Parable of the Weeds (Matt. 13:24-30)

At the age of 34 I finally owned a piece of land and a home, or at least was paying for a mortgage for a piece of land and a home. The great American dream had come true. Prior to that I had lived in apartments, condos, and parsonages. I had no great ambitions for keeping up with the Jones and having the nicest yard in the neighborhood. I just wanted to blend in, not the blight of the community with others whispering, “That preacher’s yard looks terrible. Can’t we do something about him?” So that first spring when the flowers started to bloom, the grass needed mowing, and the smell of honeysuckle floated in the breeze, I went to work. I’m here to tell you there were dandelions in my lawn, big yellow-flowered dandelions smattering my lawn like dots on the back of a ladybug. Like Bill Murray determined to kill that varmit in Caddyshack, I was set to rid my yard of dandelions.

I took a hand shovel and bucket and went to work. For hours, I labored on my knees, being very careful to get the whole root, lest they find a door for new growth. I dug up more than 150 dandelions throughout the evening, dismissing the opportunity to eat dinner at a normal hour. I was inspired, determined, zealous to purify my lawn so the neighbors would have no reason to murmur about the family on the block. I went to bed that night with a deep sense of satisfaction, triumph I’m unashamed to say.

The next morning I woke up, opened the front door in order to bask in my recent victory and almost fainted. Evidently, an enemy in the middle of the night had come and planted 2 dandelions for every one I had deposed the previous day. My yard looked like a nursery for infant yellow daisies. I was horrified I almost called 911.

Operator: Yes, can I help you.
Me: Yes, operator, someone broke into my yard last night while I was sleeping and planted dandelions all over my yard.
Operator: Calm down sir. Tell me your address.
Me: 103 Ridgecrest Drive. Hurry.
Operator: Sir, are you OK? Do we need to send an ambulance?
Me: No, just a weed killer. They’re everywhere. I think that more are showing up even as we speak.
Operator: Sir, are they armed?
Me: Of course, they’re shooting their little pistils all over the place. Somebody’s gonna get hurt.
Operator: Sir, stay on the line we’ll have the police and fire department there within 5 minutes.

The world is full of weeds and no matter how much we try and how much toxin we spew, they won’t go away. It is futile to kill the weeds. They only come back and besides, it’s not easy to kill the weeds without killing the grass, or poisoning the water, or basically doing more harm than good.
Today I want to preach on Jesus’ parable of the wheat and the weeds. It’s another of those parables that seems simple enough, but the more you dig into it, the more treacherous the interpretation. We’re aided in our interpretation of this parable by Jesus himself. Of the 40 or so parables taught by Jesus only this and one other are given some explanation. This cuts down some on the mischievousness of so many interpreters who make the parable fit into their own theological biases. Jesus’ explanation limits some of the confusion, but I’m still not confident I understand exactly what Jesus is trying to say. I’m much better at identifying what he’s not saying. But let’s give it a try.

The Kingdom of Heaven

Jesus begins, “The kingdom of heaven is like,…” which is an important clue. Jesus never defines the kingdom of God. He never nails down exactly what it is. I suppose the kingdom of God is so vast and powerful and beautiful that it’s better to paint several pictures of it than define it. How do you define a sunset at the Grand Canyon? Isn’t it better to take a photo and email it to your friends? Better still, take several photos at different times and different positions and send them to your friends. Then they can begin to capture a glimpse of something you saw with your own two eyes.

So we have a kingdom parable here, an effort by Jesus to paint a picture of kingdom of heaven to give us a glimpse of what life is like in the kingdom. I can’t help but clarify a bit for you here, so that you will understand this is a kingdom parable and not a church parable. This parable is about the kingdom of God, not the church. The kingdom of God, as Jesus’ teachings make clear is more far-reaching than the church. The church is only part of the kingdom of God, not equivalent to it. The kingdom of God is the reign of God on heaven and earth. The church is the dynamic and continuing presence of Christ in the world today. The two are not equivalent. I point that out at the beginning so we don’t take a wrong turn before we get on the highway and make the mistake of thinking this is a parable about the church, about weeds and wheat in the church, about people who do and don’t belong in the church. It’s not about the church, it’s about the kingdom of God in the world. Jesus clarifies that for us in his tutorial that follows the initial class lecture.

The Parable

Jesus tells us a man sowed good seed in his field. In the middle of the night an enemy came and sewed bad seed in the same field. When the wheat popped up so did the weeds. Wheat and weeds together in the same field. In his explanation of the parable he reveals that the man who sowed the good seed is the Son of Man, the good seed are the sons of the kingdom, and the field is the world. During the night, the enemy came, who Jesus identifies as Satan, and planted bad seed in the field. In other words, there is evil in the world as a result of Satan’s work. The weeds are sons of the devil. They are the evil people in the world.
So right here in this itsy-bitsy parable, Jesus is revealing a giant truth about the world. There are good and bad people living together, inhabiting the same space, drinking from the same fountains of water. Jesus said much the same thing in describing his heavenly father in the Sermon on the Mount: “He causes his sun to rise on the evil and the good, and sends rain on the righteous and the unrighteous” (Mt 5:45). Don’t be surprised by evil in the world, and don’t expect the world to ever be without evil. It will be there till the end. Jesus doesn’t explain why he allowed Satan to do this. We would’ve hoped that Jesus would’ve posted guards around the borders of the field so no evil could get in, no enemy could plant bad seed during the middle of the night, no dandelions would sprout up. But it’s just there. An enemy has come in, and we’re not told why Jesus didn’t put the whammy on Satan, before he messed everything up. To use a modern phrase, “It is what it is.” There is evil in the world, period.

