

“Weeds, Wheat and Worry”
Matthew 13:24-30, 36-43
Rev. Denise Wright Ingram
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A man was stopped at a traffic light waiting for the light to turn green. When the light changed, he was distracted and didn't budge. The woman in the car behind him honked her horn. He still didn't move. She honked again. Then she began pounding on the steering wheel and blowing her horn non-stop. Finally, just as the light turned yellow, the fellow in the first car woke up and drove through the light. The woman in the second car, stuck at the intersection for a second time, began ranting and raving. During mid-rant, there was a tap on her car window and she looked up into the face of a police officer. “Lady, you are under arrest,” he said. “Get out of the car and put your hands up.” He took her to the police station, had her finger printed, photographed and put in a holding cell. Hours passed. The officer returned, unlocked the cell door and escorted her back to the booking desk. “I apologize for the mistake, lady,” he said. “I pulled up right behind you as you were blowing your horn and cursing out the fellow in front of you. I noticed the left bumper sticker said, ‘Follow Me to Sunday School.’ The sticker on the right said, ‘What Would Jesus Do?’ Naturally, I assumed you had stolen the car.”

It is hard to tell weeds from wheat at times.

I was friends with a clergy couple while living in Birmingham, AL. We shared meals in each other's homes and played bridge together. Arriving one night for dinner, I noticed the house was in disarray, my friend in a state of shock and her husband nowhere in sight. My friend confided her husband had become physically violent during an argument earlier in the afternoon. I was flabbergasted to think he was capable of violence even more appalled because not only was he a Christian, he was a minister.

It is hard to tell weeds from wheat at times.

One day Jesus told a parable about weeds and wheat. When he told a parable, Jesus used ordinary objects and events from daily life to teach something important about the kingdom of heaven. Jesus addresses the life of the church, the church being like the field in this parable. In his story, the weed is not a weed but represents sin, anything and everything that works against the great purposes of God. The Sower of the seed is not just a sower, he is the Son of

God, the Savior of the world, Jesus. The parable tells us there are weeds entangled in the wheat, good and evil are mixed together similar to how there are weeds as well as wheat “in the pews.” Apparently, evil within the church, just like weeds mixed in with the wheat, has been a problem for centuries.

What happens in the parable is this: The household sows good seed in his field and during the night the enemy, Satan, comes and sows weeds right in the same field where the wheat seed was planted. No one realizes it until spring comes and the weeds rise out of the ground right alongside the wheat.

The servants go to their master and ask, “Where did these weeds come from?”

The master answers, “The enemy planted them.”

“Don’t you want us to pull them up?”

“No,” the master answers. If you do that, you might uproot the wheat along with the weeds. Let them grow until harvest time, and then I’ll tell the reapers to collect the weeds first, tie them into bundles to be burned as fuel, and the wheat will be gathered into my barn.”

The people listening to Jesus’ parable knew the precise weed he was describing.

The Greek word for weeds is ‘Zizania’ which is a very particular type of weed that looks just like wheat as it is growing up. You can hardly tell the difference. Today it is called ‘darnel’ wheat. It looks like wheat, it appears like wheat but it is not wheat. It fools you. The weed is a menace to the harvest. It is a problem because the roots of the darnel intertwine with the roots of the wheat and to pull up one damages the other. It is just as difficult to tell wheat from the weeds within the church because the weeds look so similar. Perhaps what makes the weeds even harder to distinguish is that we all often look like hybrids. Sometimes I am wheat and sometimes I am weed. Some of the things I do that appear to be good and holy turn out to be more about me than about Christ and the things I am not even aware I am doing end up making a difference. It is hard to distinguish the weeds from the wheat. We think we are pulling up a weed, but it turns out to be wheat. We think we are leaving some wheat, but it really is a weed. You and I do not know, only God knows. “Don’t you want us to pull up the weeds?” we ask, like the servants in the parable. “No,” says the boss. Only God knows who and what are useful in the kingdom of God.

Notice the master is not worried in the least that the wheat will get choked out by the weeds. He knows what he has planted will come to harvest. We know it too. But sometimes we forget. Nothing can stop God's work in Christ. His kingdom is forever. Even when it is difficult to discern signs of the kingdom, the seeds of salvation are alive and well, growing, always growing in our midst.

Salvation is sometimes spoken of as a defined moment in time (when I accepted Jesus Christ as my Savior) but it is also the on-going process of being transformed into the likeness of Jesus Christ throughout our lives. All of us are a "work in progress." There is no way you and I can know where someone is "in the process," no way we can know the transformation God intends for their life. And yes, there is the pesky problem of free will, that each person is given the will to choose whether s/he will follow God's intended purpose.

Adolf Hitler served as an altar boy in the Lutheran Church in his youth. Weeds or wheat? Who would know? God.

Several years ago in Georgia, a state representative made a speech before the legislature imploring his colleagues to pass a bill that would impose extra penalties for hate crimes committed against racial minorities and gay people. He told the legislature that all his ancestors in the 19th century had owned slaves. His great-great grandfather had fought in the Civil War. His third grade classmates had clapped when President John F. Kennedy was shot and the news passed along in the classroom. His college fraternity had ostracized six of its members because they were gay. He told of the African-American woman who had raised him, changed his diapers and taught him more than anyone else the difference between right and wrong. He told how one day when he was a boy leaving for school, she had leaned over to kiss him on the cheek. He had averted his head because he assumed that such a thing was not supposed to happen. An African-American woman kissing a white boy. He spoke of the regret he had carried ever since. "On the day that we buried that magnificent woman, I pledged to myself that never again would I look in the mirror and know that I had let prejudice or hate or indifference negatively impact another person's life." Then he said, "I have finally figured out that the only way we are ever going to make progress is when someone steps up and takes a stand. I urge the House to pass this hate-crimes bill." And so they did.

A young boy who had demonstrated racist behavior grows up to advocate for legislature protecting racial minorities and gays. Weeds or wheat? Who would know? God.

This parable reminds us God is in control. Weeds in the wheat is not the way God wants it to be, nor will it always be this way. Selfishness, abuse, greed and hatred are the enemies of God and the fact that they are an inevitable part of God's people does not mean they are a part of God's will. Just because the church has its share of hypocrites does not make the gospel hypocritical, nor does it destroy the integrity of God. When all is said and done, this evil will not endure; the goodness of God will prevail, the tender wheat will be protected and saved.

What I struggle with is the master's instructions to the servants that they are not to get involved with separating the wheat from the weeds. We in the church are tempted to ask the same question about troublesome members, "Don't you want us to pull them up?" "No," God says. Like the t-shirt slogan says, "What part of 'No' don't you understand?"

"Just leave the weeds alone," Jesus said. God knows what is good and what is not.

Scripture describes people considered to be weeds--the needy, the afflicted, the outcasts, prostitutes and tax collectors--and often they became wheat. Do you think the weeds can become wheat? The Bible thinks so. "Anyone who is in Christ is a new creation," the Bible says. "The old life is gone. The new life has begun."

Jesus tells us the signs are not always clear, especially in the beginning. Our responsibility, our job as Christians is to take care of ourselves leaving the others to God. We need to remember that the next time you and I are tempted to put on our garden gloves, grab the Round-up and tackle those weeds.

Let anyone with ears, listen. Amen.