

## **Growing Pains: Weed Whackers**

A sermon preached by

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### **Matthew 13:24-30**

*<sup>24</sup>He put before them another parable: "The kingdom of heaven may be compared to someone who sowed good seed in his field; <sup>25</sup>but while everybody was asleep, an enemy came and sowed weeds among the wheat, and then went away. <sup>26</sup>So when the plants came up and bore grain, then the weeds appeared as well. <sup>27</sup>And the slaves of the householder came and said to him, 'Master, did you not sow good seed in your field? Where, then, did these weeds come from?' <sup>28</sup>He answered, 'An enemy has done this.' 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; and at harvest time I will tell the reapers, Collect the weeds first and bind them in bundles to be burned, but gather the wheat into my barn.'"*

A few weeks ago, I purchased my first weed whacker. I know it must seem like I'm a very late bloomer in all things horticultural but I've had other things to do! Anyway, I researched the best brands, pondered if it should be electric or gas, studied the weight, cutting path, and repair records, and then went out and bought the bigger, better model that the salesperson recommended. I came home, put on my jeans, safety glasses, and hearing protection, and went out into my yard in search of anything that roughly looked like a weed. I have to say that it was wholly and completely fulfilling.

So when Jesus tells this parable of the wheat and the weeds growing and co-existing together without the benefit of a weed whacker, I have to admit that the judgmental side of me (and honestly that is pretty much all of me) is not very satisfied with his solution. Oh sure, there is that predictable Matthew ending where the weeds ultimately get thrown into the fire, but honestly, why do we have to wait? Can't we get some instant gratification here? Can't we put on our safety glasses and ear plugs on and mow these suckers down? Because God knows we are still living in an age when there are weeds popping up everywhere. The old predictable stalks of wheat seem to be threatened at every turn and it would be oh so gratifying just not to have to contend with those pesky weeds anymore.

But what if it isn't as easy to identify those weeds as we assume? What if one person's harvest is another person's kudzu? If that is the case, then perhaps Matthew's parable this week is in one sense a warning in and of itself. Before we think we have it all figured out how to judge evil from good, moral from immoral, right from wrong, virtuous from unvirtuous, think again. According to whom? When? In what contexts? By what standards?

Right now, there is a lot of righteous indignation about the Russian interference in our governmental affairs. But the Russians are certainly not the only government to have engaged in this kind of behavior. More than 30 years ago Jonathan Kwitny wrote a book called *Endless Enemies*, where he detailed 50 years of United States undercover interventions in other countries' governments, supporting cruel dictators, putting shahs in power, tearing down fledgling democracies that tipped a bit to the left, pitting tribes and religious groups against each other. This summer I've been reading Mark Bowden's book *Hue 1968*. It is a history of the Vietnam War where he outlines the United States' subversion of elections because they feared Ho Chi Minh would win by a landslide. And it was only a few years ago that the United States was caught wire-tapping heads of state in Europe, in particular the cell phones of Germany's Angela Merkel and Britain's David Cameron.

So, before we come forward with our self-assured judgments about who is the wheat and who is the weed, we might do well to step back and understand that often the wheat and the weeds in our lives are mixed together. And our own tendency toward judgment and condemnation is not always the best indicator of the realm of God that Jesus declares. Perhaps we need to understand that it isn't always our role to declare who is somehow inadequate in faith and who is an example of the Christian life. We might consider Jesus' parable as a careful warning before we assign labels about who is blessed and who is cursed. As Caroline Lewis once said, "When they discover the center of the universe, a lot of people will be disappointed they are not it."

This parable is ridiculous if one considers the reality of such a diabolical, deliberate method of destroying a wheat crop. But, if one has ears to hear the sub-verse of the parable—"an enemy has done this"—it becomes a profound exposé of the nature of evil. More to Jesus' point, it becomes a profound depiction of what the kingdom of heaven is like. It is like a carefully cultivated field of wheat, where one discovers that, alongside of that which is intended, there is a parallel reality of systemic imitation that threatens to undo it. And while one's natural

reaction is to “rid the world of evil,” the reality is that evil’s root system is so intertwined with the kingdom that the unintended consequences of such actions are devastating. In fact, one completes the enemy’s work by trying to separate the wheat and the weeds prematurely.

In a sermon in an article on this passage, Mark Davis points out that this is precisely what H. Richard Niebuhr argued in 1933, when many were calling for action against Japan for invading Manchuria. Niebuhr raised the issue of this parable with the aptly named article, “The Grace of Doing Nothing.”

For Niebuhr, “doing nothing” was not the same as “not doing anything.” It was, rather, a deliberate action of patient faith. There are times when doing nothing is ethically necessary because the unintended consequences of doing something (anything!) in the face of evil can often end up destroying the very thing one is trying to preserve. It was a profound albeit a losing argument in 1933, followed quickly by a retort from his brother Reinhold entitled, “Must We Do Nothing?” That question, “Must we do nothing?” is often the retort against the parable of the wheat and weeds. Yet, the owner’s wisdom proves remarkable time after time. In trying to rid the world of global terror, not only have countless innocent lives been lost or shattered, but every act of overreach against terrorism seems to become convincing propaganda for producing more terrorists. Richard Niebuhr’s insight—the insight of this parable—proves itself tragically over and over.

In the sphere of political decision-making, “the grace of doing nothing” is usually a losing proposition. Certainly, one could argue that the Christian church has never taken it as an article of faith. Typically, when sabers rattle, the church rallies with them. But this parable, with its unlikely phrase, “An enemy has done this,” invites even the angriest reactionary to consider the complexity of wheat and weeds, good and bad, us and them.

A few years ago, we were having a rash of break ins at the church. We are far from being Fort Knox, from the resources here to be stolen to the security that we provide for our “stuff.” It culminated one Sunday morning when I arrived to discover my office door smashed and the office turned over in search of money that wasn’t there. Now, I get in a kind of “zone” on Sunday morning and it isn’t good to disrupt that. So I was less than gracious in my reaction. If you followed me around that day, one of the quotable lines that I was muttering was, “I think there is a special place in hell for people who steal from churches.”

The temptation toward judgment, action, to quickly grab the weed whacker and do something is a difficult if not impossible impulse to avoid. But Jesus calls us to think before we act. To pray before we say.

In the end, there is hope. The weeds do not destroy the wheat and the parable concludes with some of Matthew's familiar eschatological imagery. The false kingdom is destroyed and the true kingdom is gathered in. But, until that time of utter clarity comes, the realm of God keeps its complex, intertwined relationship with the parallel imitative kingdom that the enemy has sown. The subversive quality of this parable is that doing nothing in the face of that reality is often the right thing to do. And we are asked to wait, to wait in the confidence of those who believe, who hope, who affirm that the work of God is sometimes ponderously slow, but eventually it does bend toward justice. AMEN