

Serving in a World of Wheat and Weeds

*Sermon preached by the Rev. Robert A. Arbogast
Olentangy Christian Reformed Church
Columbus, Ohio
July 20, 2008*

Matthew 13:24-30, 34-43

Once Jesus sat down beside a lake. Large crowds gathered to hear him. So he climbed onto a boat, put out from shore, and began to tell them a series of parables.

He put another parable before them. “The kingdom of heaven is like a person sowing good seed in his field. While people were sleeping, his enemy came, sowed darnel in the middle of the wheat and went away. When the stalks of grain sprouted and began to fill out, then the darnel showed up, too. The landowner’s servants came and said to him, ‘Master, didn’t you sow good seed in your field? Then, where did the darnel come from?’ He said to them, ‘An enemy did this!’ The servants said to him, ‘Then, do you want us to go and gather it up?’ But he said, ‘No. While you’re gathering the darnel, you’ll pull up the wheat with it. Leave them both to grow together until harvest. At harvest-time, I’ll tell the harvesters, “Gather the darnel first, and bind it into bundles, so it can be burned. But bring the wheat into my barn.”’”

Jesus told the crowds [many] things in parables. He said nothing to them that was not a parable, so that the prophet’s word would be fulfilled: *I will open my mouth in parables, I will declare what has been hidden from the world’s foundation.*

After he sent the crowds away, [Jesus] entered the house. His disciples came to him and said, “Explain to us the parable about the darnel in the field.” He answered, “The one who sows the good seed is the Son of Man, the field is the world, the good seed, that’s the children of the kingdom, the darnel is the children of the evil one, the enemy who sows them is the devil, the harvest is the completion of the age, the harvesters are angels. Just as the darnel is gathered and burned by fire, so it will be at the completion of the age. The Son of Man will send his angels, and they will gather out of his kingdom everything that causes sin and those who do evil. And they will throw them into the blazing furnace, where there will be weeping and gnashing teeth. Then the upright will shine like the sun in their Father’s kingdom. Let the one who has ears hear.”

Sermon

Few of us are farmers these days. But many of us are gardeners. Any gardener knows that weeds are a problem. Weeds launch repeated invasions of both flower beds and vegetable gardens. Left alone, weeds multiply like . . . weeds, day after day after day. Weeds can take over a garden, diminishing its beauty, decreasing its fruitfulness.

When weeds attack, a gardener has one option, to fight back. Any gardener knows you have to pull weeds. You have to pull them again and again. You have to pull them before they get too much grip on the ground. If you just leave weeds alone, whether or purpose or because you’re away on vacation — if you just leave weeds alone, you’re in trouble, and your garden may never recover. Any gardener knows this.

What a strange story Jesus tells, then! “Just leave the weeds alone.” That’s what the farmer says. “Let them grow with the wheat. I’ll have my harvesters sort it all out in the end.” Doesn’t this farmer know about *a stitch in time*? Doesn’t this farmer know about *an ounce of prevention*? What kind of farmer is this anyway? And what kind of farm?

Well, the farmer does have his reasons. It’s not that he’s so tolerant of weeds. It’s just that he values his wheat so much. He doesn’t want to risk pulling up wheat along with the weeds. You see, the weed in

question this time is darnel. In its early stages, you can't tell darnel from wheat. So you wouldn't know what to pull. In its middle stages, you can sort of tell the difference between darnel and wheat. But it would be easy to confuse the two and to pull up wheat by accident. Besides, by this time the plants are so close together and their roots so intertwined that when you grab and pull up darnel some wheat will surely come along with it. The farmer won't have that. He values his wheat too much. No, the sorting out process will have to wait until the end. By that time, the differences between darnel and wheat will be clearer. Also, by that time, the wheat will have finished growing and will be ready for harvesting.

That's some of what Jesus says in his story about wheat and weeds.

But what's that story all about?

First of all, it's a story about the kingdom of God. To say *kingdom of God* (or, with Matthew, *kingdom of heaven* — it means the same thing) is to speak a sort of code or jargon. *Kingdom of God* is a phrase we use all the time, usually without explaining or defining it. Honestly, I don't know how to define it. And I suspect that trying to define it would turn out to be unhelpful. Jesus himself doesn't define the kingdom of God, he tells stories about it. And so today we heard Jesus say, "The kingdom of heaven is like a person sowing good seed in his field . . ." No explanation. No definition. But a story.

And I have to add this one thing. The story Jesus tells is not about the church. It's not about the church, it's about the kingdom. I say this because nearly every written comment on this story that I surveyed last week said the same thing: "It's about the church. It's about the church and how the church handles its internal affairs." I think those comments are wrong, that they miss the mark. The church does not appear in the parable. Perhaps the church may be seen in the parable's "servants." But when the parable is explained, each item with its explanation in a one-to-one correspondence — when the parable is explained, those "servants" have disappeared! Certainly the parable speaks to the church, but it's not about the church. No. It's a story about the kingdom of God.

And there's a problem with that kingdom. It's an old problem. It's an enduring problem. It's a problem that has dogged the kingdom "from the world's foundation." It's a problem we still face every day. Here it is. In this world under the reign of God, in this world under the rule of Christ the king — in this world, good and evil both grow and thrive together.

"Master, didn't you sow good seed in your field?" Of course he did. Just look. The field is full of wheat. And the world is full of "the children of the kingdom." "Then, where did the darnel come from?" Just look. The field is also full of weeds, right there with the wheat. And the world is full of "the children of the evil one."

The world is filled with people who do good. They are kind, generous, and patient. They lend a helping hand. They are faithful in marriage and family. They use their gifts to make their corner of the world a better place. But the world is also filled with people "who do evil." They are mocking and cruel. They are hateful and miserly. They break promises. They lie, cheat, and steal. They use their gifts only to enhance their own power.

