

WEEDS AMIDST THE WHEAT

MATTHEW 13:24-30 AND 36-43

When I was a student in college, one summer I worked on a dairy farm. The farmer needed help because morning glories, a vine with beautiful flowers but a tendency to get way out of control, was growing among the corn in his fields. The vines had wrapped themselves around the corn stalks so that it was impossible to cut the corn for silage. I was hired to stand on the front of the silage cutter and push the stalks of corn up into the grinder at the top so that the ears of corn as well as everything else could be ground up. It was hot, dangerous work, but we got the job done and filled the silos with the silage. It was also a reminder that weeds can create a lot of problems.

Weeds, however, are nothing new. They've been around for a long time and they can become a real problem. In the days of Jesus, for example, there was a weed known as "bearded darnel." In the early stages of its growth it looks exactly like wheat. You can't tell the two apart. Not only that, its roots become so intertwined with the roots of that which is growing around it, that you can't pull up one without pulling up the other. You just have to let the two grow side by side until the time of harvesting, when the good grain and the bad grain can be separated from one another. "Bearded darnel" was a farmer's curse, and those who sowed it in another's field could be taken to court for a criminal offense.

So when Jesus told this parable as He sat in a boat on the Sea of Galilee, those who heard it knew exactly what He was talking about. He told the people that the kingdom of heaven is like a field that a man sowed with good seed. However, one night while he was sleeping an enemy came and sowed weeds among the good seed so that they began to grow up together. When his servants noticed what had happened, they informed the owner of what was taking place, thinking perhaps that the seed he had sown was not pure. That, however, was not the case. The master told them that this was the work of his enemy. The servants then asked if he wanted them to begin pulling up the weeds. "No," he said, "That will do more harm than good, because you will be pulling up some of the wheat while you're trying to get rid of the weeds. Let the weeds and the wheat grow together until the time of harvest. Then we'll separate the weeds and the wheat. The wheat will be preserved, and the weeds will be destroyed." In other words, sometimes patience, even in the face of a daunting situation, is the better part of wisdom.

Later that day after the crowds had been dismissed, the disciples came to Jesus and asked, "Can you explain this parable to us? We don't understand it." I can almost imagine Jesus shaking His head and saying, "Ok fellows, here's what I was trying to tell you. The Son of Man, the Messiah, the one who is speaking to you, is the one who sowed the good seed. The field is the world and the good seed are God's people living in that world. The enemy of the owner is the devil and the weeds are those who serve him. Right now the weeds and wheat are growing together, but one day that will change. There will be a time of harvesting. The Son of Man will send out His angels and they will separate the wheat from the weeds. The weeds, everything that causes sin and all who do evil will be gathered together and destroyed. The wheat, however, will be preserved and honored. They will shine like the sun in the kingdom of their Father."

Now nearly two thousand years later, what does this parable and its explanation have to say to us. I would suggest that there are several things. First of all, we live in a fallen world where weeds and wheat grow together, where good and evil exist side by side, where godly people and ungodly people frequently find themselves in close proximity to one another. And sometimes it's difficult to decide which is which. Let me give you an example. When I was serving in my second church a young man showed up with a real gift for music. He had a great voice and he played the guitar with a flourish. He presented himself as a dedicated and devoted disciple of the Lord Jesus Christ. From time to time he would sing a solo on a Sunday morning. Then one day someone pulled me aside and said, "He's never paid a dime for that expensive guitar he plays. He bought it but he hasn't paid for it." Upon further investigation, that proved to be true and when confronted the young man vanished like the dew in the morning. In the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus said, "Watch out for false prophets. They come to you in sheep's clothing, but inwardly they are ferocious wolves. By their fruit you will know them" (Matthew 7:15-16). In other words, the fruit of their labor, at the time of harvest, will certainly and most assuredly identify them.

