

July 23, 2023 – Matthew 13:24-30, 36-43

Another week, another parable about farming. It always feels like when these lectionaries were compiled, somebody, somewhere realized, “Hey these Sundays will always fall right in the middle of the summer. Let's give them something relevant to the season.” I know there were actually other reasons for it, but it's fun to think about.

But there's another similarity with last week's parable. Like last Sunday, we have a split in the lesson. We have the parable given to the crowds, and we have the explanation given just to Jesus' disciples. Which is rather helpful. In fact, these are the only two parables in Scripture that get that kind of detailed explanation by Jesus. So we should take advantage of them.

And as Jesus points out, he – the Son of Man – is the subject of both the parables. The good seed is identified as the sons of the Kingdom. People the heavenly Father has planted in the field. Planted in the world. Planted in the Church. In other words, the good seed is us. Christians. Those to whom the Father has given new life.

Jesus also introduces the antagonist of this parable: the one who plants weeds in the midst of the wheat. This is the devil. Last week, he was a bird, snatching away the Word of God. This week, he's scattering weeds in amongst us. Sons of the evil one. And these weeds look so much like the wheat as they grow, they are so close and so intertwined with the wheat, that if you try to pull out the weeds, you may accidentally take a wheat plant with them.

So Jesus instructs his servants not to pull out the weeds but to let them grow until the harvest. Not until the end of the age will the evil ones be separated from the righteous. The sons of evil will be collected, bound, and cast into the fire, while the righteous will be gathered to a safe place where they reflect the holiness of God.

There's a lot to unpack from this parable. It seems so simple and easy to understand – and it is – but there's also so many implications that we can learn from it.

First, we learn a hard truth: the church has wheat and the church has weeds. And they grow up together. In the visible Church, like Immanuel or any other congregation, there will be both genuine believers and there will be hypocrites. Jesus is most likely contrasting his chosen apostles against the Pharisees, who pose as those included in the Kingdom. White-washed tombs full of death, as he calls them.

But the same is still true today. The one true Church of Christ is perfect. Flawless. Sinless. But it is also invisible. What is visible, here, in this building is a lot of imperfect, flawed, sinful people. Some of those sinful people are repentant and faithful. They have come here to confess their sins and receive God's absolution. They have come hear God's Word of grace and forgiveness.

But I'm sure there are also those who are sinful and impenitent. They have no desire to confess their sin because they refuse to believe they are doing anything wrong. They have rejected the grace of Christ in favor of their own works. Their own self-justification. Their own idols. They are weeds destined for destruction.

How do we know the difference? Often, we don't. That's the point. Sometimes we can. Sometimes their fruit ripens and we realize, “That's not wheat. That's a weed.” Sometimes the false teachers of the church are obvious. Sometimes the impenitent of the flock are public in their sinfulness. Sometimes a weed looks like a weed.

But sometimes a weed looks exactly like the wheat. And sometimes the wheat looks exactly like a weed. And you just can't tell the difference. As I said, the true Church is invisible. Only God can see the heart.

And in these cases, Christ instructs us to do... nothing. To wait. To be patient. To let the wheat and the weeds grow up together. And that's difficult for us to accept. How can we possibly allow or even tolerate evil in the midst of the Church?

Truth be told, usually we don't. There are plenty of other passages that tell us to separate from evil. Jesus tells his disciples to cast out the leaven of the Pharisees. Don't let it contaminate your pure doctrine. He commands Peter and the others not only to loose the forgiven but also to bind the unrepentant.

Paul makes similar comments. He warns the Corinthian Church to cast out an immoral member among them. Don't tolerate such open sinfulness in your congregation. He tells the Romans to mark and avoid all those who cause division in the church through the preaching of false doctrine.

Clearly, what Jesus is talking about in this parable is not an invitation to simply ignore God's Law in the church. Public sin must be called out for what it is. The unrepentant must be called to turn from their sinfulness and live. The message of the kingdom is the same as it was when Jesus first proclaimed it: Repent! For the kingdom of heaven is at hand!

So what is Jesus telling us? Mostly, he saying that God's servants need to be careful who we judge and why we are judging them. Because, truthfully, in our sinfulness, we are all sons of the evil one. In our sinfulness, we all deserve the fire. Every believer is simultaneously sinner and saint. And so to presume that someone is a son of the evil one, simply because you see them commit one sin is to cast them out of the kingdom of God before they even have a chance to repent.

Remember: the thing that makes the weeds so difficult to deal with is the very fact that they are impossible to distinguish from the wheat. Witch hunts and inquisitions are useless when the thing you're searching for is hidden in the heart, which only God can see.

And so one of the most important messages we can take from this parable is both a warning and a promise: False teachers and hypocrites will receive their punishment at the end of the age. If you've been living a lie, pretending to be the good and faithful Christian on the outside while secretly harboring all manner of unrepentant sin, this is a terrible warning. You won't get away with it. The fact that you haven't been found out only means that God is waiting until the last day to throw you into the fiery furnace.

And if you feel like the church is full of hypocrites and unrepentant sinners, and it never seems like God does anything about them, this is also a promise. A day of judgment is coming. God is waiting out of patience and care for the faithful. The sons of the evil one will receive their punishment. Just be sure you're not one of them before you pray for God's wrath.

Which means, this entire parable is ultimately good news for the believer. Because, in the end, on the last day, what do we have: a church without weeds. A whole world without weeds. A new life without the evil one to cast weeds in our midst. A harvest of the faithful. On the Last Day, the Church is gathered in for safekeeping. Where we will shine like the sun in the kingdom of our Father.

Unfortunately, we're not there yet. We're still in the field. And there is an evil one still prowling around like a roaring lion, seeking someone to devour. There are still weeds to be dealt with and a world of sin, a world of sinful people, to struggle against. This is why we call our life as believers on earth the "church militant." We have a whole category in our hymnal with that title. And the struggle of the church militant isn't just common. It's expected. It's predicted by Jesus.

But that doesn't mean we can't have peace, even now, in this militant life. Because the battle has already been won by Jesus on the cross. The devil may wreak havoc on our world, on our lives, and on our church. But he can't win. Ultimately, he has no weapon to use against us. For our sins are forgiven in the blood of Jesus Christ. Our death has been defeated in the resurrection of our Lord.

And our end has already been prophesied in this very parable. An end where the devil's work comes to nothing. All his deceit and destruction yields merely fuel for the fire. The good seed that the Son of Man sowed in his field has still yielded its harvest. The Word of God that Jesus sowed into each of our hearts has still yielded faith and righteousness.

God is patient. Far more patient than we are. But if we wait on his timing, on his methods, on his promises, the end will be glorious. And we will shine like stars in his kingdom. Amen.