

Matthew 13:24-30, 36-43 - The Parable of the Weeds

“Where, then, did these weeds come from?”

Who has not at some point asked that question? You may not have used those same words and you may not have spoken it aloud but I’ll bet everyone has, at some time or another, asked the question.

Maybe you’ve read or watched the news and wondered, “How did our world get in this shape? How did we get to this point?” It’s one headline after another; the shooting of the man in the park recently, the arguments over the ‘secrets’ of a would-be vaccine for Covid-19, the number of deaths not just in this country but globally due to the Coronavirus. It seems the world is going crazy.

Maybe life’s circumstances have left you asking yourself, “How did my life get like this? What has become of me?” We could all list the hurts and wounds of life, the betrayals and resentments, the addictions, fears, and loneliness. On and on the list goes.

Perhaps you’ve faced the death of a loved one, a devastating illness, or other tragedy and want to know, “Why, if God is good and loving, did this happen?”

“Where, then, did these weeds come from?”

We often live with the assumption that if we do good, work hard, and be nice everything should work out as we want. That’s the illusion with which the slaves in today’s parable live. “Master,” they ask the farmer, “did you not sow good seed in your field?” Of course he did. They know he did. That’s why they are so surprised when they discover the weeds. The weeds have shattered their illusion. This isn’t supposed to happen. “Where, then, did these weeds come from?”

There is an urgency to their question. They want to know what happened and who is responsible. So do we. That’s what we want to know when we discover weeds in our fields. We want an explanation and someone we can blame, hold accountable, and even punish. Far too often we see that in our political bickering, our Facebook posts, and our privately held opinions. Jesus, however, seems less interested in this approach than we are. He doesn’t give it much time or attention.

“An enemy has done this,” he says. That’s it. He doesn’t explain it. He doesn’t identify or name the enemy. He doesn’t give instructions to find, drive out, and punish this enemy.

Behind our desire for an explanation and the name of the culprit is a truth many of us neither like nor want to accept. It’s one of the challenges of today’s gospel and the gospel does like to challenge us to become more than who we think we are. It’s a challenge that arises every time we face the weeds of our life and world.

The reality, according to Jesus, is that our lives and our world are a field in which good and evil, life and death, joys and sorrows, that which we want and that which we don’t want grow and live side by side. The wheat and the weeds stand together in our world and in each of our lives.

That, Jesus says, is what the kingdom of heaven is like. That’s good news for us. It means that despite the weeds in and around us the kingdom is still here. The weeds do not overcome or make absent God’s kingdom. It may not be the fullness of the kingdom but it is, nevertheless, the kingdom.

But what about those weeds? What do we do about them? Surely we should do something. Not according to Jesus. “Let

them grow together until the harvest,” he says. That makes no sense. How can we let them be? The weeds are bad and the wheat is good. We must do something. We need to take a stand, draw a line in the sand, establish some boundaries.

“Don’t you want us to pull up the weeds,” the slaves ask their master. “No; for in gathering the weeds you would uproot the wheat along with them.” These aren’t just generic weeds. The parable speaks of a particular weed called *zizania*. It’s sometimes known as darnel or false wheat in Israel. It grows with the wheat. It looks like wheat. Its roots intertwine with the roots of the real wheat. The difference between the two is not always readily apparent.

It seems the separation between the wheat and the weeds is not as clear-cut or black and white as Facebook, the media, our politicians or even our own personal opinions would often have us believe. In any event, we are not the ones to make that judgment. We’re not the ones to uproot those we see as weeds. Jesus is clear about that.

“Let them grow together until the harvest,” he says. Jesus shows more interest in growth than extermination. He is willing to wait and to be patient. If we are his followers we too will wait and be patient amongst the weeds of our life.

While we patiently wait let’s not get too excited about the end of this parable. Let’s not revel in and celebrate the end of the age and the coming of Jesus as some divine weed whacker. I don’t think Jesus intended this parable to be taken literally, but, rather, with absolute seriousness.

So do we do nothing? Just sit and wait? No, that’s not what Jesus is saying. There is plenty to do and it will be a challenge.

The words that are translated as “let them” in Jesus’ statement, “Let them grow...” can also be translated as forgive them. It’s the same words Jesus spoke from the cross in St. Luke’s account of the gospel when he says, “Father, forgive them” (Luke 23:34). Even then, even on the cross, Jesus is unwilling to pull up the weeds.

There is no place in Jesus’ gospel for Christian vigilantism, by word or by action, against another or against ourselves. Instead, Jesus commands love. Love your enemy. Love your neighbour. Love yourself. Love God.

Perhaps there were some overzealous “weeders” in Matthew’s congregation who wanted to purify the community by rooting out the bad seed. This seems to be a temptation for followers of Jesus in every age. We whip ourselves into a weeding frenzy, certain that we know the difference between weeds and wheat, and that we know how to deal with the weeds!

Jesus’ parable makes clear that any attempt to root out the weeds will only do more damage to the crop. This has played out far too many times in congregations and denominations, with some determined to root out anyone who does not agree with the “right” interpretation of Scripture, liturgical practice, or stand on a particular issue. There are also those who pronounce judgment on people outside the church -- on people of other faiths, for instance -- declaring them to be destined for eternal damnation. Whether judgment is focused within the church or without, it does serious damage to the church and its mission.

Jesus makes clear that we simply cannot be certain who is “in” or who is “out.” In fact, God’s judgment about these matters will take many by surprise (7:21-23; 8:11-12; 21:31-32; 25:31-46).

Forgive the weeds? Love the weeds? Remember, I told you the gospel is always a challenge. So, yes, forgive them. Love them. Maybe that's how the wheat begins to disentangle its roots from the weeds and show itself to be wheat and not weeds. Maybe love and forgiveness are what life in the mixed field of God's kingdom and this world is like.

So thank God it is not up to us! We can leave the weeding to the angels, and get on with the mission Jesus has given us -- proclaiming to everyone the *good* news of the kingdom of God drawing near.

Amen