

## **"In the Weeds"**

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**Scriptures: Romans 8:18–25; Matthew 13:24–30, 34–43**

If you happened to be in Birmingham Alabama in the fall of 2010 or the spring of 2011, and if you happened to have been in the mood for Americanized Italian food weighing in at a whole day's worth of calories, and if you found yourself at the Summit shopping center, dining at the Macaroni Grill, it is possible that you would have seen me there, stressed out, waiting tables.

I believe that working at least for a little while in food service is good for character formation. It provides a window into the best and worst of human nature, from customers, fellow workers, and restaurant operators alike. It teaches good practical skills of managing multiple tasks, managing expectations, and dealing with the varied human emotions of hungry and impatient human beings. It teaches sympathy and understanding for those who serve us our food, and encourages us to treat them well. Sadly, my conversations with my fellow servers confirmed what I had heard before, that the least desired weekend shift for servers is Sunday lunch, because the after-church crowd has a reputation of being overly demanding and not tipping well. This is just a side note to today's sermon, but we may consider the witness we offer when we are dining at all times, but especially in our church clothes.

Returning to the matter at hand, while I appreciated the things I learned from my time in the restaurant, I was not a good fit. It was a job that stretched me in more ways than one, and left me stressed out in the extreme. Things were so bad that one time when Brittany's family was in

town (we were dating at the time), I asked them not to come and eat at my table, because I didn't want my in-laws to be to see me as frazzled as I got waiting tables. So they opted for Chinese next door.

There is a phrase that servers use to describe the mounting tasks of their various customers – putting an order in here, clearing a table there, bringing a check to a third place. When you were overwhelmed, it was common to say that you were “in the weeds.” It's safe to say that I was in the weeds often.

And I think there is more overlap between an overworked and under-paid server pulling his or her hair out over the demands of a room full of customers and our Gospel reading for today than may be apparent at first. Jesus certainly had other things in mind when he shared this parable of the kingdom with his disciples, but there is a connection in the anxiety, in the stress, and in the disaster that we find ourselves in in this world, living among the weeds.

So let's turn to our Gospel reading from Matthew chapter 13, much in the style of last week, centered on the agricultural life, the triumphs and trials of things that grow. That good soil from last week has grown fruit, and wheat is beginning to grow. But all is not well, for an enemy has come and sown weeds among the wheat, and these have begun to sprout also.

I am reminded here of the story I have shared before of the Rydens' first venture into backyard gardening. Still in seminary, we went in with two friends of ours on caring for a plot in their backyard. Being new to this way of providing food for ourselves, we over-shot it. We would have done well to plant a 6 foot by 8 foot raised bed. What we planted instead was

at least a 25 foot square, and I believe it was even bigger than that, nearly the size of here around the altar. That was mistake one.

Mistake two was that after we planted seeds, we immediately left for a week to go to the beach. Those of you who are more experienced than we were will know what sort of scene we came back to. Chaos. Flowers and vegetables we had planted sprouting up among some of the tallest grass I have ever seen. The freshly-tilled soil was ripe for growing, and not just the sort of growing that we had intended. It was a mess, so much so that we would lose our growing vegetables in the mass of green. This once resulted in our friend retrieving, one night while we were over there, the biggest and likely most inedible eggplant I have ever seen.

And that is the problem with what this enemy in Jesus' parable has done, the enemy that Jesus names as the devil in his explanation of the parable. The good fruit, the wheat of the kingdom grows up amongst the bad fruit of the world.

And instead of ripping everything out, the farmer decides to wait until harvest time. Then, everything will be made clear and everything will be made right. The wheat will be gathered and harvested, the weeds will be burned.

This is a parable that teaches eschatology, which is a fancy way of saying a theology of how things will be at the end of this life, when the Kingdom of God is fully inaugurated and God brings about New Creation.

And unlike much of modern eschatology, which is obsessed with dates and signs of the coming apocalypse, and getting those details just right, Jesus is more concerned with our preparedness for the things to come,

emphasizing that we ought to be ready, for the time will come when we do not expect it.

This parable emphasizes the grace and the patience of God. As Jesus says, pulling out the weeds too hastily would likely uproot some of the good wheat. God desires that all would come to him, and he wants there to be every opportunity available for those who would choose him. God is not anxious to sift the weeds out. That time will certainly come, but he is patient and merciful in the here and now, meaning that there is no better time to come to him than this very moment.

For those of us who are already following Jesus, this parable draws us to two postures as we live life in the weeds. The first posture is honesty. We must be sober-minded, ready to take a long and hard look at what is good in this world and in ourselves and also acknowledge, in the world and in ourselves, that which is not of God.