Get Rid of the Weeds

Continuing his parable, Jesus tells us that the Son of Man’s servants came and noticed the weeds in the field. They are asking the question we ask, “How did these weeds get in the field? How did this evil get into the world? We thought you were a good God. How did the bad get in?”

Jesus responds with the simple declaration that the enemy did this. Satan did this. This is not the work of God; it is the work of Satan. There is no further explanation.

The servants of the sower ask, “Do you want us to pull up the weeds?”

That’s a good question isn’t it? Doesn’t any farmer know the value of keeping your field cleared of the weeds? I remember when I was a young boy, my mother had a garden. I thought the garden was huge until I went back to the property years later and saw how small it was. If I was a swearing man, I would swear that garden shrunk from the time I was 8 years old, until the time I was 28 years old. Nevertheless, one of my chores was to weed the garden. I was given a hoe and told to go up and down those LONG rows and hoe up the weeds. My mother explained to me that the weeds and good plants were drinking the same water and drawing the same nutrients from the ground. The more water the weeds got the less the corn got. Made sense to me. I wished I knew this parable when I was 8. I would’ve told Moma, with the authority of the Almighty Word of God, “Moma, let the weeds grow up with the wheat?” Alas, I was too biblically illiterate to use the Bible for such manipulative purpose.

The sons of the kingdom knew something about fields and weeds and detracting from the good plants that need precious water and nutrients. “Do you want us to pull up the weeds?”

That’s the temptation for all of us, isn’t it? Lord, do you want us to get rid of the evil? Do you want us to identify who is good and who is evil, and pluck the evil right out of the ground? Do you want us to destroy the weeds? We can do it. Just give us the
“thumbs up.” We'll get this field right so the corn can grow tall and they won't be hindered anymore by the weeds.

You may recall a few years ago that religious broadcaster Pat Robertson said United States operatives should assassinate Venezuelan President Hugo Chavez. His 700 Club broadcast on the Christian Broadcasting Network profiled the socialist president of the oil-rich Latin American nation, comparing him to Fidel Castro.

Chavez had accused the United States of trying to assassinate him and predicted that if it happened Venezuela, the world's fifth largest oil producer, would stop exporting 1.3 million barrels a day to the U.S. and send them elsewhere.

Robertson said Chavez has "has destroyed the Venezuelan economy, and he's going to make that a launching pad for communist infiltration and Muslim extremism all over the continent."

"You know, I don't know about this doctrine of assassination, but if he thinks we're trying to assassinate him, I think that we really ought to go ahead and do it. It's a whole lot cheaper than starting a war…. We have the ability to take him out, and I think the time has come that we exercise that ability. We don't need another $200 billion war to get rid of one, you know, strong-arm dictator. It's a whole lot easier to have some of the covert operatives do the job and then get it over with."

He's right you know! He's right that it's easier and cheaper to assassinate a foreign president that to wage an expensive war against a foreign nation. But what's cheaper in the short run is not always cheaper in the long run. Who knows what kind of evil would be unleashed if the world's only superpower were to assassinate an enemy, especially at the urging of one who claims to be offering Christian counsel. But the question for the Christian community, of course, is not "What is the most economically efficient way to enact the will of a superpower on the world, but what would God have us do?" What does the Bible say? What are the teachings of Jesus Christ that help shape our worldview and how we make decisions and act out our faith. If we look at it from that standpoint, Pat Robertson's statements are in clear contrast to the teachings of Christ and the church. And the most devastating aspect of this religious broadcast is the shame and embarrassment it brings on the church of Jesus Christ. When we begin to call for the assassination of national leaders we are stepping outside the scope of Christ's teachings.

I don't want to pick on Pat Robertson too much. He's not doing much more than the disciples of Jesus were doing when people didn't respond to their pleas to believe the gospel and send 700 dollars to their home base in Galilee. Remember how Luke recorded their efforts to build up the kingdom? Jesus and his disciples were going into a Samaritan village on their way to Jerusalem, but the people didn't welcome Jesus. Their message was being rejected. The Samaritans were clearly the weeds. They needed to be plucked up and destroyed. James and John implored Jesus, "Lord, do you want us to call fire down from heaven to destroy them?" (Lk 9:54). Lord, do you want us to pluck up the weeds? Do you want us to destroy this evil? Do you want us to teach them a lesson?
And Jesus rebuked them, not the Samaritans, but rebuked James and John. It was not their role to destroy evil. It’s their role to preach and live out the Gospel.

