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

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

My text for this morning is the householder's *counsel of patience* concerning the weeds. The exchange between the householder and the slaves goes this way:

The slaves said to him, 'Then do you want us to go and gather them?' <sup>29</sup>But he replied, 'No; for in gathering the weeds you would uproot the wheat along with them. <sup>30</sup>Let both of them grow together until the harvest... (Matthew 13:28-30, NRSV)

Let us not lose the weeds in our lives. I mean people who are close to us, whose lives are entangled with our own. In the parable, the weeds receive a dreadful interpretation:

...the weeds are the children *of the evil one*, (Matthew 13:38, NRSV)

But in God's marvelous agriculture, weeds can become wheat, and the evil one can lose his grasp on his children, so that they slip away and become saints. Let that be true in our lives: that we help the weeds to become wheat and we all arrive together safe and sound in heaven someday.

This is not some safe, distant parable. This parable concerns us and our people! Let us not separate from them even if they do not help our Christian life.

So, I have hastened right ahead and told you my theme, what is on my heart about this business of the wheat and the tares. Let's not lose the people in our lives whether or not they are believers. Now let me back up some and tell you about the parable, about farming and about the spiritual meaning of the parable. After that, I will return to you and to me.

## The parable

Last Sunday we heard the parable of the seeds and the various kinds of soil. Some of the seeds fell on difficult ground — on the path or on thin soil or thorny ground. But some fell on good ground and grew and yielded a harvest. Now we learn that even the seed that fell on good ground is not home free. That favored seed still faces a challenge. You and I face a challenge. We face the challenge of the weeds.

The weed sown by the enemy in the story is a pesky plant with a difficult Latin name — *Lolium temulentum*. It is usually translated “weeds” (RSV) or “tares” (KJV) or “darnel” (NEB).<sup>1</sup> The frustrating thing about this weed is that it is almost indistinguishable from the wheat as it is growing. When the wheat and the weeds are ripe, then it is easy enough to tell the difference, but not before. So, the Master forbids his slaves to gather the weeds for fear that they will pull up the wheat in the process.

And there is another problem. The roots of the weeds become entangled with the roots of the wheat, and so pulling up the weeds involves the risk of uprooting the wheat too.

Eventually the wheat and the weeds must be separated, because if they are milled together, it will ruin the flour.

Why in the world the enemy did this is hard to imagine. At least, it is hard to imagine on the practical level of farming. It could only be meanness that would lead an enemy to go walking up and down the field scattering weed seeds. I guess he’d have to do it at night, under cover of darkness, lest the farmer see him and call the police. So, he goes stumbling along in the nighttime sowing weeds. What a waste of time for everybody concerned!

But when we turn to the spiritual interpretation of the story, then it makes sense, though in a sad way. The enemy is the devil, and he really is mean. He hates everything in sight. He hates the farmer, he hates the field, he hates the farmhands, and he hates the wheat. That means, the devil hates Jesus, he hates the world, he hates the church, and he hates you and me. He’s got plenty of energy for hate!

His method of trying to hurt everyone in sight is a clever method. Also it is a cynical and cruel method. If you and I are trying to be good wheat growing up and being fruitful, the devil’s method of hurting us is to send us people in our lives who discourage us in our spiritual lives. Maybe they ignore our faith, maybe they oppose our faith. Maybe they despise our faith. Satan is taking something precious on earth — the people in our lives — and trying to use them to pull us down.

What the devil seems not to understand is that in God’s grace, the weeds can be converted and become wheat. That’s our job. That’s a contribution we can make to this world. And that would be sweet – the blessed reverse of what Satan had intended! Things do not need to remain static. The weeds can become wheat. Of course, the reverse is also true: the wheat can become weeds — mere pretenders, who look like wheat, but are really weeds on the inside. But let’s not do that! Let’s go the other way and try to help the weeds in our life to become wheat.

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<sup>1</sup> Arland J. Hultgren, *The Lectionary Commentary: The Third Readings* (William B. Eerdmans: Grand Rapids, Michigan, 2001), page 77.

