

SEQUOYAH HILLS
PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH

“It’s Like...: Wildflowers”

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Matthew 13:24-30, 36-43

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We continue in our series in Matthew chapter 13 this week. If you’ve been with us, you’ll remember that we’re focusing on one particular chapter of the Gospel of Matthew, a section of teaching from Jesus, in which he’s using one particular form of teaching to share about one particular topic: parables on the kingdom of heaven.

We’re bouncing around a little bit in the chapter, starting in the middle of it two weeks ago, then looking at the first parable last week, the Parable of the Sower. And this week, we read two segments connected together: a parable, and then later the explanation he offers for it. But the parable itself is a challenging one. Depending on how you read it, it’s a word on just why the kingdom of heaven, in particular its king, suffers that which would oppose it. Let’s go to God’s Word together.

Jesus told them another parable: “The kingdom of heaven is like a man who sowed good seed in his field. But while everyone was sleeping, his enemy came and sowed weeds among the wheat, and went away. When the wheat sprouted and formed heads, then the weeds also appeared.

“The owner’s servants came to him and said, ‘Sir, didn’t you sow good seed in your field? Where then did the weeds come from?’ “‘An enemy did this,’ he replied.

“The servants asked him, ‘Do you want us to go and pull them up?’ “‘No,’ he answered, ‘because while you are pulling the weeds, you may uproot the wheat with them. Let both grow together until the harvest. At that time I will tell the harvesters: First collect the weeds and tie them in bundles to be burned; then gather the wheat and bring it into my barn.’”

Then he left the crowd and went into the house. His disciples came to him and said, “Explain to us the parable of the weeds in the field.”

He answered, “The one who sowed the good seed is the Son of Man. The field is the world, and the good seed stands for the people of the kingdom. The weeds are the people of the evil one, and the enemy who sows them is the devil. The harvest is the end of the age, and the harvesters are angels.

“As the weeds are pulled up and burned in the fire, so it will be at the end of the age. The Son of Man will send out his angels, and they will weed out of his kingdom everything that causes sin and all who do evil. They will throw them into the blazing furnace, where there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth. Then the righteous will shine like the sun in the kingdom of their Father. Whoever has ears, let them hear.”

Matthew 13:24-30, 36-43

The Word of the Lord. **Thanks be to God.** Will you pray with me? Holy God, for the Word spoken and heard today, may it not be mine but yours.

Well you know that whenever a passage includes the phrase, “There will be weeping and gnashing of teeth,” you know you’re in for an interesting Sunday. We hear that, and often it starts to give us the willies. We think of old paintings from Gothic cathedrals filled with all these horrible images of hellish torment—I suppose that’s where the weeping and the gnashing both come in.

But I hope that as we hear this parable, it starts to sound like good news.

Anyone remember those old comics, “The Far Side”? Usually just one panel, often with a talking cow or a small tropical island with a single palm tree. Quirky little things, those Far Side comics.

I remember one in which it was a picture of God creating the world. But instead of a depiction of Genesis 1-2, it had God in a kitchen, with the earth on the stove, so he was cooking up creation, so to speak. Then up at the top of the kitchen was what looked like a spice rack, but instead of usual spices like garlic or oregano, it had ingredients for the creation of the world. There was a container marked “Trees,” and another for “Birds,” still another for “Insects,” and a few for people, and all of them had been added to the mix in this recipe for creation.

There was one ingredient left, and it’s in God’s hands right there in the illustration: a giant spice shaker labelled “Jerks,” and we see God thinking, “And just to make it interesting” as he sprinkles it in.

All tongue in cheek, I guess, though there’s a kernel of truth in there, maybe the roots of a question that nags at some of us, even most of us. It’s not a complicated question: if creation is supposed to be made by a God who is supposed to be so good, then why does there seem to be so much in it that seems not so good?

I think that’s part of the question underlying the parable Jesus is offering here. He’s following up the Parable of the Sower which, as we looked at last week, wasn’t just talking about what kind of soil each of us might be but might’ve been talking about just why the kingdom of heaven, as the parable describes it, has such mixed results.