**Weeds and Wheat Grow Together**

So Jesus uses the parable to say, “No, don’t pull up the weeds, because you might pull up the wheat with them. Let both of them grow together until the harvest” (Mt 13:29).

Why is that you suppose? One clue might be the word used for weeds. It’s the word “darnel,” a plant that looks very much like wheat in its infancy. Jesus might be saying, “Look, I know you guys mean well. You’d like to de-weed the garden. That’s very nice. The problem is that you can’t really tell the difference between the weeds and the wheat at this point. If you go out there and start yanking up the weeds, you’re just as likely to yank up the wheat as well. So, just be patient. I’ll take care of it at the end of the harvest.”

As smart as we think we are, we can mistake the weeds for the wheat. Or we’re so rough that even if we get our hands around the weeds, we’re likely to pull up the wheat as well. That’s not so obvious with a Victor Chavez, who is clearly a weed. But what about that 10 year old rambunctious boy that shows up at church because his parents make him go. He doesn’t listen. He squirms around in his seat. He throws spitballs at the girls when the teacher turns her back. He makes fun of all the goody-goodies who are memorizing Scripture. I’m telling you, he looks more like a weed than a wheat stalk.

But if you pluck him up at the tender age of 10 and throw him out the back door, and tell him never to come back, you might be plucking up a future deacon or minister or theologian.

I’m recalling a teenager who was pretty rambunctious, didn’t listen to his mother, made fun of her. He moved in with a girl as a teenager and got her pregnant. I’m sure MTV influenced him to do this, you know, all those reality shows. After living with this girl for 15 years he dumped her and moved in with another. He became engaged to this second woman, thinking it would advance his career. The engagement was a long one, two years, and during the engagement he hooked up with a 3rd woman. In the midst of all this licentiousness, he left the church he was brought up in by his mother, and joined a cult. Eventually he became bored with the cult and he became a skeptic.

What do we do with someone like him? Is he a wheat or a weed? Is there any hope for rascal like that? Well, his name was Augustine of Hippo, who would later be called St. Augustine, one of the most important theologians and church leaders of the first 500 years of church history. His *Confessions* may be the most profound and important spiritual biography ever penned. Augustine was a wheat, who resembled and acted more like a weed in his earlier years. So one reason we don’t pluck up the weeds, is that we can’t tell them apart so easily.
Misinterpretations

Don’t get me wrong. This parable doesn’t mean that we tolerate all sorts of behavior in the church, that we have no standards for right and wrong. Some in the church today would dismiss all church discipline, since we’re all sinners and “Who’s to judge?” Just a few chapters later, Matthew records Jesus giving instruction on church discipline. He addresses what to do about a person in the church who has sinned against another. Jesus instructs the church to address the sinner directly, first one on one, then with one or two others if necessary, and finally in front of the whole church. If the person refuses to listen to the entire church, then he is to be treated as a pagan or tax collector (Mt 18:15-18). The clear implication is that the sinner is to be excommunicated, or to use old Baptist language, “churched.” In similar fashion Paul gave instructions regarding one found to be in sexual sin. Paul writes, “hand his man over to Satan, so that the sinful nature may be destroyed and his spirit saved on the day of the Lord” (1 Cor 5:5).

Clearly, Jesus and the early church didn’t mean for this parable to create a church that tolerated any kind of behavior. They didn’t see this parable as a prohibition against exercising discipline in the church. This parable didn’t provide safe haven for heretics, perverts, and libertines in the church. It’s not about creating a climate where everybody does their own thing with no accountability to the group. In the words of one renowned NT scholar this parable is about “eschatological expectation, not ecclesiological deterioration.” Or said more simply, this parable is about leaving ultimate and final judgment to God. It’s not about the church becoming filled with moral pygmies.

Conclusion

What are we to do? We are to leave ultimate and final judgment to God. Jesus is the ultimate and final judge, not us. There is going to be evil in the world and it’s not our place to eradicate it. This doesn’t mean the governing authorities can’t address evil. That’s another sermon for another day. This parable, however, is calling the disciples of Christ to refrain from exercising ultimate judgment against evildoers. Ultimate judgment, the taking of life, is reserved for God. We just don’t have enough judgment to discern the difference between the wheat and weeds. We are too likely to get it wrong and destroy the wheat when we only meant to destroy the weeds. Christians, more than any other people group, are called to exercise patience, diligence, and caution when exercising judgment. Jerome, the 4th century church father said the words the Lord spoke in this parable “leave room for repentance.” So we should leave room for repentance. The evil doers may never repent, but then they have to deal with God, not us. God can tell the difference between wheat and weeds. And we can trust God to put each in their proper place. Knowing there is a final judgment governed by God should free us from our need to judge people today. Leave room for repentance. You may need a little room yourself one day.