

## The One About the Messy Fields

Did you hear the one about the messy fields?

If you are like my husband and you are waging a war against weeds, you might be able to relate to this story about the farmer who thought he had sowed good seed in his field, but he was surprised when weeds sprung up seemingly overnight! Have we all experienced weeds trying to take over our yards, our flower beds, our fields and our gardens? Weeds are inevitable, aren't they? If we are going to grow things, we are going to have weeds.

This is why the stories of Jesus are so great -- because he would use an example that was a common experience, so that not only would the people remember it, but they would also connect with the story and understand it better. But life is a lot different for us today 2,000 years later. And although we can still relate to the idea of weeds growing in the wheat field, there is a back story about the time and place that Jesus lived that is helpful to know. Today's back story is the story of the bearded darnel. Yes, the bearded darnel. The weed that Jesus was probably referring to in this story is called the bearded darnel. And you see a picture of it here on your left -- you will notice it looks almost identical to the wheat on the right. In its early stages of growth it's almost impossible to tell the difference in the two. And as the plants mature the roots of the wheat and the weeds grow together - they intertwine. It becomes almost impossible to pull out only the weeds without also pulling up the wheat. However, it is necessary at some point to pull out the bearded darnel because it is not good to eat -- it is bitter and a little poisonous - causing dizziness and nausea if a person eats it. So it would be really important to separate it. But instead of separating the weed out while it was growing the solution was to pull the weed out after the wheat was harvested by spreading the grain out on a large tray and picking the darnel out by hand which was easier at harvest because the darnel was a gray color and stood out against the color of the wheat.

Now get this. Apparently sowing darnel seed among wheat was a common act of sabotage! And the Romans even had a law against it! (William Barclay, The Daily Study Bible Series, Matthew vol 3, page 73-74). The people of Jesus's day would have recognized the idea that an enemy might literally be responsible for the bearded darnel growing among the wheat. They would have known that the two looked almost identical at the beginning. They would have known about how difficult it would be to separate the good seed from the bad.

The stories of Jesus have a funny way of becoming our own stories. You see, I have my own parable of the weeds among the wheat, but it's called the parable of the potato chip bag. This is a terrible story to tell on my second Sunday before you know me better--but here goes... this is a really weird dream that I had. I think you will see the comparison.

In the dream, I was traveling in a van with a group of people when a catastrophic event happened - and the road beneath us just began to crumble into pieces. The van began to fall into a chasm that opened up below us. We were falling, falling, falling. I knew that I needed to pray, but no words would come to me, so I just started saying: "Lord have mercy. Lord have mercy. Lord have mercy." Suddenly, we landed in an area that seemed to be a waiting area. There were chairs grouped around tables and there was a bar at one end. On the bar were giant blue bags that looked like potato chip bags. The perfect snack for the apocalypse, right? I went over to get some chips and I was surprised to see that instead of saying potato chips on the bag it said Christians. Very strange. Nevertheless, I looked in the bag expecting to see one of my favorite snacks--salty, crispy chips. Instead, what I saw and smelled was a bag full of wet, stinky canned dog food. Does anything smell worse than canned pet food?

Things aren't always as they appear.

Just like the bearded darnel growing among the wheat, not everything is as it appears. The farmer's field in the parable looks fine on the surface, but as the crop grows it becomes apparent that it is a mess.

One commentator wrote this:

It chronically comes as a shock to find that the world, the family into which we were born, that even the church is not an entirely trustworthy place. The world has places of wonder, but alleys of cruelty, too. Families cause deep pain as well as great joy. The church can be inspiringly courageous one moment and petty and faithless the next. Good mixes in with the bad. "Where did these weeds come from?" is a perennial human cry. (M. Eugene Boring, *The NIB Commentary*, page 311).

Although our lives may look great on the surface, surely we have all experienced the messiness and even the meanness of the world.

Where did these weeds come from? This is messier than I thought it would be! The same applies for us as individuals and us as followers of Jesus and for the body of Christ as a whole - things can be messy.

But the message for today is not as simple as "be the wheat and not the weeds" or "be the potato chips and not the dog food!" Although John Wesley, the father of Methodism, adamantly believed in perfection, most of us aren't there yet. We are partly wheat and partly weeds. We are working on it, and God is working on us -- we are going on to perfection. Good mixes in with bad in our lives, and in who we are individually, and in who we are as a group of people who try to follow Jesus!

