

Living with Weeds

Matthew 13:24-30, 36-43

Parable of Wheat and Weeds

Anyone who has a lawn knows these words: Creeping Charlie. I didn't even know what Creeping Charlie was until we moved to Wisconsin. It doesn't grow in the Pacific Northwest. Dandelions grow, but not Creeping Charlie. In owning our first home here in Eau Claire, neither Jim nor I knew just what that meant. Well, it meant that our lawn was Creeping Charlie is what that meant. Battling that weed can be quite the task.

Now, we aren't really into having a perfect lawn. And, we don't put chemicals and things on our ground that our dog can get into, so generally, we have for the most part gotten accustomed to weeds. In fact, to some degree, letting things go in our little forested back yard has led to some amazing discoveries. When first moving to Eau Claire, we never had Jack in the Pulpit or Trillium and now we have both. They have found a way to grow with the weeds. And, if we had instead put a bunch

of pesticide on our lawn, we may never have had those wonderful treasures to see.

Whenever I take a photograph of a beautiful flower that I don't know the name of, I often find out later that it's actually considered a weed, at least according to Wikipedia or other such online research pages. But, I have a friend who says that I can go ahead and like that pretty little weed, because one person's weed is another person's flower; at least, that's her opinion.

Today we hear a parable of Jesus that is found only in Matthew's Gospel. For some reason, the writers of the other three Gospels did not think that including this story Jesus likely told in one of his sermons was as important as other parables were; which means that it must have been important to the faith community that Matthew either was a member of or encountered.

We actually cannot say whether or not that the one who was a disciple of Jesus, known to us as Matthew, the

Tax Collector, was actually the author of this Gospel. Given that this Gospel probably derived from Antioch, it is unlikely that Matthew was the original author, although it is likely that the one who was, either knew Matthew well, experienced Jesus personally, or was a disciple of the church Matthew may have begun.

We do know that the person writing the Gospel of Matthew was witnessing a new faith community that had both Jews who were new believers of Christ and Gentiles who had become Christ followers themselves. This was a faith community trying to grapple with the difficulties of being church together. It's clear this is the case because Matthew includes a lot of the words of Jesus surrounding how to live with conflict, how to be a good citizen in a Roman world that was opposed to the Christian view, and how to treat your fellow siblings in Christ, who may or may not have followed laws surrounding the Sabbath or eating with unclean hands.

As I mentioned in last week's message, a parable is a

story that not only has a moral ending, but it's a story we are to place ourselves within. To be honest, this story does indeed make me rather uncomfortable for it seems to point to people being either good or evil. The good people are the wheat, while the evil people are the weeds. And, in the appropriate time, God will deal with them and there will be teeth gnashing and rather a lot of misery.

Generally, as a Lutheran, I don't like to call people evil or good but rather sinful people who have both saint and sinner within them. Therefore, we can be either evil or good and some days, we can display tendencies towards both. The strict dualism that Jesus uses here in this shocking parable is harsh, difficult to swallow, and not at all comfortable to our modern ears.

But, come on, who hasn't gone there? Who hasn't thought, those people or that person is evil and if they would just stop doing all that evil – if we just rooted them out, then things would be better around here?! These

dualisms are very easy for us. As people, division is easy. That's the simple way. The harder way is moving through the hazy gray, seeing good where there is evil and evil where there is supposed good. That's hard.

But, Jesus knows that. In fact, I think he wants to shock us with this parable. He wants us to think hard about our tendency to pull up weeds Willy-nilly without considering what we are doing. This is why the parable speaks in such stark terms. He knows the human beings go to division, they sharply place boundaries on who is in and who is out and both sides see the other as evil. And, we do it not only because we have sin, but because it's easy. The harder way is working towards the messy, arduous task towards justice and mercy. Over and over again God needs to remind us that it's not up to us to destroy evil because God does this through the restorative justice of Christ himself.

But, let's get back to the story as Matthew may have intended for his community to

hear it from their Lord. I suspect that Mathew was writing to a mixed Jewish and Gentile congregation. Each viewed the other as weed, themselves as wheat. They likely disagreed on Sabbath, food, commandments, history, old rules vs. new rules – all sorts of hurdles must have been in their way.

These two groups were very destructive to each other as the Apostle Paul also speaks to this in several of his letters to his churches that had mixed ethnic believers. So, I'm going to guess that Matthew was very concerned by how these two opposed groups living together in community were treating each other. And, this story of Jesus fits that time to a tee. Of course, in many other places in Matthew's Gospel, Jesus speaks to his disciples to be doers of justice and to oppose evil. So, it's not that it isn't our responsibility to fight evil in our midst. It's just not our role to rip it out, for if we rip out the weeds, we likely also harm the wheat.

I think we can easily see ourselves in this parable. Put in today's perspective, it's

clear that we love to divide. Some people are really good at dividing themselves up and against others. Learning to live with what we find toxic – that’s the true obstacle for many today. How we deal with those obstacles is everything, so that while we are at it, we are not pulling up wheat along with the weeds we have defined to be so unworthy by our own judgements and standards.

I suppose Jesus would have us instead learn to live with weeds, but in so doing, we support the wheat so that it can grow despite the fact that evil surrounds it. Perhaps that is our role – to support the good, to tend to the soil it grows in, to lift up the vulnerable being choked by evil, and to speak against the evil we do see.

I know. It’s just more satisfying to see evil get stamped out. And I know. It would be so much better if we could be the ones to define who, what, and that something or someone is evil. But, learning to live with weeds, even the weeds within our own selves, is still a big

enough challenge God would have us do.

A difficult parable; A difficult teaching Jesus teaches today. And, just as relevant it was for Matthew’s hearers, it is also relevant for us, because ultimately, faith surrenders the outcome of righteousness into the hand of God. And, that outcome is the cross. No greater evil was there than crucifying our own God. Who will be punished for that evil? Who will retaliate for that injustice? The Good News is the knowledge that God will not. God’s love for the weeds in us is just too strong.

Now, that Creeping Charlie – Go for it. If by ripping that out you derive satisfaction, that’s great. Yell at that weed all you want. Amen.