

“The Good, the Bad, and the Weedy”  
Matthew 13:24-30, 36-43

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I love to feed birds. At my house in Indiana, I would usually have three different bird feeders going at the same time. One feeder was primarily for seed, there was a basket to hold suet for the woodpeckers, and there was also a hummingbird feeder. Often, I will also throw a coffee can full of seed on the driveway for the ground feeders. Once I counted over 50 mourning doves pecking at the seed in the driveway at the same time. I had to hose it down after they were done. Obviously, I haven't been as diligent this year as I have in the past, because I spend much less time at home than I used to. However, you could tell that I took good care of the birds last year by what has happened to my wife's garden this year.

You see, my feeders are all on shepherd's hooks hanging over my wife's garden of flowers and bushes. Now, if you are a bird feeder, then you know that there are always seeds that the birds just don't enjoy as well as others. The birds (and occasionally chipmunks and squirrels) will get on the feeders and dig through the seeds to find the kinds they like best, which are usually the sunflower seeds. As they dig, they end up scattering the seeds all over the ground beneath the feeder – in my wife's garden. And sometimes they don't even get all the sunflower seeds. Well, you can imagine what happens! It all takes root in my wife's garden. We have corn stalks and sunflowers and millet and thistle and God-only-knows what growing alongside my wife's flowers. I tried to weed it once, and my wife told me that I pulled some of her good plants. She then asked me kindly to just leave her garden alone, and that she would take care of it.

This is pretty much what Jesus is talking about in our parable for this morning. An "enemy" has come at night and "sowed weeds among the wheat." Maybe this enemy thought it would be funny, although he would have to have a pretty cruel sense of humor. Maybe he just wanted to aggravate the farmer by causing him more work. Maybe he hoped the weeds would destroy his rival's crop. We don't know the reason - but we do know that the enemy had malicious intent and wanted to cause harm.

In the reality of our lives, we often find ourselves living among enemies and bullies. As children, we learn to deal with or escape from the playground bullies. I remember when I was in elementary school in Detroit there was one boy—a year older than me—who would always take my ball away from me on the playground. I would yell at him to give it back. He usually did—by bouncing it off my head or nose or anywhere else that would leave a mark. One day he just wouldn't give it back. He told me to take it. So, I did; or, I should say, I tried. We both had scrapes and bruises on us by the time the playground aides pulled us apart. Of course, we both got detention—but he never took my ball away from me again!

As teens, we learn, sometimes the hard way, to avoid those kids who are always ready to cause trouble. As adults, we learn that no matter how polished a person may look or how eloquently they speak, most anyone has the power to bully us, and some do. And, as a society we witness a whole new scale of bullies in the world—those responsible for the Jewish holocaust, the Jonestown Massacre, the Sandy Hook Elementary School shooting, the attack on the World

Trade Center, and genocide in Armenia, Rwanda, and Cambodia.

As individuals and as a society, what are we to do? "Shall we tear the weeds out?" the servants ask?

Well, the master knows that there is a problem with pulling up the weeds. Those weeds, probably darnel—which is also known as "cheat wheat"—look exactly like wheat to the untrained eye. Darnel is also known to wrap its roots around the roots of other plants, so if you do pull out just the weed, the chances are very good that you will still damage the wheat. And on top of all that, the wheat is very delicate when it is young. If the servants go tramping through the wheat, they could do more damage to the wheat than the weeds are doing. So, no, it wouldn't be helpful to pull the weeds. And so, the master tells the servants, "We just have to let the weeds grow until the wheat grains are set, and then we will cut it all and sort out the weeds and burn them."

Well, that is fine for wheat and weeds, but how can we be assured that the bullies of this world—those people who have malicious and evil intent toward others, and act on those intentions—how can we be sure that they will be punished? Jesus answers us in this parable, but perhaps not giving us the answer we want. "Yes, they will be dealt with," Jesus tells us, "but in God's time, not yours. We have to wait until the end, when we can tell the weeds from the wheat. But count on it, the weeds will not be mistaken for the wheat then."

This isn't an easy lesson to accept, is it? We don't want to just sit back and do nothing. Let go, and let God? I think not! We want to judge. We want to punish, don't we? We know who the evil ones are, and they are certainly not us. Are they?

Let's think back to the story of my fight on the playground. The other boy was evil, obviously, and I was good, wasn't I? Well, I did attack him physically—and we both got punished. Maybe good and evil isn't quite so easy to distinguish. Maybe it isn't as black and white as we would like.

Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn, the Russian author and critic of Soviet totalitarianism, once said: *"The line separating good and evil passes not through states, nor classes, nor between political parties... but right through every human heart and through all human hearts"*

Ouch! Maybe it isn't so simple to discern between the good and the evil. Maybe those we consider evil aren't all bad all of the time. And, just maybe, those of us who consider ourselves good—maybe we aren't all that good all of the time.

The artist Sting wrote a song entitled *Russians*. The final stanza goes like this:

*We share the same biology;  
Regardless of ideology.  
What might save us—me and you,  
Is that the Russians love their children, too.*

The Rev. Sandra Herrmann, a retired United Methodist pastor, wrote a sermon on this parable in dialogue format. Jesus is trying to teach the disciples the meaning of this parable, but they just don't want to accept it. Here is a small segment of Jesus' explanation:

*"It's about living shoulder to shoulder with those you do not trust, those you don't like, even those you think are dead wrong. The world is full of any number of people of whom you disapprove. God is letting the wheat and the weeds grow up in the same space. Eventually, anyone will be able to see who the good guys are and who the weeds are. Right now, day by day, it's not an easy thing to see. When you're talking about people, there's always the hope that a weed will become convicted in his heart and will strive to be wheat instead. But how are the weeds to hear the good news unless we admit them into our circle? It's only in the day to day living that this can happen."*

Last week we heard the parable of the sower. Jesus told us about the difficulty seeds have in taking hold of God's word and growing up to be fruitful. This week's parable, of the weeds among the wheat, is about the problem of recognizing one plant from another, and the lesson is the difficulty in discerning the good from the bad.

Though on the surface they may seem like cute little stories, these parables carry profound truths that are sometimes hard to accept. Weeds that threaten to choke the harvest, but cannot be ripped out because the wheat would be pulled out with them. Seeds that fall on pathways, and amongst weeds, and in shallow soil that is not beneficial to a strong root system, and so are unable to produce fruit.

The lessons in the parables are not always simple. The more we think about them, the more troublesome they become. They are difficult to just skim over or ignore. As I prepare for a sermon on a parable, I keep mulling the parable over and over in my mind, asking myself, "What in the world does Jesus mean by *that*?" It is often possible to come up with a variety of possible meanings for each of them. And I always believe that there is more to the parables than what is obvious on the surface. The thing to remember is that they all attempt to give us a clearer picture of the kingdom of God. And in God's kingdom, all things happen in God's time, and that is always hard for us to accept. AMEN