

“Why the Wheat?”

A preacher always knows she has done her job if she gets one of two comments at the door after church. "Preacher, you stepped all over my toes" OR "I feel like you have been reading my mail." As I planned the schedule for the parables that we would study together this summer, the parable of the wheat and the weeds made me want to offer both comments to Matthew for including this parable of Jesus in his gospel.

I like this parable because it is very straightforward and easy to understand. Jesus tells the disciples about a certain landowner who plants wheat in his field. But when the plants first start to break through the earth, he notices that weeds have begun to sprout as well. Jesus tells them that an enemy has planted them there. Obviously, the wheat represents the believers in God and the weeds represent the nonbelievers.

But it is my personal kinship to the response of the slave who was working in that field that I relate to most. He said to the Master, “Don’t you want me to go take care of this problem now? Let me go ahead and pull up the weeds.” You see, he wants to fix things. I understand this sentiment because I am an explainer, a fixer and a checker offer! And I suspect there are a few more in the room!

I am fifty-seven years old and yet, to this day, if someone criticizes something I have done or a decision I have made, I think I have to explain my actions. I know this is not necessary and not particularly emotionally healthy, but by George, I’m going to do it anyway. It would be better to say something very non-committal like, “Thanks for your input” and then just walk away but I can’t always do it. My former boss helped me

tremendously with this tendency. When he would catch me trying to explain something unnecessarily, he would remind me, “Never wrestle with a pig. You get muddy and the pig enjoys it!”

I also want to fix things – a terrible downfall for ministers when you think of all the problems that people present us with. It has taken me years of practice and many prayers to understand that when people come to share a tragedy with me, THEY already know that I cannot change their situation. They just need someone to listen. But because I am a fixer, I always want to send them away with a solution. And often there is not one. I can send them away with the assurance that they have been heard, that I will be praying for them, and that God is with them – “even unto the end of the age” – but Seminary did not equip me to right all the wrongs of the world.

When I first became a pastor, this was my most challenging dilemma. I shared this problem with my spiritual advisor one day and she looked me straight in the eyes and said, “Julie, the world doesn’t need a savior – we already have one!” I was angry at her for a few days until I realized that she was right and that she said what she did to rescue me and protect me from myself!

So after years of ministry, I have gotten much better with my tendencies to explain and to fix, by the grace of God, through diligent prayer and with the help of those who are wiser than I. But I am pretty sure I am destined to be a checker offer for life! Being a true Type A person, I love to come to work and tackle my “to do” list and put a big check by things I have done because it gives me such a sense of accomplishment. I have a friend who told me recently that things were so hectic at work and that she felt so overwhelmed that, at the end of one day, she sat down and made an imaginary list of all

the things she wished she had done that day and then checked them off just to make herself feel better!

The reason this parable is so helpful to me is that the slave suffered from the same disorders as I do. He wanted to explain the presence of the weeds, to fix them by pulling them up and then to check that off his list. But the Master said, “No. When the wheat and the weeds have grown then I WILL TELL YOU what to discard and what to keep.” Many people see this as the main point of the parable and it is a good one. But there are several layers to the reasoning of the Master that can help us in our lives today.

You see, Jesus is telling us that WE do not have the right to judge and it is basically because we don't have all the information. First, we do not know a person's motives nor do we have the power to understand them. God, however, “searches the heart and knows what is the mind of the Spirit” according to the Apostle Paul. He then has the understanding and the right to decide, based on knowing a person's heart and his circumstances, whether they should be allowed to grow or should be thrown out.

I preached in a church in our Presbytery once and based on something that I said, a man stopped to tell me his story, which he has since given me permission to share. This man happens to be gay. Several years ago, one of his co-workers had a teenaged daughter who got pregnant and in her 17<sup>th</sup> week, decided to go to Atlanta and terminate the pregnancy. When the man heard this, he went to her driveway and barricaded it and begged her not to go. He was so relentless that finally, she said, “Okay, but here's the deal – YOU pay for it and YOU raise it.” And he and his partner of 20 years did just that.

Now, please understand that I'm not telling this story to be political or controversial. I'm telling it because many of us in this room would have chosen to throw much in this story away, if WE had the power to judge. But here is what I saw that morning. I saw a beautiful 5 year-old girl with big blue eyes and long curly brown hair who is being raised by two parents who love her and bring her to church every time the doors are opened. A child of God, created in God's image, who might never have been. And I rejoice that God had a plan for bringing that little girl into the world in a way that included choices that MOST OF US would never have made.

