

# Living Among the Weeds

## *The Parable of the Weeds Among the Wheat*

Matthew 13:24-30  
College Hill Presbyterian Church, Tulsa

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July 24, 2011

How familiar are you with this parable from the Gospel of Matthew commonly referred to as The Weeds Among the Wheat? You may know it by another name, The Parable of the Tares (which is simply a different word for weed that was used in the King James Version.) It's not nearly as well-known as the parable of The Good Samaritan or The Prodigal Son, but as I mentioned three years ago when I preached a sermon based on this parable, **"If I had to pick just one parable that perhaps corresponds best to the overall vision and mission here at College Hill it would be this one."**

Why? Because, its central message is one that calls not only for **tolerance and mutual forbearance, but also issues a strong edict not to judge others – because we often don't judge correctly.** That's something best left up to God.

Even though this parable sounds simple enough to us, people living in the first century would also have been much more familiar with the agricultural imagery that was used by Jesus. In other words, in order to more fully understand The Weeds Among the Wheat, we first need a quick botany lesson.

Just as we have certain weeds that we can easily identify because of their familiarity in our gardens and fields here in the Tulsa area, wheat farmers and others in ancient Palestine knew exactly the specific kind of weed Jesus was referring to in his parable. As it turns out, this small bit of information provides the key to a proper interpretation of this parable.

The weed in question is called darnel, more specifically, **bearded darnel.** Darnel is a very clever weed. It doesn't stick out like a giant thistle bush would in a vegetable garden, or a dandelion in a carefully manicured yard of Bermuda grass. Rather, **it looks so much like wheat that the two are almost impossible to distinguish from one another.** This, as we shall see, is a very important point. It's not until each plant goes to seed, just before the time of harvest, that you can tell the difference between them. But by that time their roots are so intertwined that the darnel can't be separated out without tearing the wheat out with them. Both, therefore, must be left to grow together until the time of harvest.

Eventually, however, the wheat and this weed must be separated because the grain of darnel not only has a bitter and unpleasant taste, it is slightly poisonous. Doing some research on the Internet this week, I found a website that listed the symptoms one might experience if darnel is ingested. Sleepiness, hypnotic episodes, convulsions, intoxication, hindered speech, and dim-sightedness. (Sounds like effects of too much beer.)

From *The Encyclopedia of Psychoactive Plants*, I found this, "During the Middle Ages, bearded darnel frequently found its way into cereal grain plantings and was consequently harvested and baked into bread, which induced psychoactive effects

when ingested and caused staggering." "In addition to its sedative effects, it is also said to make one stupid." (Again, sounds like beer...)

So needless to say, at harvest time the grains of dandelion have to be separated out from the grains of wheat. But so laborious is this task of separation that according to Roman law it was actually a crime to sow this weed in the wheat field of an enemy.

People in Jesus' day understood all these things when he told them this parable. They would have understood, therefore, that **the wheat represents good and the weed evil. But here's the twist. According to Jesus, the two may be almost impossible to distinguish from each another.**

That revelation would have shocked people then, and that's what should shock us today. For wouldn't you agree that most people, including ourselves, could claim that they can distinguish between good and evil? Are not some in the Christian family of faith bound and determined to weed out those who they would judge as evil, or as an abomination?

Despite recent great strides within our own denomination, there also continues to be those within the Presbyterian Church (USA) who seek to "purify" it by seeing that certain categories and types of people are excluded from positions of leadership, or others who are simply meant to feel unwanted or unwelcome.

The gospel writer, Matthew, was obviously aware that the church in his day was involved in this same process of so-called "**purification.**" **It's the age-old syndrome of trying to determine and judge who's in and who's out. It's obviously a game that Christians have never gotten tired of playing.** And while some play it more fiercely than others, I don't think I'm out of line in suggesting that **there is an element of it in every congregation.** And more than that, when we're honest with ourselves I think we'll be able to recognize that **there's also an element of this in each one of us.**

On a more personal level, this parable had a profound impact on me when I first studied it about twenty years ago during my second year in seminary. I even wrote a paper on it in one of my New Testament classes. At that time I was one of those who was convinced that good and faithful Christians had a primary *responsibility* to distinguish, classify, and know what was right and what was wrong, what was good and what was evil. After all, weren't most of us taught that as Christians we should actively try to eradicate evil and wickedness from our midst?