Where did these people, these weeds, come from? The story provides only the barest explanation. "An enemy did this!" The farmer has an enemy who wants to undo the farmer's best efforts. God has such an enemy, too. This enemy has been at work "from the world's foundation." And quite frankly, like the farmer's field, the world is a mess. It's riddled with all kinds of evil. It's polluted by all kinds of evil. That's how the world is.

Surely, something has to be done about that.

Something has to be done about that.

But the task of fixing the kingdom's problem — the task of fixing this enduring, from-the-world's-foundation problem — has been given to none of us. "Do you want us to pluck up the weeds?" the servants ask. In other words, "Do you want us to rid the world of evil?" They know the

kingdom has a problem, a serious problem. Evil is evident right alongside good. Evil people and good people are closely mixed together. The servants of the Son of Man know there is a problem, and they are ready to do something about it. “Just say the word, master. We’re reporting for duty.” But the master says, “No.” The Son of Man says, “No.” Jesus says, “No.”

Three days after September 11, 2001, President Bush said, “Our responsibility to history is already clear: to answer these attacks and rid the world of evil.” All respect to the office of president of the United States, but ridding the world of evil is not our responsibility. Jesus has given that task to none of us. Not to any nation or military machine. Not to any think tank or charity. Not to any religion. Not even to the holy catholic church! The task of ridding the world of evil has not been given to us.

Do we dare ignore the word of our master? He says, “While you’re gathering darnel, you’ll be pulling up the wheat, too.” I suppose this is what the planners of war and the executioners of war refer to as *collateral damage*. But this farmer values the wheat too much for that!

Besides, who of us can tell for sure the weeds from the wheat? Especially when they’re growing so closely together? Especially when, as we’ve learned from experience, from our theological tradition, and from personal reflection — especially when good and evil are wrapped together, in varying measure, in each one of us? Try to rid the world of evil, and by the time you finish, you will have pulled even yourself up by the roots. Because each one of us is infected by sin and evil. In our tradition, we’ve given a name to that dark reality: *total depravity*. Each one of us is infected by sin and evil. Not one of us is upright. Osama bin Laden may be the face of evil. But that does not make President Bush the face of good. The face of good is none of us. The face of good is Jesus Christ alone!

It has not been given to any of us to rid the world of evil. To purify the kingdom is the right of the king alone. And in due time, he will tend to that task through his holy angels. He will bring judgment — which is to say, final justice. He will see to it that all the wheat is saved. And he will see to it that all the weeds are burned up, no longer to threaten his wheat or his world. That’s in the end.

Meanwhile our task is to grow and to be fruitful, i.e., to be wheat. As I said, the “servants” disappear when Jesus explains the parable. They disappear because they are not charged with the responsibility of resolving the kingdom’s problem with evil — certainly not ultimately, but also not here and now either. My best guess as to where those “servants” go between the parable and the explanation is that they are absorbed into the field and its produce. Like anyone and everyone else, they are wheat or they are weeds. (Or perhaps they are some strange hybrid of the two; that seems nearer to the truth about us, doesn’t it? — a mix of good and evil.)

The question is: What are we called to be and do, if we would serve the Son of Man? What are we called to be and do, if we would be servants of Jesus Christ? We are called to be wheat and to be fruitful. To be upright, honest, faithful people. To be morally sound. To look after our loved ones and to look out for our neighbors. To be loyal friends and good citizens. To give due honor to the God who made us and saves us. To yearn for and work for God’s kingdom on earth, where his will shall be done.

Doing so, we will confront evil, though we will not uproot it. Let me use the BREAD organization as an example. Through BREAD we have joined with others — as wheat in the master’s field, I trust — we have joined with others, and we have together confronted evil. The evil that has kids falling out of school and going nowhere. The evil that exploits vulnerable people with immoral interest and fees on short-term loans. We have confronted those evils. We have named those evils for what they are. We have shown a better way. And we have made some difference in our city, county, and state. Project Key is tackling the problem of chronic truancy with good success. And legislation that reins in the payday lending industry is on the books.

We have no illusions, however, that through these efforts, successful as they have been, we have uprooted evil. The payday lending industry, for its part, is busy gathering petition signatures for a ballot initiative aimed at loosening the recently imposed restrictions. So, no, we have no illusions that we have

uprooted evil. Evil abounds still in schools and families, in staff and students. Evil abounds still in corporate planning meetings and in foolish private decisions. Evil abounds still in each one of us.

We have not been pulling up the weeds of evil. (That is not our job!) We're just trying to be wheat, and to be fruitful, to serve the king and the kingdom, to shape ourselves and our corner of the world toward the justice that is coming. And doing it not with threats, not with violence, not with hatred, but with patience and persistence, with gentleness and gumption, with frankness and faith.

Jesus is the farmer. Jesus is the master gardener. It's his field. It's his world. And he has planted his people everywhere. As light in the darkness. As yeast in a batch of dough. As salt in a world that could be spoiled.

The devil, of course, opposes this saving work of Jesus. The devil plants evil people everywhere. The devil sows seeds of evil on any open ground. Those seeds have sprouted all around us — and in us! (Lord, have mercy.)

But Jesus tends his crop. Jesus tends his crop.

No, the weeds have not been pulled. Not yet. But the wheat: Jesus tends that carefully. He cultivates it. He waters it. He feeds it. By his Spirit. By his Word. By the holy water of baptism. By his sacred body and blood.

And so we grow. And we bear fruit. Facing up to the evil in our world and in ourselves. Turning away from that evil. And turning toward the light of the Son of God, day after day after day.