

Kingdom Farming: Growing Grass or Pulling Weeds?

Matthew 13:24-30, 36-43

March 17, 2024

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It's like the Olympics, except it's for weeds. The Collegiate Weed Science Contest, held each summer, has been called the World Series of Weeds or the Super Bowl of Herbicides. Seriously, you can't make this stuff up. Last year the contest took place at the Bayer research farm in Union City, Tennessee, where, as they do every summer, graduate and undergraduate students from Canada and the United States participate in individual and team competitions.

The Weed Science Contest is a grueling, 8-hour event, divided into 4 components. Students must be able to identify 100 species of weeds by both their common and Latin names. They must show proficiency in identifying herbicides. They are evaluated on how well they role play to solve problems and find recommendations to a difficult weed control dilemma. And finally, contestants must be able to properly calibrate an herbicide sprayer and know how much product to apply. I don't know about you, but the excitement is killing me!

A lot rides on the outcome. The winners of the contest are courted by lawn companies, golf courses and agricultural consulting firms. For several years running The University of Guelph in Ontario, Canada won the event, earning them the reputation of being the Yankees of Weed Science. But in recent years Virginia Tech has been a big winner which has made me feel a little better about how much tuition I paid for my son's education. The University of Arkansas has also been winning of late, which doesn't surprise me a bit, given all the prolific weeds my mother battles in her garden beds.

Jesus' approach to weeding would not have garnered a top prize at the Weed Science Contest. When Jesus was asked about whether servants should pull up the weeds that had infiltrated a field of wheat, his counsel was to leave well enough alone. Let the two grow together until the harvest.

I like Jesus' method of lawn care. I, too, let the weeds grow together with the grass, all of it mixed in together—moss, clover, dandelions, wild strawberry vines. I've discovered if I cut the grass short enough, you can't really notice so much where the grass ends and the weeds begin.

Matthew 13 records a series of 7 parables Jesus delivers about the kingdom of God. Using agricultural images was one of his favorite ways to illustrate his teachings, not to mention one of the handiest. I can just imagine that as Jesus begins this particular parable with the words, “The kingdom of heaven may be compared to a farmer who sowed good seed in a field,” (13:24) his audience was looking at a farm where planting season had just commenced. Jesus goes on to say that while the farmer and his family were sleeping, the farmer’s enemy sneaks on to the land and sows weeds among the newly planted wheat.

The word in the Greek that is translated “weed” or “tares” describes a type of rye grass that is more commonly known as “bearded darnel,” or by its botanical name, *Lolium Temulentum*. It’s a weed that, especially in biblical times, was thought to have no redeeming virtues. Below the surface, its roots surround the roots of good plants, sucking up precious nutrients and scarce water, making it impossible to root it out without damaging the good crop. Above ground, darnel so closely resembles the good plant that it is called false wheat or cheat wheat. It’s only when the grain appears that the real wheat can be separated from the noxious imposter.

But the seed has been sown. A little time passes, long enough for the seed to germinate and new plants to emerge from the ground. That’s when the farmhand in Jesus’ parable makes the perplexing discovery that something has gone badly wrong in the field. He is expecting to find a budding crop of healthy wheat, but to his horror, tares are visible among his plants. What’s to be done? He suggests to the farm’s owner that perhaps the tares should be pulled out, but of course, to do so would uproot the good crop as well. There’s really no choice but to leave them in the ground together for the time being. Later, at harvest, a sorting of the two can be done.

Jesus tells upwards of 40 parables in the gospels but explains only two of them, the parable of the sower which appears immediately preceding this one in Matthew 13, and this one of the wheat and tares. Jesus spells it out for his followers: the farmer who sows the good seed is Son of Man, or in other words, Jesus himself. The field is the world. The children of the kingdom sow good seed, whereas the children of the evil one sow weeds. The enemy is the devil. The harvest is the last judgment, and the harvesters are his angels.

Parables typically make one main point, but this parable functions more as an allegory. This parable has a point to make about evil, about people, and about God.

