



# FLOSSMOOR COMMUNITY CHURCH

July 17, 2011

**“WHEAT AND WEEDS”**

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

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Sometimes the Bible feels like a riddle. Sometimes the words of Jesus make me stop, scratch my head, and simply wonder, “What in the world does he mean?” or “Why did he say that?” or “How could he say that?” That is how I feel about the parable of the Wheat and Weeds from today’s Gospel Reading.

But this is okay---because Jesus uses parables to intentionally make us stop, scratch our heads, and simply wonder. In his parables, Jesus wants us to pause. He wants us to do a double take. He wants us to cock our heads to the side like that puzzled dog recognizing the sound of his master’s voice in those old RCA advertisements. Because such puzzlement piques our curiosity and we start thinking extra hard about the point Jesus is making.

In the parable of the Wheat and Weeds, why does Jesus teach us---how could Jesus teach us---to let the wheat and weeds grow together? After all, Jesus actually identifies the wheat as children of the reign of heaven and the weeds as children of the evil one. “Let both of them grow together”---is Jesus being devil-may-care about evil?

Let us first consider what Jesus does not mean or say in the parable of the Wheat and Weeds. He does not mean or say that we should ignore evil when we see it---the slaves of the householder do, after all, recognize the weeds growing in the field alongside the wheat. Jesus does not mean or say evil does not matter---the final judgment of the householder against the weeds is clear: “at the harvest I will tell the reapers, ‘Collect the weeds first and bind them in bundles to be burned....’”

When we then consider what Jesus does mean and say throughout the gospels, we find that he is never cavalier about evil. Jesus does mean and say that we need to see and name evil for what it is. Jesus specifically does mean and say that we should pray for God to deliver us from evil.

Jesus does not take evil lightly. He calls us to confront it. The catch is: Jesus calls us to confront evil without becoming evil ourselves---to confront evil without becoming like weeds in the process.

We are called to maintain our integrity as children of the reign of heaven, to remain like wheat, when we confront evil. This means countering fear with faith, countering despair with hope, countering hate with love. This means shining the light of truth to scatter the darkness of lies. This means having the courage to boldly live our thoughts, words, and deeds out in the open instead of cowardly sneaking around out of sight. When it comes to confronting evil, there is no point in being weed-resistant wheat if our resistance hinges upon behaving like weeds ourselves. And here is where we get to the kernel of the matter of what Jesus means to say in the parable of the Wheat and Weeds.

Biblical scholarship indicates that darnel is the type of weed Jesus mentions in the parable. Darnel is a poisonous weed that has a clever habit not only of getting itself intertwined with the root system of wheat, but it also looks exactly like wheat in its early stages.

Now, from the outset, there are two very practical reasons why the householder of the parable would let the wheat and weeds both grow together until the harvest. To begin with, because the root system of the darnel gets so intertwined with the wheat, weeding the crop would result in the premature uprooting of the wheat. Then there is

the fact that while dandelion is poisonous to eat, it does not essentially damage the wheat itself during growing season---the real concern is not getting dandelion and wheat mixed together for human consumption following the harvest. The householder in the parable is patient and smart enough to let the crop grow as is, then will safely separate the weeds from the wheat at harvest time.

Jesus presents a choice. Will we be patient and smart in response to evil? Or in our attempts to deliver wheat from evil, will we ironically become as destructive to the wheat as the very weeds we seek to overcome?

Beware of Christians who presume to be the guardians of a congregation, who assume they are the true protectors of wheat from weeds. A woman in the first church I served was one such guardian. Because of her I have learned to be on the alert whenever I hear the phrase, "I just want to do what's best for the church." She was a bona fide weed whacker, and to her mind there were plenty of weeds to go after.

A number of noteworthy actions and attitudes accompanied this woman's personal understanding of what was "best for the church." She regularly undermined people who did not agree with her one hundred percent of the time. She regularly discredited the work of newer members seeking to contribute their time and talents to the church. She regularly insisted that she be in charge of church activities she most liked doing, and would not participate if others were in charge---others who soon wound up on her list of weeds. She regularly buttered up enough people of genuine good will in the congregation whose reputations lent her just enough credibility to get away with her weeding exploits. She regularly did her weeding in such a manner that people of genuine good will never saw or heard her in action.

I personally experienced her weeding as she regularly critiqued my work with the youth of the church by sentimentally reminiscing about how wonderful my predecessor had been. After three months, I stopped counting how many times she reminded me what a great job Andrew had done . . . but I kept hearing from her about Andrew all three years I served there.

About a year after I had moved on from that church to take another position, my successor called me to express frustration over this same woman. He wanted to know how I had dealt with her. At one point he said, "All I ever hear from this woman is 'what a great job Fred did.' So, what was your secret?"

Hmmm. You know, the only thing scarier to me than this woman is my realization that at any given time (though in different ways and in different contexts) I can, and have, exhibited such behavior myself. What about you?

Will you and I be patient and smart in response to evil? Or in the attempt to deliver the wheat from evil, will we ironically become as destructive to the wheat as the very weeds we seek to overcome? It is bad enough whenever our personal weed whacking boils down to a matter of personal preference or convenience in order to get our own way. More dangerous is becoming thoroughly evil in our weeding, even when---especially when---we convince ourselves that we are the true guardians of the wheat.

We are better off leaving the weeding up to a higher authority.

There is a story about a man who wakes up one morning to discover he has the power to make whatever he wishes come true. He chooses to use this power to do good deeds. After a while, he becomes determined to take on all evil people throughout the world. One night he decides that everybody who causes harm to others should shrink in size so that they will be easier to recognize and resist. The man makes his wish, knows from experience that it has come true, goes to turn off the lamp by his chair, and discovers he is too short to reach the switch.

For most of us, the wheat and weeds situation is less stark and more subtle than the two stories just shared. There is wheat and weed in all of us. Perhaps we will be more faithful followers of Jesus when we realize that while there is enough wheat in us to recognize and resist evil when we see it, there is also enough weed in us to remind us that we are not the ones actually worthy to be doing any weeding in the fields.

Only heavenly resources can deliver us from evil.

Leave the weeding, if weeding is to be done, to the one who proclaims in his parables that the reign of God is sure. Though it may seem at times to have humble beginnings--like a mustard seed or a small amount of yeast--this reign that Jesus proclaims will come to amazing fruition. We need to be humble enough to trust that God knows what God is up to when it comes to God's will being done on earth as it is in heaven---when it comes to delivering us from evil.

And so, leave the weeding to Christ, the one who most completely counters fear with faith, counters despair with hope, counters hate with love. Leave the weeding to Christ, the one who most completely shines the light of truth to scatter the darkness of lies. Leave the weeding to Christ, the one who courageously lived his thoughts, words, and deeds out in the open---whose only secret practice was to pray to God, "Thy will be done!" Leave the weeding, if weeding is to be done, to Christ, the one who is the true wheat that forms the bread of life---the one who cultivates the wheat in us such that our greatest weapon against evil is faith, hope, and love.