

7 Pentecost 2020

We believe in the risen Christ, who meets us in the brokenness of life, accompanies us on all our wanderings, and forever seeks to welcome us home with open arms.

Literally, within 30 feet of our house lies a very large field, where the owner plants winter wheat. 3-4 weeks ago, it was easy to imagine Jesus and the apostles walking through and plucking the wheat off of the stalks.

Then this past week, we watched the combine going through the field with small stalks left in its path. That is pretty much the reality of this field throughout the summer months. I realized that somehow the wheat berries ended up somewhere in a bin on the combine as there was no truck that followed alongside. But I had to look up a combine to see what the process was like. Not so surprisingly, the steps of the process, itself, are similar to how things were done in Jesus's day. But a lot less work for the harvester. Especially when it come to the weeds. Weed prevention today is very scientific. The specific types of weeds are located and identified to see which herbicides might be needed. Everything possible is done to prevent the weeds from growing with the wheat. One type of weed was especially concerning for the Jewish farmers. Its name is *Lolium temulentum*, or Darnel. It has been called a "mimic weed," or "false wheat" because it looks and behaves so much like wheat, it is very difficult to tell the difference throughout much of the growing process. Further complicating the problem of the darnel is the fact that as the wheat and darnel plants mature further, their roots can intertwine. As Jesus pointed out in this morning's parable, attempting to pull out the weeds could also pull out the wheat. They had to be left alone to grow together. When it came time for harvest, the Darnel or Tares would be gathered up first and burned.

Darnel occupies a grey area in human agricultural history. It's definitely not good for us. If it's berries got mixed up with the wheat and people ingested them, they could get dizzy, off-balance and nauseous. Its official name, *L. temulentum*, comes from a Latin word for "drunk." In fact, it has actually been used in beer to kick it up a notch. But ingesting too much can cause death.

In this morning's parable, the weeds are gathered and burned but in other parts of the Bible including Psalms, Isaiah, Job, and Matthew, it is the chaff that is burned. In Matthew 3:11-12 we hear John the Baptist crying out:

"As for me, I baptize you with water for repentance, but He who is coming after me is mightier than I, and I am not fit to remove His sandals; He will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and fire. His winnowing fork is in His hand, and He will thoroughly clear His threshing floor; and He will gather His wheat into the barn, but He will burn up the chaff with unquenchable fire."

Weeds make sense, the chaff maybe not so much. Although the chaff is not digestible for humans, it is sometimes used for cattle feed. Often, as the winnowing forks toss the stalks up into the wind, the chaff or husks are simply blown away. Weeds are weeds and should not be there, but the husk which protects the wheat berry until harvest does need to be there.

The process of harvesting wheat is very interesting. You can watch how this is still done without technology in various parts of the world today.

Last week, I attended a brief online Bible Study about this Gospel. Several folks commented that there is disagreement among scholars whether or not Jesus told the parable, or at least

the discussion with his disciples. With further research, it seems to be that the disagreement comes with Jesus' explanation of the parable, in verses 36-43. This does appear to be out of place and therefore it would not be a surprise if these verses were added later by Matthew, or someone else, to make a specific point. In these verses, the final judgement is the focus.

Evan Gardner is a priest in Fayetteville, AR. and wrote the following in 2014:

“All of us depend upon God’s promise that one day everything will be made right. All suffering will cease. The prisoners will be set free. The lowly will be lifted up, and the mighty will be pulled down. We look for that day, but we know that we have to wait until “the end of the age” for it to happen. And so, we need hell—at least the concept of hell. We need to know that someday oppression itself will be imprisoned. We need to know that torture itself will be tortured. Does God need it to work that way? I don’t think so—otherwise he’d go ahead and pull those weeds out. But those who will live their entire lives under the threat of evil must cling to the hope that, in the next life, those weeds will be thrown into the fiery furnace”. (End quote)

That is certainly one way to look at the reading. But when you read the parable by itself without the explanation, the focus just may take on a different meaning.