## Entangled

I find the image of the entangling of the roots to be very moving when you think about the human reality of it all. In our families, in our workplace, even in our congregation, there are probably people in our lives who seem like people of faith, but are not. They are this particular kind of weed — a weed that looks like a Christian, but are all weedy inside.

And then, some of the people in our lives do not look like Christians, nor even try to look like them. Nonetheless, their roots are entangled with ours. They are our people — our brothers, our sisters, our children, our neighbors, our lifelong friends. You can't uproot them without uprooting us too — without breaking our hearts in some real measure. And the Master does not want that. So he says, let them grow together until the time of separating must come. Let them “grow.” Let them mature and flourish. In this way, the Master shows sympathy for both the weeds and the wheat. He gives them both a chance. He acknowledges that we are not sticks nor stones, but human beings whose lives become entangled with other people, including people who are not Christians, indeed who may never plan to become Christians. Let there be no plucking up of the weeds lest the wheat be harmed in the process. Indeed, let us not be the ones to do the plucking up. Let us not separate ourselves from them. Let there be no violence against the weeds.

You might have someone dear to you who tells you flat out that he is not a believer, she is not a believer. I have someone like that in my life. He is not a Christian, and he is proud of it. In my opinion, he doesn't have a clue about my Savior Jesus! But what he imagines he knows, he despises. He learned his contempt in college and has never departed from it. I guess he thinks that Jesus is simply some collection of dried bones in a grave somewhere. He has hurt my feelings many times over the years by his dismissal of the faith of the church. But he knows that I pray for him and he is grateful for that. In fact, recently he has asked me to “pray harder” for him, which I am indeed doing. The parable says to me, “Don't lose this one. Don't give up on this one.”

## The trick is the balance.

As in many things, the trick in life is the balance. Just as the field in the parable has both the wheat and the tares, the church on earth has both saints and sinners. It has both sincere Christians and hypocrites. It has both orthodox believers and heretics. And often, we slip and side among those various positions. Sometimes we are saints, but then we become sinners too. Sometimes we suspect that someone in our life is a hypocrite. Sometimes we ourselves are the hypocrites.

Pastor Timothy Keller, the founder of Redeemer Presbyterian Church here in New York City, has a wonderful saying about hypocrites in the church. He says that, naturally so, there are hypocrites and broken people in the church, because the church is a “hospital for sinners”:

Growth in character and changes in behavior occur in a gradual process after a person becomes a Christian... This means, though, that the church will be filled with immature and broken people who still have a long way to go emotionally, morally, and spiritually. As the saying has it: "The church is a hospital for sinners, not a museum for saints."<sup>2</sup>

So, the church and the world will have people in them who, to use the phrase in our text, are the "children of the evil one." They are hypocrites, heretics, and unbelievers. They do not have the Spirit of Jesus. They do not live for him, nor try to walk in his ways. But they are our own people. What are we to do? We can't give up on them.

So, we have to walk a balance. Heretics should be opposed, but not killed. They were killed at various times in history, but that has got to be wrong. That is uprooting the tares before their time. Hypocrites should be challenged, if the time seems right, but with the goal not of condemning them, but helping them along, ever mindful that we ourselves need some help along in life. And unbelievers in our life are a mystery growing in number. It seems that there are more and more unbelievers around us. For them, I figure that there are two things we can do: We can pray for them. And we can preach to them, if not with our words, then with the manner of our life.

This might be pretty feeble compared to the great evangelists of church history. But then, few of us are Saint Paul or Martin Luther or John Wesley. In a way, our fundamental job is simply to remain wheat regardless of how many tares surround us. And entrust the rest to the Lord of the Harvest. He will preside over both the wheat and the tares according to his wisdom and his goodness. To him be the glory, with the Father and the Holy Spirit now and forever. Amen.

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<sup>2</sup> Keller, Timothy (2008-02-14). *The Reason for God* (pp. 51-52). Riverhead Trade. Kindle Edition.