

“In the Weeds”
A sermon by the Reverend Joe Genau
for Edgewood Presbyterian Church
Matthew 13:24-35
February 17, 2019
Sixth Sunday after Epiphany

This past summer, while there were hedges to be trimmed and vines to be cut back and plants to be pruned and weeds to be uprooted, we took time during our Sunday School hour to take a careful look at the parables of Jesus.

For those of you who weren't there — and as a refresher for those who were — I want to prepare us to hear this morning's Gospel lesson with a few quick notes that we covered in that class.

Parables are a particular way of teaching that Jesus just loved. They're not fables with tidy morals at the end for us to take home. They're not allegories either, where you can do simple math: *this* stands for *that* and *this* character represents *so-and-so*, in one-to-one relationships.

Parables throw down two things side-by-side — like “the kingdom of heaven” and “a shepherd with one hundred sheep” — and they weave images that challenge the hearers with parallel and paradox that serve to unmoor us from whatever notions we had before the parable got into our brains. They're confusing and can be disturbing and unsettling and provocative. If we think we've got a parable understood fully, we literally need to think again. They bring unasked questions to the surface, revealing things we know, but can't admit.

Parables are weird and hard. So here are three from the Gospel according to Matthew:

[Jesus] put before them another parable:

“The kingdom of heaven may be compared to someone who sowed good seed in his field; but while everybody was asleep, an enemy came and sowed weeds among the wheat, and then went away. So when the plants came up and bore grain, then the weeds appeared as well. And the servants 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?’ He answered, ‘An enemy has done this.’ The servants said to him, ‘Then do you want us to go and gather them?’ But he replied, ‘No; for in gathering the weeds you would uproot the wheat along with them. 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.’”

He put before them another parable: “The kingdom of heaven is like a mustard seed that someone took and sowed in his field; it is the smallest of all the seeds, but when it has grown it is the greatest of shrubs and becomes a tree, so that the birds of the air come and make nests in its branches.”

He told them another parable: “The kingdom of heaven is like yeast that a woman took and mixed in with three measures of flour until all of it was leavened.”

Jesus told the crowds all these things in parables; without a parable he told them nothing. This was

to fulfill what had been spoken through the prophet: “I will open my mouth to speak in parables; I will proclaim what has been hidden from the foundation of the world.”

This is the Gospel of the Lord. Praise to you, O Christ.

I have an enemy and its name is bamboo. I’ve mentioned from this pulpit before how in our house I’m not allowed to pull weeds. Let’s just say I have a history of being an unreliable weeder. I can’t be trusted not to pluck up something beautiful and treasured and possibly expensive.

But I am let loose upon the bamboo.

We have a nice line of privacy bamboo on the other side of the fence. It once filled our yard too, but the previous owners used heavy machinery to reclaim the land from that invasion. So now I work to keep it on the other side of the fence. We like it *over there*, so we can’t poison it. And for a variety of reasons — none having to do with Congressional funding — it’s impractical to install a barrier more substantial than our fence. So those runners spread underground. They’re doing it right now! *If you listen really carefully you can hear it taunting me, even from here at the church.* And as soon as they shoot up, I have at ‘em. And I dig down and have at the runners when I can. I have an appreciation for bamboo. I have a bamboo cutting board in my kitchen and a few other things made from bamboo fibers, but that’s all the bamboo I am comfortable with on my side of the fence.

Scholars tell us that the weed in Jesus’s parable is a plant called darnel and that it was a real problem at the time. It’s called “false wheat” in some regions, because as it grows it closely resembles a wheat stalk until you can see the ear. In our pew Bibles, these verses are labeled “the Parable of the Weeds.” In others they’re called “the Parable of the Tares.” But those headings are added by modern editors.

One of the issues we talked about in our Parables class was how these traditional titles can color our perception. Jesus told a story about a man beaten by robbers on the side of the road. He didn’t call it “the Parable of the Good Samaritan” — that’s the church giving it that title over centuries. What we choose to call something — or someone — can matter greatly. How does it change our focus if we call that story from Luke “the Parable of the Two Guys Who Walked Past” or “the Parable of the Man who Traveled Alone.”

