

# Weeds

Matthew 13:24-30, 36-43

The bearded darnel is a devil of a weed. It defies Emerson's claim that a weed is "a plant whose virtues have yet to be discovered." Known in biblical terms as "tares," bearded darnel has no known virtues. Its roots surround the roots of good plants, sucking up precious nutrients and scarce water, making it impossible to root it out without damaging the good crop. Above ground, darnel looks identical to wheat, until it bears seed. Those seeds can cause everything from hallucinations to death.

No wonder Jesus uses this noxious "cheat weed" to illustrate evil incarnate. Bearded darnel, also known as false wheat, is the botanical equivalent of the "ravenous wolves ... in sheep's clothing" of which he has already warned his disciples. Jesus said this evil is intentional. Unlike the story about a sower, this is not a parable of happenstance, of good seed falling onto infertile soil. Here the enemy deliberately sows cheat weed in a field of good wheat. Jesus clearly acknowledged the reality of evil. His parable illustrates evil's destructive nature, underscoring both the necessity of eradicating it and the difficulty of doing so.

There is not a person among us who does not know what Jesus is talking about. Sometimes our own lives resemble the farmer's infested field, with weeds and wheat intertwined in our souls, hearts, and minds. The apostle Paul certainly knew it and expressed it: "I do not do what I want, but I do the very thing I hate" (Rom. 7:15). Members of Alcoholics Anonymous or Alanon do too. The First Step confesses, "We are powerless over alcohol and our lives have become

unmanageable." The Fourth Step is to do a "fearless moral inventory," sorting out the wheat from the weeds within.

Our personal experience of the enemy's sowing vary from person to person, as in the countless distractions we let derail us. E-mails, phone calls, and endless meetings can make it look as if we are working on the realm of God, but they may simply be symptoms of our own divided souls. Sometimes our jobs can feel weed infested and under assault by the evil one. Like the servants of the parable, many of us face the challenge of separating the weeds from the wheat in our workplaces, our social lives and our spiritual lives. Maybe it is the middle manager who is glad for her company's big profits, but is not sure about the bookkeeping behind them. Maybe it is the teacher facing a clique of parents whose well-meaning criticism chokes out his creativity and care for his students. Perhaps it is the lawyer who is asked to look the other way for the "good of the firm." You can put in your own scenario.

We are not first-century Galilean farmers, but we confront evil every day. Jesus did too. Just before he told this parable, the Pharisees—leaders of his own faith—tried to trick him and began their plot to destroy him. They looked like true leaders, but they were as false and deadly as any bearded darnel where he was concerned.

Jesus and the author of Matthew also knew that evil can infest the community itself. Elsewhere in the Gospel, Jesus warned against "false messiahs and false prophets," those who cry, "Lord, Lord," and seem faithful and caring, but who lead people astray and harm the community ([24:24](#); [7:22](#)). In contemporary terms, Kenneth Haugk, founder of Stephen Ministry, describes such people as "antagonists in the church." By any name—antagonists, weeds, wolves, false prophets, false wheat—they are a reality in the community of faith. Jesus' parable acknowledges that hard truth.

At the same time, his parable clearly cautions against a rush to judgment. We cannot always tell initially what is a good plant and what is not. The story is told of a grandmother, a master gardener, who once transplanted some flowers from her garden into her son's front yard. Two days later, she was back, frantically digging up the same plants. "I made a mistake," she said, sweat dripping from her eighty-year-old face. "These are weeds, not the flowers I had intended! Quick, give me a hand before your mother gets home!" Although the beloved grandmother is scarcely the evil one of Jesus' parable, her story underscores the challenge of distinguishing good from bad, wheat from weeds, loyal opposition from heresy, healthy conflict from destructive antagonism.

Thus the landowner told his servants to be patient and wait until the harvest, when they can see the difference by the fruit that is borne. Such patience is not an excuse for inaction or conflict avoidance. Jesus knew only too well the wiles of the evil one. He knew that failure to deal with evil allows it to spread, just as seeds of the noxious darnel multiply and infest other fields. In his interpretation of the parable, Jesus identifies the reapers as angels who come at the "end of the age." The fact is, the weeds often win out in this life. Jesus knew that. So do we.

The parable's ending affirms that there is One who is stronger and smarter than the weed-sowing enemy. God will sort out the good from the bad. In a world where seeds of hatred and injustice are daily sown, the parable affirms unequivocally that God is still in charge. **Talitha J. Arnold**

In our concern to sort out the evil from the good, we have only to be reminded of our own fickleness and betrayal to be aware of how easy it is to rush to judgment before the story is complete. This parable is about waiting and judgment, gathering and separation, preservation and destruction. There are two potential responses to evil mixed with good. First comes the response of the slaves, who want to know if the householder has inadvertently sowed bad seed and—if

so—whether they should rid the field of weeds. The other response is that of the householder: wait and live with the paradox until God's resolution at the consummation. **J. David Waugh**

The God who is glimpsed in this parable models for us an infinite patience that frees us to get on with the crucial business of loving, or at least living with, each other. Often, in the space created by such patience, it is not just others, but we ourselves, who are welcomed into a larger reality. This is the sense in which we are "reborn" not just once, but over and over and over again.

This parable gives us a picture of a blessed mixture of weeds and wheat growing together until harvest is not just a glimpse of the faithful church in our own time, but is finally a glimpse of the future judgment at the end of time as we know it. This text points us to a God who does not merely tolerate endlessly a world that is a mixture of good and evil, faith and faithlessness, triumph and tragedy, but who finally, in God's own good time, acts both to judge and to redeem the world. As Christians we believe that, for the sake of this hurting and impatient world, and through Jesus Christ our Lord, God's realm will at last be completed and revealed in all its fullness. Meanwhile, this realm is thriving in us, around us, and even, miraculously, sometimes through us; and God is pleased to let all of it "grow together until the harvest" (v. 30).

Patrick J. Willson, a superb preacher and pastoral theologian, has said that Jesus did not say that the kingdom was like a rock, fixed and solid and firm and unchanging. Jesus did not say that the kingdom was like a giant machine, that you put some things in and you get some things out and that what you get out depends upon what you put in. He said it was like an enormous tree that grows out of a tiny seed. A tree that grows so enormous that all the birds of the air can come and find shelter in its branches, even strange little ducks like you and me. He said that God was like a housewife who puts a smidgen of yeast in the three measures of flour

and that yeast yields its life into the whole batch of dough. That is the way that the kingdom is, growing from the very beginning into all that God has intended....

From the foundation of the world, the very first moment of creation, it is the kingdom that has been on God's mind, and God is infinitely patient as it grows.

It is toward this very God that we are forever moving—individually, collectively, and as a cosmos. On such a journey as this, it is not our job to determine who is within and who is beyond this God's attention. It is rather our job to imagine everyone as belonging to this God, and therefore, with all that we can muster, to endeavor to embrace, through Jesus Christ our Lord, God's holy and purposeful uncertainty. **Theodore J. Wardlaw**

Feasting on the Word: Preaching the Revised Common Lectionary - Feasting on the Word – Year A, Volume 3: Pentecost and Season After Pentecost 1 (Proprs 3-16).