

“Weeds”

Matthew 13.24-30, 36-43

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July 20, 2008

Let's talk about weeds! Plants that grow where they're not wanted. There are dandelions, of course, those pesky little yellow flower heads on long stems that turn into white fluffy things that you can blow wistfully into the air. There's poison ivy and poison oak, which some of you may have, at some point in the past, become more intimately acquainted with than you might have wished. There's Creeping Charlie, and ragweed, and Queen Anne's Lace, and the list goes on and on. Basically, anything that's growing in a place where you don't want it to be growing – that's a weed. Some of them are considered to be “invasive species.” And when you've got weeds growing in places where you don't want them to be growing, well, you have to decide what to do about that. If you have weeds in your lawn, you could just mow over them, the way you mow over your grass, which may temporarily remove the unsightly effects of weeds in your yard, but doesn't get at the root of the problem . . . the weeds are still there, sapping the soil of precious nutrients that could be nourishing the grass and plants that you *do* want to grow. In your garden, you could try covering the weeds with wet newspaper or plastic, or with gravel or mulch. Those of you who know more about farming than I do know the various ways you can deal with weeds growing in your crops. The bottom line is, once you've got weeds, you've got to figure out what – if anything – you're going to do about the problem.

My friends, there are weeds in the kingdom of heaven.

Last week, I started a little three-week series on the parables of the kingdom of heaven that we find in the thirteenth chapter of Matthew's gospel. There are a whole series of parables here, in which Jesus provides illustration after illustration after illustration about what God's kingdom looks like, in terms that people can relate to. Last week we explored the parable of the sower; next week we'll explore a whole series of brief one- or two-sentences parables. This week – well, this week we're talking about weeds. Weeds in the kingdom of heaven.

So there's this sower. A sower, kind of like the sower we heard about last week, but this sower is a little bit different. This sower is responsible for tending one particular field. He's trying to get wheat to grow in his field. The sower and his servants spread seed throughout the field – *good* seed. There is nothing that the sower plants that is not good. There is – let me repeat that – there is *nothing* that the sower plants that is not good. Some time passes, and the wheat begins to mature. But something has happened, something that seems to catch the sower by surprise: someone has snuck into the field and planted weeds in the midst of the wheat. An “invasive species” has arrived in a field where it is not wanted – and it didn't happen just by chance. The way Jesus tells this story, this is a deliberate,

calculated, intentional effort to undermine the work that the sower has done. There are weeds in the field – weeds that the sower did not put there – weeds that the sower does not *want* there – weeds that were deliberately planted in the field to thwart the plans of the sower. The one who is responsible for planting those weeds – well, Jesus refers to him as an “enemy.” And the act of planting those weeds – well, Jesus uses the word “evil” to describe what has happened here.

There are weeds in the kingdom of heaven, my friends, weeds that were planted by an enemy of the sower.

This is a parable. . . a story that is intended to convey a larger truth. In this case, it is a truth about the kingdom of heaven. In this story we find ourselves with a good sower, who just wants to plant and harvest a good field of weed . . . and in this story we find ourselves with another person, or being, or entity, or power, or force. We find ourselves with someone who deliberately wants to thwart the plans of the sower. Someone who sneaks in, uninvited, and causes havoc.

So when the servants of the sower realize that there are weeds growing in the field, they run to the sower. “Master, did you not sow *good* seed in the field? Where, then, did these weeds come from?”

Well, that’s the question, isn’t it? That’s the question we *all* find ourselves asking, at some point or other, as we go through life. Where do the weeds come from? Not the ones we find in our lawns or our gardens or our fields. Where do the weeds of our *lives* come from? Or, to put it differently: why is there *evil* in the world?

Not long ago, I found myself having a conversation with somebody who was asking some tough questions. This individual had been the victim of some crimes, some horrible crimes. This person I was speaking with wanted to know why God allowed those things to happen. (You know, when you’re a preacher, people think you have answers to questions like these!) Does God allow evil? Can God prevent evil? If God can prevent evil, why does it seem that God sometimes *doesn’t*?

There are weeds in the kingdom of heaven, my friends. How did they get there, and why does God allow them to stay?

I don’t know about you, but I often find it to be the case that the more I read and study the Bible, the more connections I find to other parts of the Bible, and to life itself. This past week, as I was reading and studying this passage in preparation for this morning’s sermon, I found myself reflecting on the opening chapters of the book of Genesis. The book of Genesis begins with God creating the world. God calls light into being, and God sees that the light is good. God separates the earth from the seas, and God sees that it is good. The earth brings forth plants and trees and fruit, and God sees that it is good. God sets the sun and the moon and the stars in the heavens, and God sees that it is good. God creates the fish of the sea and the birds of the air, and God sees that it is good. God creates wild animals and cattle and things that slither along the ground, and God sees that it is good. God looks upon everything that God has made, and behold, it is *very* good. In the first chapter of the book of Genesis, everything that God creates or brings about is good. There is *nothing evil* in the universe that God has created. *Nothing*. Everything that God creates is *good* – just like that wheat seed in the field – it’s all good! The seed is *good seed*. There’s nothing wrong with it. But what happens next – in the

creation story and in the parable – is that *evil* creeps in. In the Genesis story, as it has been passed down to us through countless generations from its original Hebrew origins, suddenly, at the beginning of chapter three, evil appears in the good creation that God has created, in the form of a serpent. Where did it come from? The text doesn't say. Jews and Christians have been puzzling over that little riddle for thousands of years. Philosophers and theologians and regular, ordinary people like you and me have pondered the question. Why is there evil and suffering in the world? Why do bad things happen to good people? Does God allow evil? Can God prevent evil? And if God can prevent evil, why does it seem that God sometimes *doesn't*?

