

**STORYTIME:**  
**The One About the Messy Field**

**Matthew 13:24-30, 36-43**

*We have to deal with the weeds in the wheat.*

A sermon preached by  
Rev. Dr. William O. (Bud) Reeves  
First United Methodist Church  
Fort Smith, Arkansas  
July 7, 2019

When we talked about the parable of the sower last week, I shared with you that I am not a farmer, and I have very little experience at gardening, although I can talk a good game about either. I do, however, like to do yard work. It's a little frustrating that I don't have time to do my basic yard maintenance myself, but I do like to do special projects and the extra things to make my yard look good. Maybe there will come a season in my life when I have the time and energy to do more of my own yard work.

But I have to admit, one of the more irritating tasks of yard work is pulling weeds, especially when the weeds get entangled in the flowers and plants that you want to grow in your flowerbed or landscaping. I have tried weed barriers, mulch, and chemicals, but those darn weeds always seem to find a way to poke their pesky little heads out of the soil.

So I totally relate to this parable of Jesus today. Of course, that's why Jesus told these parables the way he did, so people could immediately relate to the story and be drawn in, then have a moment of conviction, insight, or inspiration.

I think these parables of Jesus are powerful because they make one simple point of faith, using an image that everyone understands. This parable, like the parable of the sower from last week, is explained into an allegory, where each part of the story has a symbolic meaning. Maybe that's the way Jesus explained it. Maybe, like some scholars think, Matthew embellished the story with his own explanation. (These stories don't appear in this way in the other Gospels.) Either way, I think the power of this parable for us today is to drill down to the original story and the original meaning for those who heard it by the Sea of Galilee years ago.

Jesus said, "The kingdom of heaven is like this: a farmer sowed good seed in his field, but while he was sleeping, an enemy came and sowed weeds among the wheat. (I didn't know the coop sold weed seeds, but I guess they do.) So when the plants grew up, there were weeds among the stalks of wheat. The slaves of the master questioned him, 'Did you not sow good seed in this field?' The master replied, 'This is not my fault. An enemy has done this.' So the slaves wanted to go out and pull up the weeds, but the farmer stopped them. 'No, if you try to pull up the weeds, you'll pull up the wheat, too. Just let it all grow until the harvest, then I will tell the

reapers to gather the weeds and burn them, and gather the wheat into my barn.”<sup>1</sup>

What does this simple story tell us about the kingdom of heaven? **First, it tells us that the kingdom of heaven is a growing thing.** The business of the kingdom, and therefore the business of the church, is to grow, to expand, to produce a crop, to make new disciples of Jesus, to spread our influence further and wider across our community and around the world. A declining church should be an oxymoron; it’s just not supposed to happen. The kingdom grows like a crop getting ready for harvest.

Jesus followed this parable with two more parables of growth. The kingdom of heaven is like a mustard seed, the tiniest of all seeds. But when it grows, it is the greatest of all shrubs, standing 10 feet tall, big enough for birds to nest in its branches.

Or the kingdom of heaven is like yeast. A woman put a handful of yeast into a bushel of flour, and it was enough to leaven the whole bushel. It doesn’t take much yeast to make a big impact, right? It doesn’t take much faith to change the world.

Truett Cathy, the founder of Chick-fil-A, once used the image of a Chinese bamboo plant. Chinese bamboo looks dormant for four years—no apparent growth at all—then during the fifth year of its life, something happens, and it grows fifty feet tall in about six weeks. Cathy asked, “Would you say that bamboo tree grew in six weeks, or five years?” Then he said, “I believe God wants us to be successful ... and yet success is not always obvious. ...I think our lives are akin to the Chinese bamboo tree. Sometimes we put forth effort, put forth effort, and put forth effort ... and nothing seems to happen. But if you do the right things long enough, you'll receive the rewards of your efforts.”<sup>2</sup> Truett Cathy was in the restaurant business for 21 years before he opened his first Chick-fil-A, and today Chick-fil-A is the third largest restaurant chain in the world. The kingdom of heaven is like Chick-fil-A, a growing thing.

**The parable of the weeds in the wheat also teaches us that the kingdom of heaven is an imperfect thing.** There is no such thing as a perfect church, perfect pastor, or perfect Christian. There are always weeds in the wheat.

In 2007, David Kinnamon and Gabe Lyons published a book that was highly disturbing to many people. It was called *unChristian: What a New Generation Really Thinks about Christianity...and Why It Matters*.<sup>3</sup> Based on interviews with thousands of young adults, they sought to get at how young people view the church. Many of them say they are “spiritual but not religious,” and an increasingly larger percentage of this generation is staying away from church. Why? According to the book, it is because young adults perceive the church—“organized religion”—as being hypocritical, judgmental, anti-homosexual, political, out of touch with contemporary culture, and only interested in “getting people saved.”

Information like that (and I’m not defending or debunking the book here) makes us want to react like the servants in the parable. “Master, should we just tear out the weeds?” Can we cleanse the church, solve our problems, restore our image, and get on about our real business, which is growing a new crop of disciples of Jesus?

