

A World Full of Weeds
A Sermon for Every Sunday
Pentecost 8A
Matthew 13:24-30, 36-43

Here's a question for you: What are good, God-fearing people like you and me supposed to do about all the evil in the world? Although you won't find it anywhere in the Gospel of Matthew, it is that question, or one very much like it, that lies behind the parable of the wheat and the weeds in chapter 13. "A farmer had a field," Jesus says, "perfect and pure, ready to produce nothing but good grain, but in the night an enemy came and sowed weeds among the wheat that had been sown. And later, when the wheat had grown up, the servants who worked in the field came to the master and said, 'Didn't you sow good seed? Look at this. Your field has weeds growing in it!'" And Jesus would say, later, that that field is like the world: Weedy. Corrupt. Not the way it was supposed to be.

No one needs to tell you we live in a world like that; you know it for yourself. You read the paper, you watch the news, and if you do it often enough you often find yourself shaking your head at the enormous difference between the way the world ought to be and the way it actually is. Most of the time that difference leaves you feeling powerless. What can you do about it? But there may be other times, when you are feeling especially outraged or especially brave, that you think maybe you could do something about it, and like the farm hands in the story you might find yourself volunteering to go out into the world and rip evil up by its roots. And that's when the master says, "Wait."

And that's what surprises me about this parable.

Whenever we read the parables, we need to pay attention to the surprises, to those places where expectations are upset, because that's how parables "work." Well, this is that place in this story, because what you would expect from the master is precisely what you don't get. You would expect him to say, "Yes! Pull the weeds as quickly as you can. Get that stuff out of my field." But instead he says, "No. Let the wheat and the weeds grow together until the harvest." If this story really is, as Jesus says, a story about evil in the world and God's response to it, then what Jesus is saying is that God doesn't have any immediate plans to uproot all the evil among us. God's plan, for now, is to let it be.

That's hard to believe, isn't it?

Every once in a while I will talk with someone who has worked himself into a lather about some evil or another, about some movie that seems sacrilegious or some television show that pushes the boundaries of good taste, about people selling liquor-by-the-drink in small towns or bringing the lottery across a state line. "We've got to do something about this!" they will say. "We've got to put an end to this kind of evil!" And if, on the basis of this parable, I suggest that we shouldn't do anything, that it isn't our business to uproot the evil in the world, they can hardly believe it.

"What?!" they ask. "Are you telling me that in a world full of weeds God doesn't have any interest in weed pulling?"

"Well, yes, if we're going to be faithful to this parable, that's exactly what I'm telling you."

Remember what the master said to the slaves? “Don’t pull up the weeds, for in gathering them you would pull up the wheat, too.” In other words, “You’ll do more harm than good” (notice that he doesn’t say they *could* pull up the wheat, but that they *would*), because the type of weed that is sown in this story is a very specific kind. It is *Lolium Temulentum*, also known as “darnel,” an annual grass with long, slender bristles that looks very much like wheat. It would be easy to mistake it for the real thing. And in a frenzy of weed-pulling you would yank up the good along with the bad.

Can you see how the same caution might apply to dealing with evil in the world? Sometimes it’s hard to tell the difference between the good and the bad, and sometimes, in pulling up what you think is a weed, you may in fact be pulling up wheat. And it doesn’t just happen in the world; sometimes it happens in the church. Back in 1979 the Southern Baptist Convention adopted “Bold Mission Thrust,” an initiative to take the gospel to every person on earth by the end of the century. But in that same year some people who felt the denomination was drifting too far to the left launched an initiative of their own, a plan to take control of the Convention and purge it of its liberal influences.

And that’s just what they did.

Over the next ten years they fired a whole host of professors and journalists, seminary presidents and denominational employees. Others resigned while they still had a choice. A great many more left the denomination. By the end of the century, instead of being known as the people who reached the world for Christ we were known as those Christian who were always fighting with each other. Our witness suffered, our

reputation was hurt, and the name “Baptist”—which we once wore so proudly—became something of an embarrassment. Many Baptist churches don’t even use it now. Some have changed their names to “community” churches in the hope that visitors won’t be scared away. I don’t think those people who wanted to purge the denomination of its liberal influences envisioned such results, but in their zeal to pull up the weeds much good wheat was lost, and maybe some day even they will be able to look at the uprooted field of the denomination and realize that more harm than good has been done.

