

Weeds in the Garden

Matthew 13:24-30, 36-43

²⁴ He put before them another parable: "The kingdom of heaven may be compared to someone who sowed good seed in his field; ²⁵ but while everybody was asleep, an enemy came and sowed weeds among the wheat, and then went away. ²⁶ So when the plants came up and bore grain, then the weeds appeared as well. ²⁷ And the slaves of the householder came and said to him, 'Master, did you not sow good seed in your field? Where, then, did these weeds come from?' ²⁸ He answered, 'An enemy has done this.' The slaves said to him, 'Then do you want us to go and gather them?' ²⁹ But he replied, 'No; for in gathering the weeds you would uproot the wheat along with them. ³⁰ Let both of them grow together until the harvest; and at harvest time I will tell the reapers, Collect the weeds first and bind them in bundles to be burned, but gather the wheat into my barn.'" ...

³⁶ Then he left the crowds and went into the house. And his disciples approached him, saying, "Explain to us the parable of the weeds of the field." ³⁷ He answered, "The one who sows the good seed is the Son of Man; ³⁸ the field is the world, and the good seed are the children of the kingdom; the weeds are the children of the evil one, ³⁹ and the enemy who sowed them is the devil; the harvest is the end of the age, and the reapers are angels. ⁴⁰ Just as the weeds are collected and burned up with fire, so will it be at the end of the age. ⁴¹ The Son of Man will send his angels, and they will collect out of his kingdom all causes of sin and all evildoers, ⁴² and they will throw them into the furnace of fire, where there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth. ⁴³ Then the righteous will shine like the sun in the kingdom of their Father. Let anyone with ears listen!"

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 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 (Matt. 7:15). Moreover, Jesus says, these weeds, this evil is intentional. Unlike the preceding story about a sower, this is not a parable of happenstance, good seed

falling onto infertile soil. Here the enemy deliberately sows cheat weed in a field of good wheat.

This is a reminder that Jesus clearly acknowledges the reality of evil. His parable illustrates evil's malicious nature, underscoring both the necessity of eradicating it and the difficulty of doing so.

There is not one of 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 knows it: "I do not do what I want, but I do the very thing I hate" ([Rom. 7:15](#)). Members of AA or AL anon 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 may be more subtle, 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. 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."

We may not be 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—try to trick him and begin their plot to destroy him. They look like true

leaders, but they are as false and deadly as any bearded dandelion where he is concerned.

Jesus knew and Matthew also knows that evil can infest the community itself. Elsewhere in the Gospel, Jesus warns 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. Commentator Arnold tells of her grandmother, a master gardener, once transplanted some flowers from her garden into their 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.

In the parable the landowner tells his servants to be patient and wait until the harvest, when they can see the difference by the fruit that is borne. Jesus knows only too well the wiles of the evil one. In his interpretation of the parable, Jesus identifies the reapers as angels who come at the "end of the age." **Talitha J. Arnold**

This 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. Our scripture 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. Christians 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. Wilson, 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.

On our journey of faith, it is not our job to determine who is within and who is beyond God's attention. It is rather our job to imagine everyone as belonging to God, and become the community of Jesus, called to imitate Jesus, to follow Jesus, to present the face of Jesus to the world, and to act in his name according to his command to love, through Jesus Christ our Lord, and the grace of God, and the power of the Holy Spirit. **Theodore J. Wardlaw**

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. This harvesttime judgment is the ultimate good news, be it for the person facing corruption in their workplace or those living in times and places of oppression. 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**

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