Weeds are a fact of life in many gardens and fields. We see less of it today in modern wheat fields due to the use of various herbicides. I have watched this done in the field next door. Apparently, it works pretty well.

Jesus is talking about the reality of weeds and wheat interact in humanity. We know this to be true, but it is not as black and white as we would like it to be. Many times, we are the judge and jury over others we meet or read about.

--Abraham Lincoln is widely considered to be one of the greatest Presidents ever and author of the Emancipation Proclamation. However, on September 18, 1858, Lincoln made this statement. "I will say then that I am not, nor ever have been, in favor of bringing about in any way the social and political equality of the white and black races,". He also said that he opposed blacks having the right to vote, to serve on juries, to hold office and to intermarry with whites.

He publicly advocated for colonization in 1852, and in 1854 said that his first instinct would be "to free all the slaves, and send them to Liberia or Central America."

Weed or Wheat?

--Joshua Milton Blahyi (born September 30, 1971), is a former commander of forces under the wider control of Liberian warlord Roosevelt Johnson. Blahyi was known for his violence and atrocities during the First Liberian Civil War in the early 1990s. He said in 2008 that he killed at least 20,000 people and carried out regular human sacrifice and cannibalism of children.

In 1996, he converted to Christianity and became an evangelical preacher, taking care of child soldiers and making amends for his violent past.

Weed or Wheat?

--Jim Jones at one time was a civil rights activist and the Director of the Human Rights Commission in Indianapolis. Of course, he is more well known as the leader of a notorious cult called the People's Temple. He somehow convinced almost 1000 members of the cult to commit suicide, which they all agreed to.

Weed or Wheat?

1. In Gaddafi's Libya, a home was considered a natural human right and was a basic human need.

2. Education and medical treatment were all free

3. Gaddafi carried out the world's largest irrigation project designed to make water readily available to all Libyans across the entire country.

4. If any Libyan wanted to start a farm, they were given a house, farm land, livestock, and seeds all free of charge.

5. Electricity was free

6. Gaddafi raised the level of education

Before Gaddafi only 25% of Libyans were literate. This figure was brought up to 87% with 25% earning university degrees.

Weigh all of this against the multiple human rights violations he committed.

Weed or Wheat?

Sometimes it is not so easy to decide. You may say that these are glaring examples of good and evil and you might be right. But do **we** get to decide who is a weed or the chaff blown away by the wind?

This is what stands out for me from the parable. It is not up to me to be judge and jury. God is God and I am not. The weeds and the wheat, in God's Kingdom, will be allowed to exist together until the harvest. When the time is right, Jesus will decide.

But what about each of us who are children of God? What about the bad things that we have done, the decisions that hurt other people; the hurtful comments and judgements that we have made against others; the shared gossip that went unchecked. Those are weeds too that we need God's help to control.

Knowing that God will set things right when the harvest time comes, does not mean we get to sit on the sidelines and watch. There are no quick fixes when it comes to the social justice issues that haunt our churches and our communities. Those weeds have very deep roots. These are systemic evils that need our active intervention. We are talking about evil as a noun not an adjective describing a person.

As a civil rights activist, Representative John Lewis said: "When you see something that is not right, not just, not fair, you have a moral obligation to say something...To do something. Our children and their children will ask us, 'What did you do? What did you say?' (end quote).

My sisters and brothers, we still need to be wheat. The more that we live and love as Jesus does, the stronger we are and the deeper our roots will grow.

So Be the wheat:

* Grow where you are planted.

* Grow tall and strong and crowd out the weeds.

* Let your influence shade out or deprive the weeds of the sunlight and water they need to survive.

* Don't be a stalk of wheat in a field by yourself. Grow with others in a field of wheat.

* No stalk of wheat worries about a weed nearby; the farmer's going to take care of that weed when the time is right.

And for all those who say that they could never be a stalk of wheat, because they have **a gluten sensitivity**; Not to worry. God can handle that also.

God is in control. God always has a plan. And we can trust the plan.

Amen!