

Matthew 13:24-30, 36-43 Separating the Wheat from the Weeds

A man walks into a florist and asks “I want some pink Geraniums please” “Sorry sir but we don’t have any pink geraniums. Anything else do?” “No, pink Geraniums” “Well, we don’t have much call for common old Geraniums, but I could do you an exotic African Violet for the same price. How does that sound?” “sorry – must be a pink geranium” “but why your insistence on a pink geranium?” “Well, it was a pink geranium I was supposed to water while my wife was away”.

The moral of the story being – it’s not just a question of watering, but of *what* you water.

The parable of the weeds and the wheat is somewhat similar. Why should we want to water one plant and at the same time kill another? The weeds and the wheat are growing up together, and the servants want to pull the weeds. And this is understandable, because according to Leviticus 19:19, weeds made a field unclean, along with sowing more than one kind of seed in a field. The master tells the servants to wait until both are fully grown and ready for harvest, because until that time, the weeds and the wheat maybe identical in appearance. Also, because the roots of the weeds and wheat are intertwined, pulling up weeds could also mean pulling up wheat. At harvest time, the weeds are to be gathered separately, bundled together and used for fuel, while the wheat is ground into flour. So – both are useful!

The parable has some grain of truth (no pun intended!) and was particularly relevant at the time. In Palestine, there is a type of weed called darnel grass. In its growth and form it strongly resembles wheat, but it produces either an inferior kind of grain or none at all. Because of its similarity, it is extremely difficult to separate from genuine wheat. Also, its taste is very bitter and when eaten either separately or when mixed with ordinary bread, it causes dizziness.

We are like the farmer who carefully sows good seed in the field of our lives. We work hard to raise a good family; make good relationships; help a loved one battling with a disease; fight for better schools, healthcare, peace and the environment. If the world was fair, the good we do would always yield good results, but in many cases the good we work for looks like it is going to be choked by the reality of our world.

We live in a world where good and evil coexist, and there's not much we can do about it. Sure, we can resist evil and temptation, but very often we can't get rid of them. In fact, is it our job to get rid of them? That is God's job on Judgment Day. If we try to get rid of evil on our own, we are bound fail, because the standards we use to separate good from evil may be quite different from God's standards. And who are we to make God's decisions?

In the 1600s, the Puritans made a concerted effort to purge the church of all those who weren't of pure faith, and so, didn't belong. They also tried to remove pagan symbols from celebrations of Christmas and Easter. In both cases, they failed. After all, if there's no place in the church for sinners, there's no place for us. The church needs constant reformation and positive action, including the quest for holiness, but it must avoid unrealistic purism---what is needed is that elusive thing called balance.

A man was stopped at a traffic light, waiting for the light to turn green. When the light changed, he was distracted and he didn't budge. The woman in the car behind him honked her horn. He still didn't move. She honked again, and by this time she was pounding on the steering wheel and blowing her horn non-stop. Finally, just as the light turned yellow, the man woke up and drove through the light. The woman in the second car was beside herself. Still in mid-rant, she heard a tap on her car window. She looked up to see the face of a police officer. "Lady, you're under arrest," he said. "get out of your car, I'm taking you back to the station". Hours passed as she sat at the police station still wondering why she had been arrested. Finally the officer returned and said - "Sorry for the mistake, lady," he said. "But I pulled up behind you as you were blowing your horn and cursing out the fellow in front of you. I noticed the stickers on your bumper. One read "Follow me to Sunday School." The other, "What would Jesus do?" So, naturally, I assumed you had stolen the car." The bumper stickers were looking like wheat, the driver acting like a weed. Inconsistent.

And sometimes it's very difficult to tell the wheat from the weed. An expert evaluating a potential American football coach said of him, "He possesses minimal football knowledge and lacks motivation". He was talking about a celebrated coach Vince Lombardi, who, though he lacked motivation, was the successful football coach quoted for saying, "Winning isn't everything, it's the only thing." After Fred Astaire's screen test, the evaluating director wrote, "Can't act, slightly bald, can dance a little."

The Kingdom of God is a mixed bag in which weeds and wheat grow together, side by side, and we can't always tell them apart. We will always have evil among us.

As Christians we are to practice forgiveness and patience. Revenge (in this case, pulling the weeds) resolves nothing, but only increases evil. Many of you will remember the "The Muppets" TV show? Two of the characters were the two old men who sat up in the balcony every week and heckled and criticized the jokes and performances, but they always returned next week. They were part of the show.

If we try to judge others and get rid of evil, we also run the risk of going against Jesus' advice to not complain about the speck of dirt in our neighbour's eye when we have a plank in our own eye. To do so might give us a "holier than thou" attitude, and judging others is a sin in God's eyes. In our own lives, there might be more weeds than we care to admit, and getting rid of them is easier said than done.

This is a parable about mercy. While the forces of good and evil will be sorted out some day, there is still time for change until that day comes. It is a story about grace, patience and hope. How often have we looked back on our own mistakes and become thankful that we had time to change and make amends? Aren't we glad that God gave us the chance and the help we needed to work things out? Imagine if we were all 'weeded out' for some small wrong doing years ago?

In the meantime, let us do our best to be good wheat, to live in God's garden as faithfully and obediently as possible, instead of trashing the weeds around us.

And let us always follow Paul's advice to the Romans...a passage that could well have been Paul's homily on the Parable of the Wheat and the Weeds:

"Live in harmony with one another; do not be haughty, but associate with the lowly; do not claim to be wiser than you are.

Do not repay anyone evil for evil, but take thought for what is noble in the sight of all...Beloved, never avenge yourselves, but leave room for the wrath of God, for it is written, 'vengeance is mine, I will repay, says the Lord.'...

Do not be overcome by evil, but overcome evil with good.