

Wheat or Weeds? In or Out?

Matthew 13:24-30, 36-43

Good Morning Church Family,

It's good to be together this morning. We're continuing our series on the Kingdom of Heaven parables that are found in Matthew chapter 13. Last week, we talked about the Parable of the Sower and how Jesus, as the master of the Garden, invites us to sow love, grace and peace in our communities with joyful abandon, trusting that Jesus will make the harvest grow.

Our scripture text for today is known as that parable of the Wheat and the Weeds. At first blush, the story that Jesus tells is stark: images of good and evil, who's in and who's out, complete with a fiery judgment at the end. It's the sort of parable that would have struck fear into me as a child growing up in the church. God was coming to execute judgment and I best be ready, best be sure that I was growing as a wheat and not a weed. There's an echo here from last week's Good Sower parable- the pressure here to assume more responsibility or more control over the harvest than belongs to us.

So often the temptation is to turn these parables, these great, mysterious nuggets of truth about the New Kingdom of God into a simple morality tale. What's right and wrong? Who is the good guy and who is the bad guy? What rules do we have to follow to fall in line with the good side?

And while it is true that Jesus offers us wisdom and guidance for life through the parables, Jesus is also attempting to teach us more about who God is and what this New Kingdom Vision means for us and our world. This morning, I'd invite you to set aside the hunt for the moral of the story and instead to explore the question of who is God and how does God act towards humanity in this parable? What is the Good News embedded in the story of the wheat and the weeds?

To help us explore these questions, listen to this meditation from Psalm 139. I'll be reading verses 1-7, "O Lord, you have examined my heart

and know everything about me.

You know when I sit down or stand up.

You know my thoughts even when I'm far away.

You see me when I travel

and when I rest at home.

You know everything I do.

You know what I am going to say

even before I say it, Lord.

You go before me and follow me.

You place your hand of blessing on my head.

Such knowledge is too wonderful for me,

too great for me to understand!

I can never escape from your Spirit!

I can never get away from your presence!"

Psalm 139, one the most beloved Psalms of the Church, crafts an image of God as the one who knows us fully, who is present with us from the womb to the grave. We cannot escape God. As these verses illustrate, God is the one who knows us intimately. We can perhaps fool others or even ourselves about who we are, but we cannot fool God.

If we use Psalm 139 as a lens through which to look at the parable of the wheat and weeds, a different framework emerges. We're invited to turn our attention to the Master in parable, that is God. Starting in verse 27 of Matthew 13, "The farmer's workers went to him and said, 'Sir, the field where you planted that good seed is full of weeds! Where did they come from?' 'An enemy has done this!' the farmer exclaimed. 'Should we pull out the weeds?' they asked. 'No,' he replied, 'you'll uproot the wheat if you do. Let both grow together until the harvest. Then I will tell the harvesters to sort out the weeds, tie them into bundles, and burn them, and to put the wheat in the barn.'"

We see here the workers, that is us as followers of Jesus, rushing to the Master and saying, "Look! This evil has sprung up in our world. We see it! We'll take it out for you, get rid of it, so only that which is good and right can flourish!" But the master doesn't say, "Go for it! You know what you're doing!", rather he says, "No no, that's my job. I and my harvesters will take care of it when the time comes."

Elisabeth Johnson, a professor at the Lutheran Institute of Theology writes this, "Perhaps the slaves represent the disciples, or anyone who hears this parable and its interpretation. Who among us has not questioned why God allows evil to grow and thrive? Who among us has not wanted to take matters into our own hands and root out the evil in our midst? The master stops the slaves from doing anything of the sort. For one thing, it is not so easy to tell the weeds from the wheat, and for another, their roots are intertwined below the ground. Rooting out the weeds would uproot the wheat as well, doing more damage to the crop than leaving the weeds to grow. Jesus says that the reapers -- not the slaves -- will take care of this at harvest time. "The Son of Man will send his angels, and they will collect all causes of sin and all evildoers, and they will throw them into the furnace of fire, where there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth. Then the righteous will shine like the sun in the kingdom of their Father" (Matthew 13:41-43). It is the angels -- not any human beings -- who are authorized to pluck out the weeds from the wheat."