We also do not know what a person has been through or what they may have to face at the end of the day. Minister Fred Craddock tells the story of visiting a parishioner who was dying of cancer. When he got to the woman's house, her daughter asked if he would read Scripture and pray and handed him a Lutheran prayer book written in German. Fred said, "I thought your mother was a United Methodist" and she said she was. "She married my father, who was a Methodist, and they were together in the church for over forty years." Fred asked, "Well then, what is this?"

The daughter replied, "My mother came from the old country when she was a child. She is from Germany. It would mean a lot to her if you would read the Lord's Prayer to her in German." So Fred did just that and the dying woman mouthed the words and smiled. Fred said, "You do not know where people come from. You do not know their background. You do not know if they say the Lords' Prayer in German. You do not know their hearts – but God does."

But most of all, we do not have the right attitude to decide who should be kept and who should be thrown out. One reason the Master tells the slave to wait is to teach

him the lesson of patience. He is hoping that, if the weed is left, that by the grace of God, it may become wheat. Most of us would say, “Poppycock! You can’t teach an old dog new tricks – that weed will never change.” But thanks be to God that He doesn’t have the same attitude that we do.

You see, if you say that you believe in God then you MUST believe in a God who can change people, in a God who redeems situations. Think about Zacchaeus, the crooked tax collector, who after being called a child of Abraham by Jesus, paid back all that he had taken and four times more! What about the woman at the well, who had five husbands and lived in an adulterous relationship until Jesus offered her living water. Then she went about preaching forgiveness and according to the Gospel of John, brought many to Christ. Think about Saul of Tarsus, who encouraged the stoning of Stephen but would go on to be the bearer of the Good news to the Gentiles and to become the writer of much of the New Testament, as the Apostle Paul. And it has been my experience that the hardest situations that I have had to bear have ultimately brought me much growth and trust in the Lord's presence in my life.

And think about the words of the Psalm that we just heard. “Bless the LORD, oh my soul and do not forget his benefits – who forgives YOUR iniquity and redeems ME from the pit.” This is the God who CAN and will change the weeds into wheat if it is in accordance with his will.

Which leads me to a question that held on to my heart the whole time I was studying this passage. If God has the power to change weeds into wheat then why doesn’t he do this all the time? Why are there any weeds at all? Because that is basically

what we are thinking when we struggle with a world that is full of injustice and poverty and oppression and personal trials. We are asking God – WHY THE WEEDS?

Well, friends I have prayed a lot about this and rolled that question over and over in my mind in preparing this sermon. And what happened is this – the Holy Spirit gave me a brand new question. WHY THE WHEAT? God could make a world with NO WEEDS but He could just as easily make a world with NO WHEAT! And yet, out of his great love for you and me, He did not. And seen this way, what we have is a parable of grace.

There is suffering right in front of us every day. You do not even have to turn on the news to see it – you can just look around. But when you do, you will see GREAT BEAUTY TOO! One of my best friends is a walking medical miracle. She survived breast cancer, surgery, chemo and radiation and was cancer free for 11 years. But one day, my friend developed a cough that would not go away. It seems that after all that time, her cancer had returned in her kidneys, bones and lungs.

Here is the miracle. She has had stage 4 breast cancer in her bones for 14 years! She has allowed the doctors in Greenville to experiment with her. She has plates in her pelvis, prosthetic hips, a rod in her leg – all because of the cancer. She has lost her hair and it has grown back at least four times. Yet, she flies all over the country speaking at doctors' conventions and keeps her grandchildren and next week she is going on vacation with her husband to Canada. And I have never once heard her say "WHY ALL THESE WEEDS?" Instead, she glories every day that God continues to give her so much wheat!

Yes, the world is full of weeds and God could have left them off completely and he did not. But oh, friends, the world is full of wheat too. And God could just as easily

have left IT off too. But He did not. And that is the point of the parable. God made the wheat AND God made the weeds and ONLY HE knows why.

Let us be thankful for the wheat and let God worry about pulling up the weeds. To use the words of Fred Craddock's benediction that he closes each service with, "Lord, teach us to live simply, to love generously, to serve faithfully, to pray daily and leave the rest to you." In the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

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