And throughout all of this, again, he's teaching about the kingdom of heaven, which as Jesus speaks of it, isn't a reference to a spiritual destination for our souls after we die, but rather a depiction of how God's reign, God's reality is emerging on earth. That's important to remember throughout this series: that when Jesus says, "kingdom of heaven," he doesn't mean, "Where you go after you die." And if there was any uncertainty about that, hopefully this parable clears that up, in which Jesus tells a parable of the kingdom of heaven involving both wheat and weeds growing alongside. Does anybody think heaven has weeds?

So as a follow up to this parable about the seemingly mixed results of the kingdom of heaven, Jesus offers this parable, again using images of seeds and growth, but with growth that gets complicated.

A sower goes out into his field, sowing good seed. But then at night, an enemy comes and sows weeds into the same field. So once the good seed starts to grow, guess what, the weeds grow right alongside it. (And I'm tempted to call the weeds "tares." If we have any King James Bible fans, you might know this as the Parable of the Wheat and the Tares.)

The sower's servants notice the weeds, and they're like, "Whoa! Where'd these weeds come from?" They say to the sower, "You want us to go in and gather them up to get them out of there?" And the sower says, maybe surprisingly to us, "No." And why? Well, he says, because they would rip up the wheat along with all the weeds. "Let them both grow together until the harvest."

I'm not much of an authority on farming, so the closest I can get to something like this is crabgrass. If we have any passionate gardeners or landscapers among us, you know what I'm talking about. That quick-growing stuff that spreads out sideways, all connected in its roots just below the surface of the soil. To get rid of it, you either have to put down a bunch of herbicide at a certain time of year, or you got to get that stuff out root and stem, or else it'll come back. And I've tried getting it out root and stem, but because its roots are so tangled up in all the roots of the actual good grass in there, getting it out really just resembles ripping out a huge chunk of plant growth and hoping you got everything. At least that's what happens when I've tried it. Just big patches of grass getting ripped out, all to get rid of this crabgrass.

In the parable, apparently the plant that this is most likely referring to was a particular kind of weed that was the scourge of ancient farmers, a weed that in its infancy very closely resembled wheat, meaning it could grow without being recognized for the weed that it was until it had gotten stronger and more resilient, intertwining its own roots with healthy wheat stalks, to the point that really you couldn't pick out one without ripping out the other. So common practice at the time was a begrudging shrug, letting them both grow at the same time.

And we might presume that for anyone there hearing this from Jesus, they'd already know what he was talking about, and this illustration would make sense. They'd be thinking, "Oh yeah, those tares. They're awful. Can't do anything about it. Just got to let them grow and then weed them out later."

Everyone would be nodding at the illustration. They get what Jesus is saying, but like with most parables, there's something unsettling about it. Why is that like the kingdom of heaven?

Jesus explains the parable a little bit later. In fact, Jesus tells a couple of other parables, but later on when the disciples were with Jesus on their own, this was the one they wanted to go back to, and that kind of makes sense, considering the implications of it. Jesus explains it: the Son of Man sows the children of the kingdom throughout the world, but at the same time, "children of the evil one," as Jesus puts it, that which would be opposed to the kingdom of heaven, are sown throughout the world too, and that both are allowed to grow, so to speak, until the day when all causes of sin would be gathered up and thrown out.

We've talked before about a typical parable, even if it's explained, tends not to have a neat, tidy meaning, and that's certainly the case here. Even when Jesus explains it, is it still unsettling for anyone? It is for me. Jesus seems to be saying that in the kingdom of heaven, the good wheat, the good seed, that which bears further fruit for the kingdom indeed grows, but at the same time, right alongside it, in such a way that it is entwined with the good seed, grows that which would oppose it, the causes of sin, evil in the world.

The question Jesus seems to be getting at is one that people have been wrestling with for a long, long time. There is an inevitable need to wrestle with the claim of a God who is almighty, who is good, and to square that claim with the reality that categorically horrible things do happen.