Is it possible that Jesus is reminding us that the harvesting, the winnowing of wheat from weed, good from evil belong to him because it is ultimately God, and only God, who knows us intimately enough to decide?

When my paternal Grandfather passed away nine years ago, his story and relationship to us, his family, was complicated. He was an alcoholic, a man who was angry, abusive to his ex-wife and children. The life he chose to live seemed like a weed, not a redeemable quality to be found. And yet, the pastor who performed his funeral treated his story and indeed God's intimate knowledge of my grandfather with such care, and grace. Only God knows our truest self, and only God holds the keys to life and death, not us. Even now, nearly 15 years after his passing, that truth still holds on to me. God whispers this graceful truth in my ears, when I feel certain in my righteous ability to sort the wheat from the weeds. We are the servants in the fields, not the harvesters, nor the Sower.

The reminder here is to let God do the farming. That's hard, isn't it? It's hard for us, for me, to allow the wheat and the weeds to spring up together, to tend them and wait, wait, wait for the Harvesters to come and finish the task. We could make the garden so beautiful, we think, we could pull all the thistles, thorns and briars in our lives, our churches and our neighbourhood. Let us in there, God, we've got our garden gloves,

our round-up spray, and plenty of righteous indignation!

And yet, from the voice of Jesus, we hear God saying, That is not your work. Allow them to grow together, tend them, love them, care for all that I have entrusted you with and then leave the harvest to me.

Recognizing then that God calls his people to care for both the wheat and the weeds in our lives, our churches and our world, what practical steps can we take as disciples of Jesus to ensure that we are being faithful to our work while trusting that God will be faithful in God's work?

First, we must actively resist the temptation to pass judgement on another person, church or situation. Unlike God, we are not omniscient, and we can never fully know the inner workings of the heart. It can be easy to pass judgement, to assume that people or dynamics can never change. My kids have been in a rather squabbling pattern lately- lots of fighting and bickering, as siblings do. Still, after a few weeks of this, my nerves were frayed. "All they do is fight!" I thought, "We'll just have to referee them for the rest of their lives! And then on Ezra's first day of Kindergarten, before she ran off to join her class on the playground, she hugged Ezra, kissed him on the top of his head and said, "I hope you have a great first day of Kindergarten, Ezra!"

This is a small scale example, but the heart of it rings true. We can extend grace to others, and to ourselves, because only God knows the whole heart. Another Rachel Held Evans quote that often return to, when I'm tempted to sort people into "Wheat or Weeds" categories is this: "Cynicism may help us create simpler storylines with good guys and bad guys, but it doesn't make us any better at telling the truth, which is that most of us are a frightening mix of good and evil, sinner and saint." If God is unbothered to let wheat and weeds grow together, perhaps we can be too. If God's judgement waits for the harvest, perhaps we can wait on him too.

So as we wait together in love and grace, what then shall we do? We can throw ourselves wholeheartedly into our mission- "proclaiming the good news of the kingdom of God drawing near." Modeling the love and most especially the grace for others that is at the heart of the parable and at the Heart of the Kingdom of Heaven. Let us make that our mission. To bring good news, that Jesus has come for you and for me, for wheat and for weeds. That nothing, and no one, is beyond redemption because God has redeemed even death through the resurrection of his son, Jesus Christ. And this is good news for everyone. Good news for those who are trapped in certainty, and good news for those who find doubt their constant companion.

As God's children, wholly and dearly loved, let's proclaim this good news to everyone,

whether or not we feel like it's doing anything, whether or not we believe someone or something to be wheat or weed. Let us humble ourselves before the Lordship of Jesus Christ to say "You are in charge of the harvest, you have asked us to serve in your fields."

In closing, friends, we serve a Good God who has invited us to labour in his fields, pouring the Gospel, the living water, onto the soil, nurturing all grows there. We are being asked to let go of our agendas, our belief that we know what is best, and instead to rest in the knowledge that God has searched all our hearts and knows us in our innermost being. We can trust that the loving, omniscience that is part of the nature of God will have the final word when God chooses to gather up the harvest. And this, dear friends, is good news for us and our weary world this day.

Amen.