No, we can’t. It doesn’t work that way. The key to the parable is in the words of the master, “*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.*”<sup>4</sup> We can’t just remove all the sin and problems and controversies from the church. It’s a divinely-inspired but unfortunately human institution. We have to have patience and let the story run its course. We would love to run all the hypocritical and judgmental people out of the church, but that would be hypocritical and judgmental! It’s not our judgment to make. Removing the weeds from the wheat is God’s call, not ours. Clovis Chappell, a great Methodist preacher of an earlier generation often said that everyone has a right to enter the kingdom of heaven, but no one has the right to shut anyone out.<sup>5</sup>

The simple fact is, we don’t know all we need to know to make the call on anyone’s status in the kingdom. We may look at someone and think, That’s a weed for sure. But we don’t know all the circumstances of that person’s life, and we don’t know what chapters have yet to be written in

their story. Many times a weed in the present turns out to be wheat in the end.

In 1983, Carla Faye Tucker helped to kill two people in Texas with a pickaxe. She was so brutal in her behavior that she laughed while she did it. She was found guilty and imprisoned. On death row, Carla Faye Tucker became a born-again Christian, and everyone around her witnessed the true legitimacy of her conversion experience.

Carla Faye Tucker became the first woman executed in Texas since the Civil War. As she lay strapped on a gurney, she delivered her final message to those gathered to witness her execution. She said, "I'm going to be face to face with Jesus now. I love all of you very much. I'll see you all when you get there."<sup>6</sup>

That's a testimony to the transformational power of the grace of Jesus. It's also a call to patience toward those that we are sure are unworthy of the kingdom, because we might be wrong. We might be wrong because our fields are full of weeds, too. The world is imperfect, and the church is imperfect, because it is made up of imperfect people like you and me. **The kingdom of heaven is a personal thing.** The field is our soul, and it's also full of weeds.

We have so many seeds being thrown onto our field every day. Our lives are constantly saturated with media and information, and the values we accept and take in do not all glorify God, do they? The Christian band Casting Crowns has a song called "Slow Fade." It's about letting the weeds take over in our lives; it's about our failure to live intentionally for Christ every moment of every day. The chorus says, "It's a slow fade when you give yourself away. It's a slow fade when black and white are turned to gray, and thoughts invade, choices are made, a price will be paid, when you give yourself away. People never crumble in a day. It's a slow fade."<sup>7</sup>

When our faith does a slow fade, when we let the weeds take over, we begin to sow mixed seed in the world. Our witness is compromised. We operate from mixed motives, even when we are doing good things. You know what I'm talking about. You can do the best thing imaginable—feed the hungry, help the poor, teach the children, preach the Gospel—and yet there in the weedy field of your soul, there is the voice of ego and pride and

self-satisfaction, saying, “These people are so fortunate that I’m here to help. I know God appreciates me being on his team. I can’t wait to hear God say, ‘Well done.’ In fact, I may be one of the better humble servants God has.” Weeds in the field.

When we look at the weedy field of the world and the weedy field of the church and the weedy field of our soul, where is the hope? What redeems the story? What keeps this life from being just an exercise in despair?

**The kingdom of heaven is a growing thing; it’s an imperfect thing; it’s a personal thing; but in the end, it’s God’s thing.** Remember, this is a parable about the kingdom of *heaven*. The weedy field is a picture of what God’s kingdom looks like. The field, the seed, the workers all belong to the Master. The enemy is an intruder; he has no power. The harvest will come; good and evil will be sorted out. Our call is to persevere and be patient and tend the crop until the harvest comes. Our hope is in God who owns the farm.

Ellsworth Kalas, in his chapter on this parable, quotes a line out of the hymn “This Is My Father’s World”: “That though the wrong seems oft so strong, God is the ruler yet.” Then he goes on to say, “Through it all, we dare not lose heart. For though the enemy is clever and fearsomely industrious, he cannot finally win. This is our Father’s world, and if we work with him, we are on the winning side. The harvest will come, and it will be right.”<sup>8</sup>

If you have been out working in the yard or gardening or pulling weeds, especially this time of year, it doesn’t take long before you are hot and sweaty and tired. You need frequently to take a breather. Drink some water. Take a little nourishment. Rest for a minute.

That may also describe the state of your soul today. You have been battling the weeds in your own soul, in the church, and in the world. There are things that you are struggling with that maybe nobody else even knows about, but they have just about exhausted your resources.

I want to offer you a breather today. Stop the struggle for just a minute. Rest. Come and take some nourishment for your spirit. Eat the bread and drink the juice; receive the grace of Jesus Christ. Let your patience and your strength and your peace be restored. God still owns the world and the

church and your soul. Stay in the field. One day the harvest will come, and you will be blessed.

---

<sup>1</sup> Matthew 13:24-30, paraphrased.

<sup>2</sup> S. Truett Cathy, *Leadership*, Vol. 7, no. 3.

<sup>3</sup> David Kinnamon and Gabe Lyons, *unChristian: What a New Generation Really Thinks about Christianity...and Why It Matters* (Baker Books, 2007).

<sup>4</sup> Matthew 13:29-30.

<sup>5</sup> Ellsworth Kalas, *Parables From The Back Side* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1992), 46.

<sup>6</sup> Bob Russell, "I Have a Dark Side I Must Understand," *Preaching Today*, sermon No. 222.

<sup>7</sup> John Mark Hall, "Slow Fade," Sony/ATV Music Publishing LLC, 2007.

<sup>8</sup> Kalas, 48-49.