God is not surprised when things get messy. And yet God loves us so much, that he doesn't want us to stay in the weeds. So maybe it is time for some honesty -- maybe it's time to admit that our own lives do need some weeding, and that the church is filled with us weeds, too. And then after we are honest about ourselves, maybe this parable calls us next to love others instead of judging others -- the same way that Jesus loves us even knowing all our imperfections. Maybe this story is teaching us that **God** will take care of the judging, and our role in bringing in God's kingdom is to love, even if it's messy.

There's a book called *UnChristian: What a New Generation Really Thinks About Christianity .... And Why It Matters*. It's based on three years worth of interviews and research by the Barna Group. It's pretty shocking. What they found is that many people outside the church, especially younger adults, reject Jesus because they feel rejected by Christians. It really grieves me to think that someone might reject Jesus because of my rejection of them. You see, people are watching to see how followers of Jesus act on a daily basis. They are watching how we speak to people, and how we do business, how we act at restaurants and Wal-Mart. They are watching how we treat people who are hungry, grieving and sick. They are watching how we are standing up or not standing up for the oppressed, and how we welcome or reject immigrants. They are watching to see how we respond to acts of racism and discrimination. They are noticing whether we are really Christians through and through.

The writer of *UnChristian* says, "every Christ follower bears some degree of responsibility for the image problem" that the church has today (Kinnaman, page 14). Unfortunately, Barna's research shows that among Americans ages 16-29 who are outside of the church 91% view the church as antihomosexual, 87% view the church as judgmental, and 85%

view the church as hypocritical (saying one thing and doing another/looking like potato chips on the outside when...). (Kinnaman, page 32). .....The way we live and love bears witness to the world for Christ. I wonder how these statistics might change if we focused on loving others instead of judging others?

God is not surprised when we aren't perfect, but God called us here to **this** place on **this** day for a reason. The reason God called us here is to grow, to mature, and to be transformed by Jesus. The bearded dandelion **isn't** going to be changed into a grain of wheat. But we **can be** transformed more and more every day into the likeness of Christ when we are intentional about practicing this life of loving God and loving people. You see, God desires for us to be his followers to the core of who we are, not just on the surface--to be disciples through and through. Jesus teaches that we are to love God with all that we are and to love people the same way he did. We are called to love people, not to judge people.

**This** church is already engaged in some really amazing ministries that show God's love in tangible ways. There are so many I don't even know about them all yet. You are already feeding the hungry and loving people of all ages and stages in the community in all kinds of different ways. But I am willing to bet that the leaders of all these ministries need and would welcome more people! Could we show God's love to more people if we had more help with the Sunday breakfast or our youth and children's ministries or the Red Shield Diner or the Guatemala Mission trips? And get this....while I was writing this sermon, I got an email from John Stauffer that the Salvation Army would like to talk with us about expanding our work with them. There are so many needs in our local community and across the world. And part of the reason that God showed up here on earth in the form of Jesus was to show us exactly how we are called to love people -- especially how to love those who live on the margins of society who have no idea how beloved by God they are.

Now there are about 500 people who come to this place to worship on Sunday. Imagine what an impact 500 people could make on Fort Smith. If 500 people joined forces to show the love of Jesus in this community, don't you think people might notice something about the power and love of God?

Many of you know that last week was my first week here. And my husband told me that when I first got up here I was so excited that he thought I wasn't going to make it. I think he thought I was going to hyperventilate. And I realized that the reason I am so excited to be here is that the presence of God's spirit is tangible in this place. I can feel an abundance of the fruit of the spirit - love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, gentleness, faithfulness and self control. It's like the Spirit of God is just bubbling up around us. And I know that there is someone here today that the Spirit is working overtime on -- the spirit is stirring you up to step out and try a new thing, probably even something that is out of your comfort zone. The Spirit is stirring you up to be more of a through and through Christian. And I also know there is probably someone here that the Holy Spirit is nagging to do a new thing or to take an old thing and ramp it up - to take it to a new level. I'm thinking some of you may know what I mean, when some new thing is on your mind and you can't let it go. Now, it's not because I have some kind of psychic abilities that I know these things. It's because this is how God works in the world -- the Holy Spirit convicts God's people to step up and step out to be God's helper in bringing God's kingdom on earth as it is in heaven. And when people say yes to God, amazing transformation occurs.

So, my challenge for you this week is to listen closely for the ways that God's Spirit is drawing you to love people rather than to judge people. How is God calling you to become more of a through and through disciple? I would love to talk with you in person about the dreams that God is stirring up in you; in fact, that is part of my job here.

Know today that it's not easy to join God in this kingdom work. If we are going to grow things, we are going to have weeds. It's going to get messy. But it is so worth it -- the harvest will be amazing!

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