In the story Jesus tells, the enemy sows his evil seed and then goes away. He seems confident that the damage he intends will be done. Robert Farrar Capon says that the enemy doesn’t have any real power over goodness anyway: the wheat is in the field, the Kingdom is in the world, and there is not one thing he can do about it. But, Capon adds, “He can sucker the forces of goodness into taking up arms against the confusion he has introduced, to do his work for him. That is why he goes away after sowing the weeds. He has no need to hang around. Unable to take positive action anyway—having no real power to muck up the operation—he simply sprinkles around a generous helping of darkness and waits for the children of light to get flustered enough to do the job for him.ⁱ”

But in the parable, at least, that’s not what happens. The master says, “Wait. Let the wheat and the weeds grow up together until the harvest, and when the harvest comes I will tell the reapers to collect the weeds and bind them in bundles to be burned, but gather the wheat into my barn.” Can you see that it’s not as if the master in this

story likes having weeds in his field, it's just that he has a different plan for dealing with them. His solution to the problem is ultimate, rather than proximate. And Jesus wants us to hear that more often than not, this is God's way of dealing with the evil in the world, in our cities, in our families, and in our selves—not immediately but finally, once and for all.

And Jesus should know.

There was plenty of evil in his time. If he had asked any of his disciples they could have pointed out a dozen social problems that might have been eased by divine intervention: Poverty. Injustice. Prejudice. Prostitution. Oppression. Drunkenness. Drought. Disease. "Look at the world," they might have said to him. "It's full of weeds. Surely this isn't the way it's supposed to be!" And surely they were right about that. But their way of dealing with those problems was different from God's way. They thought that by overcoming the Romans, re-establishing Israel as a political kingdom, and electing the right man to rule it everything would be as it should be. They thought they could fight their way, legislate their way, vote their way into the kind of Kingdom that would please God.

They were wrong.

Read the Gospels carefully and you will be amazed by how little faith Jesus puts in the political process. He seems much more concerned about rescuing people than about rescuing programs and he does it God's way, by going to Jerusalem, where he is arrested, tried, and crucified. As he hangs there on the cross it would be easy to believe that God's way has failed, that evil has triumphed, that the field of the world has been

completely overcome by weeds. But that's not what happened. In the death of Christ we who believe believe that evil was somehow, ultimately, conquered, so that while it might exercise dominion for a while, it will not exercise dominion for ever.

We believe that one of these days all the evil in the world is going to be gathered up into bundles and burned in the furnace. "It may not be today," Jesus says, "it may not be tomorrow, but one of these days Evil is going to catch it right in the teeth," and when that day comes, "the righteous will shine like the sun." In the meantime I think we ought to begin trusting the one who will deal with evil ultimately rather than fussing over it so much proximately. I think we should accept the fact that we live in a world full of weeds rather than trying to pull up every plant that looks vaguely suspicious. The truth is that none of us is completely free of evil. There is more evil in the best of us, and more good in the worst of us, than any of us, in this life, will ever know. All the more reason to stop judging everyone and everything, to leave the sorting of good and evil to God and his angels, and for our part—for our part—to spend most of our time trying to be wheat rather than pull up weeds. When the harvest finally comes that's what will matter most.

I asked the people at my church in North Carolina to imagine what would happen if we adopted a policy of weed-pulling, if we drew a circle around the little town of Wingate and made a vow that no evil would cross that line, that no weeds would grow within that border. I said, "You know, you and I could spend the rest of our lives protecting that boundary, standing shoulder to shoulder with pitchforks and clubs, making sure that we kept drugs and alcohol and pornography and gambling safely on

the other side. I think it would take all our energy and most of our time. But what if we did it? What if we succeeded? (and they started to get excited about the idea). What would we have?" (Hmm, they wondered. What *would* we have?). And then I popped the bubble. "We would have a town characterized by the absence of evil, which is not the same as a town characterized by the presence of good." And maybe this is what Jesus was talking about all along, that it's better to have a wheat field with weeds in it than a field with nothing in it at all.

When that church began a ministry to the children of a nearby trailer park we had to decide what kind of ministry it would be. We could have chosen to root out all the sources of evil in that place—to chase down the drug dealers and the deadbeat dads, to confiscate handguns and round up child abusers. Instead we chose to put up a basketball goal, sing songs about Jesus, tell stories from the Bible, serve cookies and Kool-Aid. Most of all we chose to love children who didn't seem to have a lot of love in their lives. And two years after we started that ministry, two years of going out there Saturday after Saturday to do those things, I got a note in my mailbox with five words on it: "Adrian wants to be baptized."

Adrian. Terror of the trailer park. The one person who had made our work most difficult during the previous two years. Who would have guessed? Instead of pulling weeds in the field where she lived we just tried hard to be wheat, and somehow Adrian saw that, and admired it, and wanted it for herself. After she was baptized there was a little more wheat in the field. And because she was there, soon, there was even more.

In a world full of weeds maybe the best strategy we can adopt as Christian people is the strategy Paul suggests in Romans 12:21:

“Do not be overcome by evil, but overcome evil with good.”

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ⁱ Robert Farrar Capon, *Parables of the Kingdom*, p. 102