

## **"We've Got Weeds"**

Matthew 13:24-30, 36-43

This spring as part of a Cub Scout project with my son, Jonah, I planted an indoor garden in a small aluminum dish. I carefully spread the seeds in one inch of soil, watered them, and placed them by the window. Within a few days, I had nice green sprouts shooting up. After a few weeks of growing, the plants slowly began to take shape. Occasionally, I would pick out a few to nibble on, and even though I pulled them out as carefully as I could, I accidentally pulled up several plants at once. Apparently I do not have a green thumb, because many of the young sprouts wilted and died. But my wife was able to transplant the strongest ones to her garden.

Now, let me tell you, Katja has a beautiful garden, but tending it is hard work. How many of you have gardens or flower beds? You know the effort it takes to keep them tidy. I am in awe of how Katja cares for her little plot, bending over, trimming, watering and weeding, all the while expecting a good harvest at the end of summer.

The hardest part of gardening is the weeding. Nobody enjoys it. It takes forever, and when you get one spot done, the very next day it is full of weeds again! There are times when I wish I could just go and napalm the weeds, but I don't think Katja would appreciate it. Even my little indoor garden sprouted with weeds and a mushroom! All we want is a healthy garden? Why, oh why, can't we just get rid of the weeds?

In the context of this age-old agricultural conundrum, Jesus tells the parable of the wheat and the weeds. It goes like this: A farmer sowed a good crop. He plowed and planted, watered and waited. And while everyone was

asleep, his enemy got a bunch of tares – poisonous weeds – and scattered them among the wheat. I can imagine the enemy standing there with a bunch of white dandelions, and with a malicious laugh, PFFF! - blowing hundreds of those puffy white seeds all over the field.

The sun rose and the rain fell, and the plants started to grow. Now the farmhands, as they watched the little green shoots of wheat sprouting up out of the soil, noticed with dismay that nasty weeds were appearing, too. So they asked their master what they should do. Should they rip out the weeds? No, the master told them, because in the process they would harm the good crop as well. Although the servants were eager to do something about the problem immediately, patience was advised. The master would decide when to separate the weeds and wheat. Not now, but later, when the time was right.

Jesus goes on to explain to his disciples that he is not talking about garden plants, but about people. Apparently, the disciples were wondering about something. Jesus had announced the kingdom of heaven was at hand (reference), so why was there still evil in the world? Why has Jesus not gotten rid of the weeds? Why does he allow the weeds and wheat to grow together?

We wonder the same thing in today’s world, don’t we? There is a fancy seminary word for it: theodicy. Put more simply, why does a good God allow evil to exist? God, you are a good and just and loving and compassionate. Yet we read about evil in the news. We experience the effects of evil in our lives. This does not make sense to us. Theodicy: We believe God is good, and yet God allows evil to persist. Why?

This is a question that has dogged humankind since the beginning. It dominates our thoughts, and we struggle to understand.

Take for instance the recent movie, *The Shack*. In one scene, Mac, the main character, is given a chance to sit on God's throne and judge all creation. He is told to discern for himself what is good and evil, including which of his children belong in heaven or in hell. The process is very difficult for him, and he eventually surrenders the throne back to God.

That scene hit me hard. The truth is, we want to judge, especially against those who harm our loved ones. So we label things. They are either normal or odd, right or wrong, good or evil, and when we judge against them, our desire is to remove them, as quickly as possible. We want to pull up the weeds!

However, we are not talking about inanimate objects or plants. We are talking about real people. When we make our judgments, our words are rude and unkind, impatient and vindictive. Have you heard these phrases before? "Fire the incompetent and lazy people!" "Put all the criminals in prison!" "Bomb the terrorists!" Effectively, we are saying, "Break out the herbicide! Kill the weeds!" (That's from one of my seminary colleagues.)

Once we start judging the world, how easy is it to continue judging the church? It does not matter if you are a pastor or someone who simply sits in the pews, there are times when we look around and think, "I wish those people were somewhere else." We are tempted to avoid someone simply because we don't like them. We even wish that they would leave the church. Oh, it is not that we think that they are evil. They just do things that drive us crazy! They act, think, do things in ways that seem totally opposed to us. Their performance is not perfect, and the little voice inside our heads tells us, "Yank them out. Just uproot them and find someone else."