First, this parable teaches us something about evil. Evil is portrayed in the parable as bad seed, sown by the devil. It is sometimes hard for us as people of the modern world to know what to do with references to the devil. At one end of the spectrum we see portrayals of a red-caped, pitchfork-bearing imp with a tail and two horns as ridiculous. At the other extreme are people who attribute even minor or ordinary everyday difficulties of life in a fallen world as the work of an evil being. What are we to believe? C.S. Lewis, in the preface to his book, *Screwtape Letters*, writes, “There are two equal and opposite errors which we can fall into about devils. One is to disbelieve in their existence. The other is to believe, and to feel an excessive and unhealthy interest in them. They themselves are equally pleased by both errors.”

The point for us is this: evil in this parable is sown at night, when Old MacDonald and his family are sleeping in sweet repose. Like the farmer, we are most susceptible to evil when our guard is down. He had a false sense of security about the health and status of his field, and we, too, can be lulled into a false sense of security about our lives as well. Instead, we need to be alert for bad seed and those who sow it. The evil one in the parable sows seeds that resemble wheat. He dresses evil in fine apparel. Evil seems attractive. The forbidden fruit looks delicious. Sin comes to us like Judas, with a kiss. That’s what makes it so hard to spot as the counterfeit that it is. It takes vigilance to keep ourselves away from that which is dangerously alluring but which we know is a poison to our souls.

Second, this parable tells us something about people. Let me, for a moment, extend the application of this parable. Weeds and wheat not only exist within the same field, they exist within the same person.

We have a tendency to think of ourselves as the good guys and everybody else as the bad guys, and that can be especially true for people in the church. But this parable suggests what we know to be true about ourselves and others: good and bad reside in all of us. We are a tangled web of good and bad seed. The roots of evil and goodness are entwined in the same human heart.

Psychologist Carl Jung spoke about the tendency to imagine other people as worse than they really are and to imagine ourselves as better than we are. “Everyone,” he says, “has a shadow side, consisting not just of little weaknesses and foibles, but a positively demonic dynamism.” There are weeds in everyone’s garden. That should give us significant pause before we label anyone as wheat or weed, or to use language from another of Jesus’ teachings, to judge which of us are the sheep and which the goats. There are no unqualified good guys any more than

there are unqualified bad guys. We're all growing together, side by side, and for right now, we are not in a position to tell which is which.

Third, this parable tells us something about God. The parable of the wheat and tares is concerned with judgment. It tells us that there will be a time of judgment when wheat and tares, sheep and goats, will be sorted and separated. Not by us, of course. That's not our job; it's God's. But what about in the meantime? What accounts for the delay in judgment? If Jesus inaugurated the coming of God's kingdom, and the kingdom is already here, already begun, how is it possible for evil to exist in the world?

According to the parable, God allows evil in exchange for good seed to take root. God permits evil for the sake of goodness, for while there is still time for the good and bad seed to grow together, there is time for God to work, transforming weed into wheat. The apparent delay of judgment is explained in terms of God's patience. Scripture portrays this delay as evidence of God's forbearance. Patrick Willson, a superb preacher and pastoral theologian has said that, "From the foundation of the world, the very first moment of creation, it is the kingdom that has been on God's mind, and God is infinitely patient as it grows." (Feasting, Year A, Volume 3, p. 265)

Think of it this way: why did Jesus come? He didn't come primarily to judge people. He came to offer life, salvation, and redemption. Jesus didn't weed Peter out of his inner circle even though he knew Peter would deny him, would let fear get the better of him and cut and run when trouble appeared. Instead, Jesus prayed for Peter, and patiently worked to transform Peter's weeds into wheat.

Judgment, Jesus says, will be meted out in time. In the meantime, our mission is not to gather around home plate and argue about who is out and who is safe. Our mission is to sow good seed for God, carefully and diligently tending both the field that is the world and the field that is our own heart.

The Pharisees were good "weeders." They were meticulous about weeding out "bad" people, and they expected Jesus to do some weeding out of his own. They wanted him to sort out the good guys from the bad ones. But Jesus is in the mercy business. His mission, first and foremost, is to transform weeds into wheat. I don't know about you, but I can speak first-hand about how grateful I am that God doesn't easily give up on us, that God patiently tends the field, giving us time to learn and grow, that God believes in redemption and new life and new beginnings.

We are not harvesters for the simple reason that we are not qualified to make such judgments. We are sowers. And now is the time for sowing. Harvesting comes later. Until then, we join Jesus in sowing good seed. Our mission is two-fold: to grow into wheat and to sow more seed for the kingdom. So grab your seed sacks—there's work to do!

Thanks be to God. Amen.