goldenrod and brown eyed Susans. All bloomed together. Then the reapers came and carefully, expertly, gathered the wheat and made the rest into bricks for the oven where the bread was baked. And when the harvest was over, the owner called them all together – the farmhands, the reapers, the neighbors – and they all broke bread together with the owner as host.

This parable is about the mystery and magnitude of God's grace. It's about living in a world which is not perfect, but where much good exists. It's about our partnership with God to transform our weeds into wheat and trusting God to do the same in the lives of other people. It is about learning to live in a world that is not black and white. It is about understanding that the field ultimately belongs to the one who created it and being patient with God and with each other. Let those who have ears to hear, listen.