

Weed Treatment

Matthew 13:24-30, 36-43

WATCHING THE GRASS GROW

About a year after I graduated from Franklin College, I went to grad school because that's what you did if you had a biology degree with no teaching certificate. My minor was in theatre – not such a great combination with biology, as it turns out. Anyway, I found myself at IU studying ecology – how organisms relate to each other and their environments – and when you're a grad student you have to pick a research topic, mine was about grass. Tall fescue grass to be specific. There is an ergot fungus that can infect this grass, except to the fescue, the fungus isn't as much of an infection as it is a partner in crime. Tall fescue that's infected with ergot grows faster, is more resilient to drought, and is an all-around healthier plant. Great, right? Well, not so much to the cattle that graze on it. Ergot poisoning constricts blood vessels and can make a cow's hooves fall off, cut off milk production, and cause them to become infertile. This is a disaster for cattle farmers. So I set out to see how the plant populations would turn out if I planted different amounts of infected seed with uninfected seed. I was supposed to remain objective, but what I hoped to find is that a person didn't have to sow 100% uninfected seeds to end up with a field of 100% uninfected plants. So I planted my plots and then literally watched the grass grow.

SCRIPTURE

Today's scripture is also about a field with good plants and bad ones. Hear the words of Jesus in the Gospel according to Matthew, Chapter 13, verses 24-30 and 36-43:

He 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 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?" He answered, "An enemy has done this." The slaves 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.'"

Then he left the crowds and went into the house. And his disciples approached him, saying, "Explain to us the parable of the weeds of the field." He answered, "The one who sows the good seed is the Son of Man; the field is the world, and the good seed are the children of the kingdom; the weeds are the children of the evil one, and the enemy who sowed them is the devil; the harvest is the end of the age, and the reapers are angels. Just as the weeds are collected and burned up with fire, so will it be at the end of the age. The Son of Man will send his angels, and they will collect out of his kingdom all causes of sin and all evildoers, and they will throw them into the furnace of fire, where there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth. Then the righteous will shine like the sun in the kingdom of their Father. Let anyone with ears listen!

DISTRACTED BY JUDGMENT

I struggle with this text. I am not comforted by the idea that some people are going to burn in hell. More than that, I think this scripture can be used to divide people up "before the harvest" so to speak. We like to think of ourselves as the wheat, and judge others to be the weeds. I'm not just talking about Christians and non-Christians, I'm talking about division within the Christian Church: division between denominations, congregations, and even between groups of the same congregation. When we get distracted by judgment, the good news of the gospel gets lost. In the parable of the wheat and the weeds, the landowner tells his servants to leave the weeds alone because removing them would destroy the wheat. Maybe this is another way of saying, "Judge not, lest you be judged."

JESUS LOVES THE WEEDS

Another reason I struggle with this scripture, is that it doesn't seem to line up with the rest of Jesus' behavior. If Jesus had been like the landowner, he would have looked at the people of his time, seeing the good and the bad, and done nothing. Just would have kind of hung out until the harvest. That is the opposite of what Jesus did. Jesus couldn't leave the weeds alone – but he didn't uproot them either. Think back to the beginning of Jesus' ministry; what did he do? In Matthew's gospel, the first thing Jesus did was preach the good news of the kingdom. He called out, "Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is near!" And this really was good news: the kingdom was coming close but not here yet; there is still time! Jesus' message meant that people still had the chance to turn toward God before it was too late. I want you to notice something. Jesus' message of repentance was meant for those who needed saving. Jesus wasn't preaching to perfect people. Jesus was speaking to the weeds. And he was doing more than spreading the word, he healed them of

their diseases, he cast out evil, he fed thousands upon thousands of them. All weeds, all people who had been judged by others and maybe even judged by themselves and decided they weren't worth saving. These were the people Jesus *loved*, and he worked himself to death – literally – to make sure as many of them as possible were included in the harvest.

THE SERVANTS

When his disciples ask Jesus to explain the parable of the weeds and wheat, Jesus tells them what each of the parts of the story stand for: “The one who sows the good seed is the Son of Man; the field is the world, and the good seed are the children of the kingdom; the weeds are the children of the evil one, and the enemy who sowed them is the devil; the harvest is the end of the age, and the reapers are angels.” There are two characters that go unexplained: the landowner and the landowner's servants. I believe we are meant to assume that the landowner – the one in charge of the harvest and when it will happen – is God. But who are the servants? Who are the ones who looked into the field and wanted to tear it up as soon as they saw that it had been contaminated by weeds? I believe these are Jesus' disciples – ones who followed Jesus when he was alive on earth and on through time to the disciples of Christ today. It can be very tempting for a servant of God to look out at the field of the world and start rooting out the ones they judge evil and worthless. But we must remember what will happen to the world if we start judging and eliminating the ones we consider wicked: we will destroy the good along with bad. That can happen simply because judgment among people points everyone away from God, but it can happen for another reason as well. When judgment is being thrown around, even the wheat can feel weedy. Pointing fingers can highlight sin not so far in the past. If I decide abusers of alcohol are evil and should be cut off, a person in the congregation who struggles with alcoholism may very well feel rejected by God. Even if the person stays in the church, I have weakened his or her roots and planted seeds of doubt. Now who's the weed?

WE ARE WEEDS

I wonder if you remember when you were lost, or maybe you feel lost even now. We have all been there, and there are parts of us that are still there – parts that haven't yet turned to God and still need to be found. We have been weeds in the field, surrounded by wheat that the landowner's servants judge to be the only thing that's valuable. Thank God that the servants don't get to decide which plants are worth saving. Thank God for the landowner's patience and guidance. Without it, I wouldn't be in front of you today; without it, none of us would be here.

THE LANDOWNER

The landowner's patience is the good news of this parable. The landowner suspends the harvest to give the plants in the field time to mature. God's suspension of judgment means there is still time for grace to work. When Jesus explained the parable of the weeds and wheat to his disciples, he said the Son of Man was the sower of the good seed. But the Son of Man's work wasn't complete at the beginning of the growing season. Jesus spent his life *continuing* to sow good seed. He called people to repent, he taught them how to live faithful lives, he healed them, fed them, and sought them. The Son of Man's legacy lives in us. We are Christ in the world today, and we must continue sowing good seed.

RESULTS OF THE PROJECT

I got interesting results from my grass-growing project. It turns out that I didn't have to plant 100% good seed in a plot to end up with a harvest of 100% healthy plants. What I discovered was that if I sowed 75% good seed, the uninfected plants crowded out the infected ones. They literally pushed the infection out of the field. Maybe it is that way with people and the kingdom of heaven in Jesus' parable. Maybe the growth of faithful people – both in spirit and in number – pushes out evil and keeps it from growing.

THE TIME BEFORE THE HARVEST

We are living in the time before the harvest, a period of suspended judgment that gives the gospel a chance to change the world. Just as Jesus imitated God, suspending his own judgment and working so all might know forgiveness and new life, we must do the same. We are the body of Christ, and as such we must see the people of the world with his eyes. We must look out at the field seeing not weeds to be destroyed but wheat in the making, waiting for us to show them the good way to grow.