

**Albuquerque, New Mexico.**  
**Sunday July 23, 2023. Proper 11A**  
**Christopher McLaren**  
**Text: Matthew 12: 24-30, 36-43**  
**A Wheat-Weed Reality**  
**Parable of the Wheat and the Weeds**

I get this parable from a gardener's perspective. I do a lot of weeding in my vegetable garden and yard. I rarely if ever use weed killers because I don't think that they are good for the environment, for me, or for my honeybees, so I have a lot of weeding to do. I work hard to get rid of the weeds that compete for nutrients and water and sun so that my tomatoes, basil, eggplant, peppers and okra can thrive. The first year we lived in New Mexico, when the Monsoons arrived (we are all praying that they arrive this year and soon). I did not know how important it was to start weeding and I ended up with weeds 6-8 feet tall over the whole yard.

So, Jesus' parable really gets my attention. Someone intentionally putting weed seed in amongst the beautiful fecund necessary grain. It's outrageous, dastardly and simply not fair. Honestly it makes me mad. This is a cruel enemy. What kind of a world does this parable imagine? How can this be a picture of the Kingdom of God?

For several weeks now we've been reading parables from the Gospel of Matthew. And lately we've been tracking these parables that purport to tell us something about the Kingdom of God. It's like seeds sown on various forms of soil, It's like a farmer who sows good seed only to have an evil neighbor sow weeds amongst his grain or next week is a string of really cool parables about the kingdom. What are we supposed to learn?  
What is the main point?

Some people see the Gospel of Matthew as one in which there is a high interest in clear answers. One famous commentator says: "Of all the Gospel writers, it is Matthew who most wants a clear-cut creation in which things are black and white, good or bad, in which people are faithful or wicked, blessed or cursed. (Taylor). Matthew is the only gospel writer who talks about the end of the world, weeping and gnashing of teeth and the furnace to burn up the chaff. He has parables that others don't include the wise and foolish virgins as well as sheep and the goats being separated. Matthew may be the gospel for the tidy or black and white thinkers, just sayin'...

Matthew's quest for clarity for answers, for clean cut interpretations may be a comfort to some. But for others of us it seems a bit too tidy when we consider the

world in which we live and strive every day. Are there only two kinds of people in the world? Are there just two groups of people, the insiders and the outsiders? Some get just the parable and others get a fancy explanation later over dinner and drinks. One of the problems most of us have with this simple inside/outside approach or wheat and weeds is that the world seems a bit messier than that especially when we've discovered both weeds and wheat in ourselves, our friends, our parishioners, and others we rub shoulders with every day. Most of us when we are being honest or are fresh from a 12-step meeting are prone to realize that we are mixed plantings ourselves neither pure grain nor or a lost cause patch of puncture vine. In fact, in our most lucid or self-reflective moments we may be a little concerned, nervous about all the talk of fire and burning up the weeds as that could get a bit personal for some of us. Once again, we encounter the American tendency to make this about our own personal spiritual life What kind field crop am I? Wheat? Weeds? (Don't worry I'm thinking about myself or my friends, not you.)

But I want to remind all of us that parables are not really intended to answer these kinds of questions. Remember this is a parable of The Kingdom. It's not really about you particularly or only about you. It's something larger. I love what Barbara Brown Taylor said about parables.

"The wonderful thing about parables is that they rarely answer such questions (like what kind of soil am I?) or at least not directly. No matter how much we want to read them like Morse code, they behave more like dreams or poems, instead delivering their meaning in images that talk more to our hearts than to our heads. Parables are mysterious and their mysteriousness has everything to do with their longevity. Left alone, they teach us something different every time we hear them, speaking across great distances of time and place and understanding." (Taylor).

As you will have noticed Matthew's Gospel doesn't just give us the parable but a few verses later we get an explanation where everything means something specific, a kind of allegory. I'm just going to say it clearly that many biblical scholars think that the explanations are bogus additions from religious folk that just couldn't leave well enough alone. Their need for clarity clobbered Jesus' need for mysterious stories that would live on and be numinous. I know that I probably shouldn't say this, but a lot of religious folks seem to have a deep need for clarity and detest ambiguity thus scholars believe that there are unfortunate additions to holy writ and glosses that just don't make all that much sense.

It's not that all of us don't like a good explanation. Many of us want things to be clear. In fact, sometimes Jesus is infuriating, "Jesus just say it plain and simple, quit

beating around the Wheat and the Tares!" Why do you have to be some obtuse, so parabolic, so spirit-man-wisdom-talker like?

Parables have a life all of their own, they wash over us packed with mystery and meaning. Parables tease our minds into active thought and wonder. However, explanations have a way of closing things down by giving a place to stand, offering some safety that we now know what this actually means, and we can rest assured that we've wrestled this text into submission. Explanations reduce parables to manageable tools we can use to improve ourselves, judge others and try to repair the world I suppose. I'm sure you can think of all kinds of cute pithy messages that this parable might inspire. "Don't let the weeds take over." "Don't tear out the Tares?" or "Is God really on a Holy Tare?" Kind of like the person who whispered to the Sr. Warden at Coffee Hour the first year I was here, "Hey we really like Father Christopher but make sure the gays don't take over." Talk about weeds trying to choke out new life. Yikes!