As I'm sure everyone in this congregation today fully realizes, however, this eventually and naturally leads to the trap of trying to determine whether other individuals, or types of people, are "wheat" or a "weed." Throughout history the Christian Church continues to fall into this trap.

**But the point of Jesus' parable is that it is not only impossible, but even disastrous to even try to achieve a "pure" church, let alone a "pure" society or world.** Therefore, Jesus states in the parable, "No, do not gather the weeds now, for in doing so you would uproot the wheat along with them."

This parable, then, dramatically emphasizes the necessity of an attitude governed by tolerance, mutual forbearance, patience, and especially forgiveness. It is the very model of how we are to live together in community. Certainly you have heard Jesus' words in the gospel of Luke, "Do not judge, and you will not be judged; do not condemn, and you will not be condemned. Forgive, and you will be forgiven."

Referring to the weeds among the wheat, Jesus tells us, "Let both grow together." Now that doesn't mean that we passively sit back and become victimized by evil or

become tolerant of sinful behavior. The New Interpreter's Bible Commentary puts this wonderfully into perspective this way:

When the master in the parable forbids the servants to go and weed out the field, this is not to be interpreted as a call to passivity in the face of evil. It is not a divine command to ignore injustice in the world, violence in society, or wrong in the church.

It is, rather, a realistic reminder that the servants do not finally have the ability to get rid of all the weeds, and that sometimes attempts to pluck up weeds caused more harm than good. This is the way it is.

Twelve years ago the General Assembly of the Presbyterian Church (USA) met in Fort Worth, Texas. Pastoring a church in Dallas at the time, I attended most all of the plenary sessions of that assembly. Following that annual nation gathering, there were a lot of postings on a national More Light Presbyterian email list, of which I was a part. In the wake of some of the decisions made at that General Assembly gathering, there was a lot of intense complaining and criticism on that e-mail list aimed at those who did *not* seek what we considered an open and inclusive Presbyterian denomination. There was obviously a lot of hurt and pain out there among those of us who considered ourselves to be on the progressive side of the theological spectrum.

I usually just read the daily entries, but after what I considered to be a lot of hurtful language hurled at the opposition I felt moved to post an entry myself. I included the quote I just read from The New Interpreter's Bible. Then I stated, "It struck me that in our current debate over ordination [standards] that the comment, 'sometimes attempts to pluck up weeds caused more harm than good' seems to apply -- to BOTH sides of the issue. **Injustice is injustice," I wrote, "yet tolerance is a two way street."**

My point was that **it's not just the conservatives that needed to hear Jesus' message of mutual forbearance – we do as well!**

In response to that email posting, a man with whom I attended seminary, Lawrence Reh, sent me a personal email which contained some kind and affirming words of agreement. He also attached a sermon that he had preached on this parable six years previously, soon after he had graduated from seminary. Being a former professional journalist before entering seminary, he has quite a gift with words. So after obtaining his permission to use his concluding thoughts from his sermon, I will conclude mine with his words.

Instead of 'God-is-on-my-side,' I think Jesus advocates a 'be-on-God's-side' way of thinking, believing and living. Being on God's side, Jesus makes clear, can be harder, a way of life that asks us to reach out to those who are different, love people who are hateful to us, help and heal those who are hurting, so far as we are able, and bring to all the good news of a God and Savior who, valuing all, forgave all, who can help and heal even when we humans are powerless to do so.

These are particularly powerful words coming from Lawrence, who as an openly gay man back in seminary during the late 80s and early 90s has been denied ordination in our denomination. Considered a 'weed' by many, Lawrence exemplifies, in my

opinion, what Jesus would call 'wheat.'" **Sometimes, judgments can be incorrect, including our own.**

So may Lawrence's and Jesus' words of non-judgmental tolerance and mutual forbearance help each of us to think twice the next time we're tempted to involve ourselves in a bit of "weed control."

Amen.