That's not a uniquely Christian question, but you may have heard me say before that I believe that to be the most challenging question to face the church, both now and in centuries past. And for good reason. I mean, with a straight face, you're going to tell me that a loving, powerful God would sit idly by when atrocious acts are committed. There's not an easy response to that, and a short, simple story certainly couldn't just put a tidy little bow on a question that has troubled people of faith for millennia.

So when we look at what Jesus may be teaching here, I hope we come to it not as an end-all-be-all attempt to reconcile the so-called problem of evil, but as Jesus offering what parables are supposed to offer: a glimpse, something thrown alongside, for the sake of comparison, but something which ultimately defies words.

And what I see that glimpse to be, at least here, is that there's a reason for the waiting. There's a reason the sower says, "Let the weeds continue to grow," and the reason given there is

because removing the weeds would tear out all the good seed too. Try to understand what that's saying. If just for the sake of productivity and the harvest, surely the more efficient method would be to wipe everything out in the field and start afresh, a field without the corruption of the weeds being sown to begin with. If the focus was just on what would be the most efficient, least toilsome process, that's the answer. Tear it all down, and start from square one.

But that's not what the sower does. For him, it's not just about what's efficient or convenient. For some reason, the sower has concern for the well-being of the good seed, for the wheat that is growing in a tainted field, and doesn't want one stalk to be lost. Have you ever thought about God that way: allowing evil to endure for the sake of even just a little bit more good bearing fruit within the world, of just one more seed growing? I find that encouraging. If I may be bold enough in the assurance of God to hope that I am among the wheat, it means that God's not going to throw me out like a baby in the bath water, just for the sake of a more efficient harvest.

And you know what the mind-boggling thing is about it? In the end, those in the kingdom shine like the sun. The glory to come is beyond anything we could imagine.

I remember growing up, a little bit away from our house, the city put in a new kind of park. It wasn't your typical park, with playgrounds and swing sets and basketball courts. Instead it was wildflower park, one with a bison motif. When they first announced it, everyone in the neighborhood kind of scratched their heads, thinking, "Huh?"

Apparently they had brought in a wildflower expert, someone who knew just how wildflowers grew, not necessarily being planted or groomed, but just occurred on their own, all mixed in with all the other plants, with thorns and grass and weeds, you name it. So this wildflower expert, for the purpose of this park, had cultivated a mix of plants and seeds and all that so that it would grow in this park at least similar to how it would happen in the wild.

Then this was the weird part. Throughout this park, they put up wire outlines of bison, and at their base, a kind of plant that would slowly grow like a hedgerow, but molded in the shape of the wires, in the shape of the bison.

The catch was, it didn't look anything like that to start out with. Those bison didn't look like hedgerow animals. They were just bare wire outlines of something looking like a buffalo. And those plants that were mixed in and planted, you know what people saw first? Beautiful wildflowers? No. Folks saw weeds. Folks saw patches of weeds being grown at the corner of this major intersection where the park was located, all of them thinking, *this* is what the city's tax dollars are going toward?

I don't know how many complaints or questions were lodged, but I'm sure it was more than a few. But the park was allowed to continue to grow. And over the years—and I mean years, it took years for this to happen—those hedgerow bushes kept growing, as they were supposed to, and among all the weeds and the patches of plants, something else started to grow: these beautiful wildflowers.

After I left for college, my family moved to a different part of town, which meant when I came back I didn't necessarily go past this park every day like I used to, but I remember one time after some time away, going by this little park, and seeing it, I believe, as it was intended to be. Those bison were fully grown, and the wildflowers were in bloom, rising above all those other weeds and plants that grew alongside it. No doubt there were plenty of people who still thought it to be a waste of time and money, but I found something beautiful about this sign of life and goodness emerging, even when there seemed to be so much opposed to it.

Friends, this parable of the wheat and the weeds may not resolve all questions or problems of evil in the world—it may not even be close to something satisfactory to you and the evil you may have seen in your life. But at the very least, what if we all tried to hear the word of grace here: that our Lord will not toss us aside just for the sake of a more efficient harvest, and that the glory to come will defy all expectations? *That's* what the kingdom of heaven is like.

In the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.