In the parable, the workers are concerned about the owner's field that has been invaded by weeds. They offer to go into the field and pull out the weeds which will compromise the crop. The weeds in the story are tares or darnel, or if you prefer *Lolium temulentum*. It's a weed that looks like wheat and grows among wheat but it's a bad customer as its black seeds are poisonous causing blindness or even death if too many of them end up in your bread dough. So, if you were from the local culture, you would have been shocked or intrigued or horrified by this parable. It was not common practice to leave or let the tares grow with the wheat. In fact, workers often removed the tares from the wheat fields twice per season to ensure a healthy and good harvest. Jesus' parable about the kingdom of God pictures an eccentric farmer to be sure. This is a farmer that is not interested in pure crops, a neat field or an efficient farm process. **This farmer is evidently more interested in growth than perfection.** He would rather risk fat weeds for the sake of ample and abundant grain.

Perhaps this parable should be called living with the Weeds. Is it really true that the Kingdom of God, is so comprehensive that it allows the weeds as well? What is Jesus getting at? Is he saying, hey don't be so surprised about the weeds, they are a reality but so is fat grain, fecund harvests and some pretty sweet sorting practices carried out by angels. God can handle the weeds and so can you!

Richard Rohr writes:

*The demand for the perfect is the enemy of the possible good. Be peace and do justice, but let's not expect perfection in ourselves or the world. Perfectionism contributes to intolerance and judgmentalism and makes ordinary love largely impossible. Jesus was an absolute realist, patient with the ordinary, the broken, the weak, and those who failed. Following him is not a "salvation scheme" or a means of creating some ideal social order as much as it is a vocation to share the fate of God for the life of the world, and to love the way that God loves—which we cannot do by ourselves.*

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This is one way you can live out of this parable to realize that acceptance of something less than perfect is not a failure, it's an opportunity to include the human, to welcome the learner, to be gentle toward the novice. I think about this all the time in worship, do we want perfect military precision in acolytes and a culture of anxiety and fear that comes with it or do we want people to participate and enjoy the relationships and blessings of being part of a community.

Or perhaps we can understand this parable a bit better by listening to *Episcopal bishop and member of the Cherokee nation Carol J. Gallagher reflect on how her Indigenous ancestry and the profound suffering of her people enrich her understanding of heaven and hell:*

To reflect on heaven and hell is to honestly walk in the ways of my ancestors.... I have heard their ancient stories, the stories of survival and persistence, and I have lived the inheritance of people who have been removed, reviled, and turned away. It has been an inheritance of pain and suffering, and an inheritance of light and beauty....

Heaven and hell are not so much places we end up in the afterlife or places of reward and punishment, but rather, they are moments in relationship, lived experience here and in the time that follows our sojourn on this earth. On the one hand, the sense of heaven, for me, rests in the connection and interwoven sense of life that is organic to a tribal community. On the other hand, hell might be imagined as those times of severe dislocation, removal, and dis-connection to tribe and family....

*Gallagher understands heaven and hell as the impact of our choices to live in relationship with creation and to follow a God with a "bias from the bottom":*

Our place of removal, Oklahoma Indian Territory, was a dry place, ever so different from our homelands. Yet, even there our people found promise, small hillocks and

shaded streams, places that sang to us of home.... In the midst of the worst kind of hell people can live through—displacement, dislocation, and dishonor—we sought a little heaven in our little gardens and small streams, and in one another. In the night we sang our songs and told our stories. From the outside we might have looked damned, but on the inside, we knew there was yet more to come. We knew our God to be understanding of the heavy burdens we were bearing, as one who walked the removal road with us, who suffered such loss and indignations, who would hold us close and carry us to a place of healing and renewal....

To me, then, heaven and hell are concepts that are part of all creation. Heaven and hell exist within and beyond the confines of our world of space and time. We can participate in heaven by living in harmony and respect with all of creation or in hell by bringing greed, selfishness, and disease upon the whole earth....

We are endowed by the Creator with the power to live our lives for the well-being of all. Heaven and hell are about living (or not) in right *relationship* with all of creation, of honoring or dishonoring all, and knowing the love of God by sharing it with all of our relatives: human, plants, trees, four-legged, winged, water, and earth all woven together.

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Talking about this meditation this week with a faithful friend, we spoke about how Heaven and Hell are right next to each other. The weeds and the wheat are adjacent to each other in our lives. We can't help it; heaven and hell are always surrounding us and it's almost impossible to extricate ourselves. We can't get rid of all the weeds. We're stuck with them. The Kingdom of God anticipates them being amongst us if we are to believe this parable. Heaven and Hell are found in our response to all that we encounter as Bp. Gallagher so beautifully put it in her reflection on the lives of her Cherokee siblings.

One final image may be helpful to mining the depths of this parable that still await.

Heaven can be pictured as a sumptuous banquet table laden with all manner of amazing food, roast lamb, fruit, flowing wine, exquisite desserts. Seated at the table are all manner of folks, many you would not have expected to be there. Everyone is there and there is one very strange thing about this banquet table and those seated. Each person has silverware in their hands, but the silverware is three feet long and strapped to each of their arms. For some it is absolute hell as they cannot get the food they have on their utensils to their mouths. They try in vain to eat but they are

ever thwarted by their efforts. But for others the feast is a delight and a source of hilarity as they feed those across from them or two people down the table and others feed them.

Heaven and Hell are right next to each other. The Wheat and Weeds are growing together and therein is a blessing.

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*Note: I'm deeply indebted to The Rev. Bp. Carol Gallagher for her writing on heaven and hell. For Richard Rohr's OSF., meditation on the problem of perfection. Also, for the beautiful work on parables from The Rev. Barbara Brown Taylor included in this sermon.*