

Tending What's Different

*A sermon preached by Emily Hull McGee on Matthew 13:24-30, 36-43
on September 17, 2023, with First Baptist Church on Fifth, Winston-Salem, NC*

I.

Have you seen that precious video that's made its rounds on social media, where children of all kinds are paired onscreen and asked, "what makes you two different from each other?" The visual differences are immediately obvious to the viewer: different races, different abilities, different gender, different hair textures, you name it. But when they are asked to name the difference, they struggle. Long pauses and fidgeting youngsters fill the screen. "I used to not like lettuce, but now I do like lettuce," one Indian boy says, to which the white blond girl beside him interrupts, "I do not like lettuce at all." "Arthur lives down the hill," a Black girl says of the white boy beside her, "and I live up the hill." Two girls stand side by side, one with Down's syndrome and one without. "Adiel likes fish and chips" (these are British kiddos), "and I like sushi." "And those are different," Adiel shouts!¹ "I have smaller toes than Artie," says one. "She talks all the time," says another. And my favorite – "He lives in a house that doesn't have squirrels in the roof, but I have squirrels in my roof and we can't watch television that much 'cause it's biting all the wires!" "When it comes to difference," the narrator tells us at the video's conclusion, "children see things differently."²

II.

We pick up from where we left off last week, in a stretch in Matthew chapter 13 where the writer groups together a number of Jesus' parables, particularly ones with an agrarian bent to them. Last week, you might

¹ To be precise, Adiel likes "goujon and chips." Goujon, I've learned, is a type of fish.

² Video produced by CBeebies, a division of the BBC children's programming, which can be found here: <https://www.facebook.com/watch/?v=1318677894834176>

remember, we learned of the soils and the sower who flings seeds indiscriminately upon them. And today, we hear of weeds and wheat.

On its face, the story is rather cut and dried, right? The kingdom of heaven is like one who sowed good seed, but then one came along and sowed weeds all together with the wheat. The workers were perplexed and asked the master where they came from, and what they were to do about it. “An enemy did it,” the master replied, “but let both of them grow together, for in gathering the weeds you’d uproot the wheat along with them. At harvest time, I’ll have the reapers gather wheat in the barn and bind up the weeds for burning. Let anyone with ears, listen!”

But as much as we long for the cut and dried life, an unambiguous path where things stay in their lane and a landscape which only grows what we plant, you and I know that life just isn’t that clear. And neither is God, for God embodies difference! God who is three and also One, Jesus who is human and divine, proclaiming a kingdom that is both here and not yet, a kingdom where wheat and weeds grow together seemingly held by the God all at the same time. It’s not a cut and dried story, but it’s a growing story. It’s a tending story. And I want us to peer more closely at it, to see this story of weeds and wheat as a story inviting us to tend difference. Yet though we’ll be talking about weeds in today’s sermon, let’s please not then by default imagine ourselves into the place of the wheat. I’d like for us to hold loosely Jesus’ explanation that speaks of weeds as the children of evil, remembering that parables are intended to provoke and be enigmatic, challenge us and lift before us the complexities of the human condition. So let’s consider difference that the sower asks the workers to tend.

III.

First – the weeds between us.

I think of the perspective of weeds and wheat together weeds between us like the kids in the video – simply noticing difference without assigning meaning or judgment to it. Think of the incredible difference that God has knit into this world – a world with seas and skies, with forests and deserts, with wind and waves, with birds and elephants and puppies and mosquitos. We live steeped in difference, beautiful holy difference that is teeming with the life of God in this world. And humans, despite our differences and because of our differences, we bear the image of God in this world. So let us simply notice.

Next – the weeds among us.

Let's take a minute to talk about actual weeds, not just metaphorical ones, shall we? Some say a weed is a plant growing where it isn't wanted, a plant that interferes with farming or grazing, a plant that was not intentionally sown, a plant different from more virtuous flowers, or a plant that is persistent and detrimental to the plants around it, among others. Even the US Dept. of Agriculture admits that "over 50% of our flora is made up of species that are considered undesirable by some segment of society."³ Weeds, you might say, aren't just different. They're other. They're less than. They're undesirable. (But let me tell you: if any of my neighbors complain about our weeds, I'll just say, "I'm letting them grow together!")

We don't have to get too metaphorical to know how this applies in our common life. You name the difference – different worldviews, different perspectives, different religious beliefs, different politics, different college sports affinities or different thoughts on lettuce!, you name it, we can

³ Thanks to dear friend, Rev, Courtney Allen Crump, who shared this information!

without even thinking assign those differences to negatives. *Can you believe what they said?*, we whisper to one another. *Did you see what those people were doing? Is it possible that they can get any worse?*, we think, unaware of how poisoning our perspective has become. *How easy it would be*, we tell ourselves, *to just cut these folks out, to ignore them, to think they don't even matter in the accounting of our world.* And yet — as followers in the way of Jesus, not only are we called to love and extend compassion to them, this parable calls us to avoid the urge to pluck them out of our lives and cancel them all together. Let them grow together, Jesus said, almost implying that the weeds are changed by growing alongside the wheat, and the wheat are changed by growing alongside the weeds. For what may look like weeds to some may look differently from God's perspective.

Then — the weeds within us.

“Belief and unbelief,” one scholar says, “like the wheat and the weeds in the parable, are mixed together in each one of us.”⁴ So we must not slip into the practice of asking ourselves, “am I wheat or weeds?,” because of course, we are both. “I contain multitudes,” Walt Whitman reminds us. So wouldn't we think that in those multitudes are weed and wheat seasons of our lives too? Might we look to the diversity and difference that grows within us, even when the difference causes struggle?