Deacon Bruce reminded us last week of the importance of tending to the soil that is our own life, the hard work of digging out rocks, fertilizing, and watering, and yes, weeding. There are weeds, planted by the enemy and grown by my own rebelliousness and sinfulness, that sprout up in me. I need to hear this morning that those weeds are destined for the cleansing fire of God and I'd best be getting them uprooted as soon as possible. The things that we do and the things that we believe matter. Some weeds are so poisonous that their destruction manifests immediately, causing disaster for ourselves and others. This stark image of the weeds bunched up and burning ought to give us a holy desire to flee from our sins and into the loving arms of Jesus.

This parable also ought to draw us to a posture of grace. Remembering the grace and patience of the farmer in the parable, we ought to trust in the love *and* justice of God. While we must speak truth and we are certainly tasked with rooting out the evil in ourselves, we would do well to remember that the farmer, who knows wheat from weed infinitely better than we do, is not ready to pluck the weeds right away, even as his workers are ready to do so. We should not be more eager for the burning of the weeds than the farmer.

Commentators have noted that the appearance of a young wheat plant and the specific weed Jesus references here are similar in appearance.<sup>1</sup> When we put ourselves in the place of the farmer, we run the risk of plucking and throwing aside wheat that we thought was a weed.

This is why we are not tasked with judging others, but examining ourselves instead. In Luke's Gospel, Jesus is asked if those who are saved (so the wheat from this parable) will be few. He responds by rejecting that speculation and encouraging those asking the question to seek the Kingdom themselves.<sup>2</sup>

Here is the good news this morning. God can change weeds into wheat. That's the agricultural miracle! If we are honest, if we bring our failings to him and trust in his Son, we need not fear the fire that burns up all that is evil. It also means that we need not give up on anyone, because it is not our job, but his, to save. And so we look on every person made in God's image with grace, knowing that he can turn surrendered weeds into the finest of wheat.

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<sup>1</sup> See Keener, Craig. *Matthew (13:24-30)*. Keener references Jeremias, 1972:224.

<sup>2</sup> Luke 13:23-24

But there is another reality of living life among the weeds beyond the need to tend our own souls and the grace we extend to others. There is also the harm that comes from living a weed-filled world. Weeds take resources, water and nutrients from the soil that are meant for the wheat, leaving the wheat malnourished. Weeds block out and take sunlight that was meant for thriving wheat. Sometimes, weeds choke out and kill the plants that were meant to grow. To live in a world filled with weeds is to know suffering, loss, and sorrow.

The Apostle Paul, switching metaphors, puts it this way:

“For the creation waits with eager longing for the revealing of the sons of God. For the creation was subjected to futility, not willingly, but because of him who subjected it, in hope that the creation itself will be set free from its bondage to corruption and obtain the freedom of the glory of the children of God. For we know that the whole creation has been groaning together in the pains of childbirth until now. And not only the creation, but we ourselves, who have the firstfruits of the Spirit, groan inwardly as we wait eagerly for adoption as sons, the redemption of our bodies.”<sup>3</sup>

The pains of childbirth. The inward groaning of a child awaiting adoption. These are the fruits of a fallen world. Creation itself is broken, not just our lives!

But just as all will be sorted out in the end with the wheat and the weeds, Paul looks forward to the merciful justice of God:

“For I consider that the sufferings of this present time are not worth comparing with the glory that is to be revealed to us...For in this hope we

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<sup>3</sup> Rom 8:19-23

were saved. Now hope that is seen is not hope. For who hopes for what he sees? But if we hope for what we do not see, we wait for it with patience."<sup>4</sup>

The glory of God's fully inaugurated reign is so great that Paul can't even compare it with the sufferings of today, sufferings with which he was acquainted very closely.

When a bad judge offers judgment, it is a terrifying thing. But when a good judge presides, justice is a mercy to those who are suffering. This is what the Lord offers. It is why when we hear Jesus tell of the fire that burns up the weeds, we ought to look with sobriety at our own need for redemption, but we also ought to be filled with hope. Jesus says that all causes of sin will be destroyed. I don't know about you, but that is good news for me personally and for the world.

So how do we live life in the weeds? We examine ourselves with honesty, rooting out and surrendering those things that are not of God in us and in our actions. We look with grace on others who are in need of salvation, praying that the Lord would mercifully bring wheat when all we can see is weeds. And finally, we endure in hope in the midst of suffering, offering that hope to others in a broken world.

The Creator of the universe is a pretty good farmer. He will gather the good fruit of his labor in the world. And what a harvest of joy that will be. And thanks be to God, through the Lord Jesus Christ, in the power of the Holy Spirit, we can be counted among that number. Amen.

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<sup>4</sup> Rom 8:18, 24-25