Here's something else that we need to keep in mind. There are some folks out there doing their best to sow a crop of weeds in the field of the world, and sometimes we fail to recognize or appreciate what they are doing and who may or may not be motivating them. I am reminded of an old Chinese fable about Confucius. A king in one of China's provinces was facing a desperate situation in his kingdom. The jails were full, crime was rampant, crops were failing, and prosperity was withering away. So he called Confucius, the great philosopher and moral teacher, and gradually everything was turned around. Once again, the king's province became a blessed place in which to live. But those who had been turned out of power because of their wickedness were distressed. They wanted to reclaim their authority and influence in the kingdom. So they sent the king three presents—a wagon load of whiskey, a horse race, and a troupe of dancing girls. And sure enough in short order the jails were full, crime was everywhere, and the king's kingdom was driven to rack and ruin.

Those same evil doers are abroad in our world today. We're facing an epidemic of alcohol and drug abuse, gambling in all of its forms has become a way of life for many people, and trafficking in human beings, especially young women, has become big business in America. This nation is a far different place from the one in which I grew up, and it's not becoming any better. Furthermore, there is a set of values and beliefs being propagated that is completely contrary to the moral principles and standards upon which our nation was founded. Behind the scenes a whole cadre of individuals and groups are leading our nation down the slippery slope to destruction. But are these people, some of them well-meaning individuals, doing this on their own, or are they being influenced by unseen powers of which they are not aware.

Years ago I read a book by Erwin Lutzer, the senior pastor of the Moody Memorial Church in Chicago. It's entitled *Hitler's Cross*. The book chronicles the rise of Nazi Germany and its affiliation with the occult. Hitler and his cronies really believed that they were in league with the devil, and there's enough evidence to support that conclusion. Paul certainly believed that he was contending with more than just human adversaries. In his letter to the Ephesians he wrote "for our struggle is not against flesh and blood, but against the rulers, against the authorities, against the powers of this dark

world and against the spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly realms” (Ephesians 6:12). He knew and believed that the devil and his servants were hard at work in this world, trying to influence people to fall under their influence and listen to their lies. That’s what happened in the Garden of Eden to Adam and Eve, and that’s what’s happened on more than one occasion down through history.

And this brings me to the last thing that I would like to share with you today. A time of harvesting is coming. In the ancient world the wheat and the weeds would be threshed together. Then very carefully, the grains of wheat would be separated from the grain that had been produced by the weeds. For you see the grains of wheat were brown in color but the grain of the weeds was gray. It took time and careful scrutiny, but the good had to be separated from the bad, because the weeds produced a seed that was bitter to the taste and even a little poisonous. Throughout the Scriptures and especially in the teachings of Christ, there is a time of judgement, whether it’s the division of the sheep and the goats in the twenty-fifth chapter of Matthew or the parable of the net in which good fish are kept and the bad ones thrown away. Paul makes mention of this in his letters and, of course, the book of Revelation comes to a glorious conclusion at the great white throne judgement. God is simply not going to allow that which is harmful to enter His kingdom. But keep this in mind. God and God alone determines that which is kept and that which is discarded. He is the judge and we are not. Indeed, when we arrive in heaven, we might be surprised by who is there and who is not. Heaven is reserved for those who know the Lord and who have entrusted their lives into His care.

So what should we be doing while we’re waiting for the harvesting, for the time when the Lord says that judgment is at hand? Well, I don’t know about you, but I do know what my dear friend Woodrow Wood did. He planted some good seed into the heart and life of a most unusual convert to Christianity. Her name was Irm, and she was a Jewish widow who had lost family members in the holocaust. She had her doubts about Christianity and Christians, especially in light of what had happened in Germany. Woodrow had gone to her home to repair her washing machine. That was his vocation, but it was more than just a job. It was an opportunity to get to know people and to share the love of Christ with them. It would have been easy to just fix the washer and be on his way, especially since Irm possessed a rather bitter disposition. But he didn’t let that get in his way. He checked on her occasionally because she lived by herself, and he and his wife visited her every now and then. Finally, he invited her to church and believe it or not she came. Not only did she come, but eventually she received Christ as her Lord and Savior and was baptized, good seed growing in ground that had once been infested with the weeds of a Nazi Germany regime that had killed her family.

Remember what Jesus said before He ascended into heaven? “Go into all the world and preach the good news to all creation” (Mark 16:15). In other words, scatter some seed and watch it grow. It just might bring forth a great harvest.