If you're expecting to get a definitive answer to any of those questions this morning, well, I'm sorry to say, I'm going to disappoint you.

There are weeds in the kingdom of heaven. Weeds that the sower did not *want* there, and weeds that the sower did not *put* there. Where they came from, I don't know. Jesus mentions an "enemy" that somehow snuck into the field and put them there. Why that happened, how that happened, how it managed to be the case that that could happen without the sower being aware of it, I don't know.

What I do know – what the story *does* tell us – is what God is going to *do* about it.

The sower is going to take care of those weeds. The sower is going to *do something* to remove those weeds from his field, *permanently*. The sower will get rid of those weeds and make sure they never come back.

But it's not going to happen today.

You see, the way Jesus tells this story, the weeds have so infested the field that if the sower were to try to forcibly remove the weeds from the field right now, prior to the harvest, while the wheat is still growing, the force of taking the weeds out would rip the wheat out of the soil as well. The wheat would die. There would be no harvest from the good seed that the sower has sown. While the wheat is growing, the weeds *have* to stay. Yes, the weeds are causing all sorts of problems. Yes, the weeds are making it hard for the wheat to bask in the full radiance of the sun. Yes, the weeds are sapping the soil of precious nutrients that could be nourishing the grain. Yes, they're a problem, and it would sure be nice if they weren't there at all. But they are. There's nothing that can be done about that now. There are weeds in the kingdom of heaven, and there's nothing that can be done about them – yet.

The good news is that there *will* be a time when something can be done about them. The good news is that, when the wheat has reached full maturity, something can *indeed* be done about those weeds. They will be uprooted. They will be thrown out, disposed of, burned up. And when that happens, the wheat – the strong, healthy, mature wheat that the sower has sown from good seed – the wheat will bask in the full radiance of the sun.

There are weeds in the kingdom of heaven, *now*. But they won't be there *forever*.

This is not an easy passage to digest. A lot of what Jesus has to say in the gospels is, quite frankly, not easy to digest. It's hard for us, sometimes, to be willing to look evil in the face. Sometimes

we try to go through life pretending that evil really isn't a force worth worrying about. But history has shown us, time and again, that evil does exist. Sometimes, human beings, like you and me, whom God created good . . . do bad things. Everything starts out good. God hasn't created *anything* evil. We are created good. But something happens. Something changes. It's as if, at some point, in each one of our lives, a little devilish streak gets turned on, whether we're willing to admit it or not. I would venture to say that there is not one of us – not *one* of us – who can say positively and definitively, in all seriousness, having taken a good, hard look at ourselves, that we *always* have done things that are *only* good.

You see, there are weeds in the kingdom of heaven. And sometimes, those weeds make it hard for us to bask in the full radiance of the Son. It's as if there are shadows looming over us; it's as if there are roots stretching out and trying to wrap themselves around *our* roots. There is a reason why we pray every week, "Lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from evil" – because temptation is real. Evil is real. There are weeds in the kingdom of heaven.

The good news is that they won't be there forever. And when we reach full maturity, when we come to that point at which the grain of our lives is ready to be harvested, then - *then* - we will bask in the glory of the Son.

Until that happens . . . until that happens . . . well, we have to learn how to live and grow and mature with as little negative influence from the weeds as we can possibly get. We have to be intentional about looking for light in a world in which shadows loom. We have to be attentive to the soil from which we get our nourishment, doing whatever is in our power to strengthen our root system so that our roots will not be choked by the roots of the weeds. The influence of the weeds is real, and it is powerful. If it were easy to separate the weeds from the wheat while the wheat is growing, God would have already done so.

Why are the weeds there? Why is there evil and suffering in the world? Why do bad things happen to good people? Does God allow evil? Can God prevent evil? And if God *can* prevent evil, why does it seem that God sometimes *doesn't*? I don't know. We can keep asking these questions as long as we want, and I doubt we will ever come to a satisfactory answer, at least on *this* side of the veil.

What I do know is that there *is* evil in the world. There *is* suffering. Bad things sometimes *do* happen to good people. There are weeds in the kingdom of heaven. That is not the way God intended it to be. It will not always be so, but it is so now. God will take care of the weeds in the fullness of time. The question is, what are *we* going to do *now*? How are we going to live *our* lives in ways that look towards the light of the Son, and not the shadow of the weeds?

May God grant us the courage to resist temptation, to say "no" to evil, and to live for the Son . . . even – or perhaps especially – when it feels like the weeds are trying to take over the field.

In the name of the Father, and the Son, and the Holy Spirit . . . amen.