It is easy to judge and condemn, but when you have been on the receiving end, you realize that this quickly becomes very messy. I know. Twice, I was asked to leave youth ministry positions because things were not going the way the church leadership wanted. There was no evil involved. My integrity was intact. But to the church, I looked like a weed. I was sucking up the resources and not bearing fruit. It was very painful, for myself, for my family, and for my church. There was some maturing we all had to do.

We want to judge. We want to remove the weed. Yet, in this scripture, the servants are specifically told not to remove the weeds. If they pull out the weeds, the good crop would be lost.

There are two agricultural issues at play here. First, how can the servants even tell the wheat and the weeds apart before they ripen? The specific weeds referred to here are "darnel" or "tares," a weedy rye grass that looks like wheat in the early stages, but is easily distinguished at harvest time.<sup>1</sup> Second, in the process of weeding, they would pull up good plants, just like I did inadvertently with my little indoor garden. It is much better for the field to grow the way it is, weeds and all, until the good wheat fully matures. In fact, the servants won't have to do any of the weeding at all. The harvesters will be in charge of the separation. The servants' job is to tend the soil, allowing good and bad to grow side-by-side.

What is Jesus saying? The wheat still grows, despite the presence of the weeds. Don't worry: the weeds will get collected and burned eventually. The wheat will be harvested and stored in God's barn. And Jesus makes it very clear

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<sup>1</sup> Michael J. Wilkins, *Matthew*, (The NIV Application Commentary. Grand Rapids, Mich.: Zondervan, 2004), 482.

who is in charge. He is the one who separates the weeds from the wheat! Not us.

This is good news in our world. We can trust God to remove all evil when the time is right. Our job is simply to tend the soil and help the good crop grow.

My transitions in ministry were never easy. It was difficult to leave any congregation, to move my family, and to trust that God was opening a new path for me. But one thing that I always did was trust God. I never held grudges against any churches I served. I always respected and prayed for their leadership, even if I disagreed with them. And I see something critical now. Because I was patient, God offered all of us grace, even through the pain. I did not have to take responsibility for any dramatic action. I surrendered my responsibility to judge. God made the way for me.

But maybe that story is not poignant enough for you. Let me tell you about Pam Stenzel, an author, speaker, and counselor to young women. (For more information, see [www.pamstenzel.com](http://www.pamstenzel.com)). She wrote No Screwing Around, an honest book for teenagers about sex. She has an amazing message, and not only does she honor God with her words, she teaches teenagers the many benefits of abstinence.

Pam Stenzel's mother was teenage victim of rape. Dwell on that thought for a minute. If that crime is not a picture of evil, I don't know what is. Yet Pam's mother made a difficult choice: she chose to go ahead with the pregnancy and give up her daughter for adoption. I heard Pam speak at a conference several years ago, and I cannot tell you what a blessing she was to our youth group. Thank God that no weeds were pulled up in her life before God had a chance to use her.

Jesus is trying to make it clear to us. When it comes to people, we have to resist the urge to purge. Yes, as Christians and as United Methodists, we are called to “resist evil, injustice, and oppression in whatever forms they present themselves,”<sup>2</sup> but it has never been our job to remove them from the world. As long as sin is in the world, there will be brokenness. There will be evil. But there is also good. There is redemption. Our job is to simply tend the soil. We must allow others to grow and mature. And then we must let God be the judge.

When we pass judgment, when we try to remove evil instead of nurturing good, we end up like my poor plants – worn out, dried up, and ineffective. We waste our time in conflicts instead of pursuing grace, both in the world and in the church. Consider one of the greatest complaints against us, that the church is full of hypocrites. So, if we removed all the hypocrites from the church, who would be left? No one.

The mission of the church is to tend the good soil. Do decisions have to be made? Of course. Should we discern right from wrong, good from evil? Absolutely. But put down the spiritual weed-wacker and the sickle. Put the judgmental Round Up back on the shelf. Do not try to get rid of evil on your own. That is God’s job, not ours. Instead, allow things like grace and love to be the water and sunshine that allows the garden of God’s people to grow, and when the time is right, those little green sprouts that we call disciples will mature, and be brought into the heavenly barn, where we will enjoy the harvest with Jesus.

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<sup>2</sup> United Methodist Hymnal, p. 34.