This inner capacity for good and evil, for the growing together of that which gives life and that which chokes life is the very nature of the Christian life, is it not? Remember when Paul says in Romans, “I do not do what I want, but I do the very thing I hate.... I do not do the good I want, but the evil I do not want is what I do.” Remember the centurion who said to Jesus, “I believe,

⁴ Pagola, *The Way Opened Up by Jesus*, p132.

so help then my unbelief!” You see, they grow together sometimes. As people who claim Christ, sometimes we are kind and compassionate, and the very next minute we are greedy and protective. Sometimes we long for God’s dream to be made real in this world, a dream that topples the powerful and lifts up the lowly, that frees the oppressed and chastens the oppressors, that orients the whole world toward God’s dream for this world... and other times we realize just what we might lose if that dream became real – what securities we’d relinquish, what fears we’d release, what status we’d give up. We all have within us the capacities for good and bad, for belief and unbelief, and neither are a final judgment on the state of our lives. In my house, we’re careful to reframe terms like “bad guys” and “good guys” to “people who have made a bad decision” and “people who have made a good decision” – that no one is beyond redemption.

It reminds me of the quote from Ralph Waldo Emerson, who once said, “What is a weed? A weed is a plant whose virtues haven’t yet been discovered.” This blurred line can protect us from too easily slipping into false binaries around us or within us, for real life looks more like a messy mixed field of both, does it not? As we tend the fields of our lives, what then is our responsibility? How do we tend the difference without being, as Barbara Brown Taylor says, “turned loose with our machetes, going out to do battle with the weeds and end up standing in a pile of wheat.”⁵

IV.

Let me tell you a story.

Not too long ago, I had a conversation with an old friend who has come back into my life in a meaningful way. Months ago, we’d worked on a project

⁵ Barbara Brown Taylor, *The Seeds of Heaven*, p36.

together, one that drew upon our long friendship and one that we both felt deeply passionate and opinionated about. Yet now we sat in different seats, with different viewpoints, and different priorities, and different perspectives. My needs were not hers, and her concerns were not mine. At times our work together had gotten tense: I felt defensive wanting my priorities to be heard, and acted rather stridently – you might even say, “preachy” – when I felt they weren’t. You might say I was in my “acting like a weed” era. All too quickly, we’d found ourselves on either side of a line in the sand that I’m sure neither of us wanted or tried to create. I’d seen this friend a handful of times since, and while she was cordial, I felt the tension between us.

When I asked recently if we could get together for coffee, I went in with an apology fresh on my lips. “I wasn’t my best self then,” I told her, “and in my passion for this work, I made it personal. It’s not. We’re on the same team here. I’m sorry.” And because she is kindhearted and wise, she said something real similar right back to me. Together with the temperature lowered, with our shared work put aside and our lives and loves and needs and imaginations at the center, we found grace and forgiveness, right on a Friday afternoon.

Thank God she didn’t pluck me like a weed, right out of her life. Thank God – literally – for showing me what was growing unhindered in my life that needed tending. Thank God for letting us grow together, weed and wheat, sometimes one and sometimes the other, so we could find our way together to the Source. Let them grow together, we heard.

V.

Friends, as we consider the weeds between us, among us, and within us, may we do so with the posture of the tender. May we remember the one instruction Jesus gives is to the posture of those tending the field, and that is

a posture not of passivity, as we've learned, but rather of fruitful activity that is ours to tend.⁶ We're not to mind the weeds, but rather to mind our own business, so may we mind the business of tending love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, and self control. May we bear witness to the sower who holds us all together.

VI.

The great storyteller Barbara Brown Taylor tells another parable of the wheat and the weeds. Hear now her story:

One afternoon in the middle of the growing season, a bunch of farmhands decided to surprise their boss and weed his favorite wheat field. No sooner had they begun to work, however, than they began to argue – first about which of the what-looking things were weeds and then about the rest of the weeds. Did the Queen Anne's lace pose a real threat to the wheat, or could it stay for decoration? And the blackberries? They would be ripe in just a week or two, but they were, after all, weeds – or were they? And the honeysuckle – it seemed a shame to pull up anything that smelled so sweet.

About the time they had gotten around to debating the purple asters, the boss showed up and ordered them out of this field. Dejected, they did as they were told. Back at the barn, he took their machetes away from them, poured them some lemonade, and made them sit down where they could watch the way the light moved across the field. At first, all they could see were the weeds and what a messy field it was, what a discredit to them and their profession, but as the summer wore on they marveled at the profusion of growth – tall wheat surrounded by tall goldenrod, ragweed, and brown-eyed Susans. The tares and the poison ivy flourished alongside the

⁶ Ibid.

Cherokee roses and the milkweed, and it was a mess, but a glorious mess, and when it had all bloomed and ripened and gone to seed, the reapers came.

Carefully, gently, expertly, they gathered the wheat and made the rest into bricks for the oven where the bread was baked. And the fire that the weeds made was excellent, and when the harvest was over the owner called them all together – the farmhands, the reapers, and all the neighbors – and broke bread with them, bread that was the final distillation of that whole messy, gorgeous, mixed up field, and they all agreed that it was like no bread any of them had ever tasted before, and that it was very very good.”⁷

Let them grow together, Jesus says, and let those with ears listen.
Amen!

⁷ Barbara Brown Taylor, *The Seeds of Heaven*, p36-37