In this parable, we tend to focus on the weeds planted by the enemy, and I think that’s because the judgment is irresistible. The darnel is in among the wheat. Evil is afoot! There’s going to be some burning at the end! Fire! Those weeds are going to get what they deserve, and that can be reassuring.

Matthew is absolutely down with our interest in end-of-days judgment. He’s the Gospel writer most comfortable with writing about sorting and reckoning. He gives us sheep and goats and eternal punishment and eternal life. Right here in chapter 13 he has Jesus give a blow-by-blow explanation of this parable — which is both something Jesus doesn’t usually do and completely antithetical to the whole point of a parable.

I’m not suggesting we ignore the judgment here, but what if we are acting just like the servants in focusing on the weeds? What if the 20th Century heading in our Bibles read: “the Parable of the Unreliable Weeders” or “the Parable of the Landowner Who Told his Workers to Chill Out?”¹

¹ Thanks to Robert Williamson for reminding me of Amy-Jill Levine’s excellent point about this in her book *Short Stories of Jesus*.
<https://robertwilliamsonjr.com/help-weeds-grow> fbclid=IwAR2W53uTnw8XUSKaIZFjzYm_eKrvpRzHB6PoHzd6vJaEOLdStegGusPF8Sc

Someone — an enemy — got into this field in the night. When the wheat and darnel grow, the servants accuse the landowner, asking if he knows what he is doing. The one who sowed the field informs him that the other fruit they see is the work of an outside influence. And these servants are immediately ready to put on their weeding gloves and get to work.

They're just trying to be helpful. You know, like when your mother-in-law wants to help by rearranging your stuff. Or when you need to help out a friend by pointing out their grammatical errors. Or when your dad helps by critiquing your driving skills.

The servants are ready to be put to work sniffing out the false wheat and ripping it from the ground. They know who is in and who is out. It's up there with toolmaking and poetry and the ability to make an excellent risotto on the list of humanity's great skills, this ability to be so certain that We are Wheat and They are Weeds.

This sorting nature we have has had all sorts of fun consequences for humanity.
Chaos, as competing taxonomies of goodness battle for eminence.
Anger, at being told you are a weed, and at the weeds for not going quietly.
Violence, as weeds rebel and pesticides and machetes come out.

They don't send their best people, you know. They send weeds. They only look like wheat because they're not fully grown yet. Best to gather them up and detain them. Or post sentries at the edge of the field. There is false wheat in our midst, and the emergency is real. Time to wall-in this garden.

Chaos and anger and violence and panic infect the field and the enemy has accomplished what he set out to do at night. He watches as the servants scramble and trample good wheat and exhaust themselves in search of weeds and finally take a break for dinner, where they order enchiladas and tacos and plan for another day of weeding.

The landowner told them, "You're no good at this. You'll do more damage than good. Leave this work to me. I will handle it. You have other work to do."

Our first task is to see that there is both weed and wheat within each of us.
And then, to trust God to sort all that out later, at the harvest.
In the meantime, our call is to allow God's reign to flourish.

"The kingdom of heaven is like a mustard seed that someone took and sowed in his field... The kingdom of heaven is like yeast that a woman took and mixed in with three measures of flour until all of it was leavened."

The reign of God is a tiny seed.
The reign of God is some funky sourdough starter.
It needs planting and kneading and air and water, but then watch out!
It'll catch you by surprise.
It'll burst forth and take over your backyard.
It'll pop the lid off your Tupperware and make a mess on your counter.
I imagine that the Garden of Eden was not particularly well-manicured.
I worry we have the wrong idea about paradise.

The reign of God is a growing thing, a multiplying thing, an exponential thing.

To contain it or trim it or smooch it or cull it is not our work. If we find ourselves trying to hem it in, we're trying to do God's work and likely following the plot of one who plants in the night.

Our work is nurture and sunlight and nutrition and water.

When we have eyes to see and ears to hear the rustling, the shoots emerging, the blossoms opening, the creatures stirring, the hearts pounding, the music wakening, let us have the memory to hear Jesus telling us to cultivate and protect and tend and rejoice and to pour our energy into life-giving acts and work that leads to growth. We can, and must, leave the weeding to God - the creator, the sower, the only one able to sort us out. Amen.