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THE STORYTELLER: A THIEF IN THE NIGHT

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~ Matthew 13:24-30 & 36-43 ~

The Parable of the Weeds

²⁴Jesus told them another parable: "The kingdom of heaven is like a man who sowed good seed in his field.

²⁵But while everyone was sleeping, his enemy came and sowed weeds among the wheat, and went away.

²⁶When the wheat sprouted and formed heads, then the weeds also appeared.

²⁷"The owner's servants came to him and said, 'Sir, didn't you sow good seed in your field? Where then did the weeds come from?'

²⁸"An enemy did this,' he replied. "The servants asked him, 'Do you want us to go and pull them up?'

²⁹" 'No,' he answered, 'because while you are pulling the weeds, you may root up the wheat with them.

³⁰Let both grow together until the harvest. At that time I will tell the harvesters: First collect the weeds and tie them in bundles to be burned; then gather the wheat and bring it into my barn.' "

The Parable of the Weeds Explained

³⁶Then he left the crowd and went into the house. His disciples came to him and said, "Explain to us the parable of the weeds in the field."

³⁷He answered, "The one who sowed the good seed is the Son of Man. ³⁸The field is the world, and the good seed stands for the sons of the kingdom. The weeds are the sons of the evil one, ³⁹and the enemy who sows them is the devil. The harvest is the end of the age, and the harvesters are angels.

⁴⁰"As the weeds are pulled up and burned in the fire, so it will be at the end of the age. ⁴¹The Son of Man will send out his angels, and they will weed out of his kingdom everything that causes sin and all who do evil. ⁴²They will throw them into the fiery furnace, where there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth.

⁴³Then the righteous will shine like the sun in the kingdom of their Father. He who has ears, let him hear."

INTRODUCTION

This parable troubles me. I'll tell you why in a minute.

Jesus is the great landowner. He has an enemy who slips in at night when the workers are asleep—legitimately (they're not sloughing off)—and sows noxious seeds everywhere. When it becomes apparent what has happened and the workers are anxious to correct the situation, the landowner holds them back. "Don't uproot the weeds just yet. If you do, you may destroy some of the good grain with the weeds. Wait till harvest time. When everything is full-grown, we will gather up the weeds and burn them. . .and then harvest the grain."

The disciples ask for clarification, even though it's kinda obvious what the story is about.

This is the state of our world, isn't it? It is a place where good grain and weeds grow side by side. So intermixed, in fact, that they are often indistinguishable.

I can identify with the anonymous group described as servants. Can't you sense their apprehension as they report the problem to their master: "*Did we do something wrong? Will we be held responsible for the sorry state of the field?*"

How many times have I (as a pastor) or you (as a parent, a business owner, or a volunteer for some endeavor) sown good seed—or so you thought—only for it to turn out a disaster? I remember my first pastorate in Minnesota (planting a church in Mankato). How could five years of mind-bending effort produce only a handful of half-hearted followers?

Did I fail? Did I screw up somewhere along the line? Was it my fault? Well, no doubt I did "screw up" here and there. But in this instance, Jesus' rather pragmatic view in the Parable probably describes what was really going on. He simply says: "*An enemy has done this.*"

The enemy—*A THIEF IN THE NIGHT*—is always and forever in the mix of things trying to inter-fere with / slow down / inhibit / sabotage the work of God—in the world, the church, and our lives.

I. WHO IS THIS ENEMY?

Let's be clear about that this morning. The enemy who sows the seeds is clearly identified by Jesus as "*the devil*" (v. 39). His name (in Scripture) is "*Satan*". "Satan" and "the devil" are used interchangeably in the Bible.

Actually, the word for Satan comes from a Hebrew word that means *adversary*. . .to oppose. . .to accuse. He's like a prosecuting attorney that seeks to condemn, to indict.

I know it's not fashionable to talk about "the devil" and "Satan" these days. Many would say he's not real; but only a mythological figure or icon that stands in contrast to all that is good.

However you interpret the references in the Bible, one thing stands out clearly: This "Satan" is for real. He is more than a symbol. . .more than a neutral "figure of speech". He is a real being. The Bible says:

- He is an *angel* who rebelled against God (i.e.: he is not God but tried to become God)—the story is told in Isaiah 14;
- He is identified in Genesis as the one who spoke through the *serpent* and seduced Eve into disobeying God's command;
- He shows up as "*the accuser*" of Job;
- He shows up in the desert to *tempt* Jesus;
- He is the *dragon* in the Book of Revelation;
- He is called "*the prince of this world*" and "*the spirit that now works in the children of disobedience*".

You can throw away all of these images and any other representations (e.g.: pitchforks) that seem outmoded. But don't throw out the fact that Satan is real. . .he is our enemy. . .he is active and alive. . .and will do everything within his power to *ZAP* you (as a black preacher once put it). ☺

Nevertheless, the Kingdom of God can thrive, it can flourish in spite of all evil and opposition. That's one point the Parable seeks to make.

II. IF SATAN IS OUR ENEMY, HOW DOES HE WORK?

According to the Parable, he tries to infiltrate. . .to duplicate. . .to blend in so you can't tell the difference.

The “weed” in this Parable is a plant common in the Middle East called *bearded darnel*. It looks just like wheat until it is fully grown. It has long roots which extend into the root system of the wheat plants and become entwined with them → so that if you pull up the darnel, you also pull up the wheat.

That’s how this enemy works. He blurs the differences so weeds & wheat look the same. . .so you can’t tell the difference between the “real thing” and the “false counterfeit”.

He’s been at it a long time. Let me take you back to the stories of **the 10 plagues in Exodus**:

- **Before the 1st plague**, Moses had Aaron throw down his staff and it instantly became a snake. But Pharaoh called in his sorcerers. . .they threw down their staffs. . .which all became snakes. True, the snakes from Aaron’s staff ate the other snakes. But that didn’t impress Pharaoh. [Exodus 7:8-13]
- Then came the **1st plague**, in which the water of the Nile River turned to blood. Again, Pharaoh got his sorcerers to duplicate this wonder. [Exodus 7:14-25]
- The **2nd plague** was the one in which the whole land was covered with frogs. I can’t resist this description in Exodus 8:3: *“The Nile will teem with frogs. They will come up into your palace and your bedroom and onto your bed; they will come into the houses of your officials and onto your people; they will get into your ovens and kneading troughs.”* Doesn’t that make you squirm? Pharaoh’s heart grew even harder. He got his sorcerers to duplicate this wonder too. [Exodus 8:1-15]
- Now we get to the **3rd plague**. This is the one where Moses told Aaron to strike the dust with his staff, and bazillions of gnats swarmed the land. Now we start to have a separation of powers: Pharaoh’s magicians could not duplicate this one. In fact, they said: *“This is the finger of God.”* [Exodus 8:16-19]
- It took seven more plagues before Pharaoh was convinced! But, God did have the last word!

That is what this Parable assures us of: **GOD WILL HAVE THE LAST WORD!** In vv. 41-42:

“The Son of Man will send out his angels, and they will weed out of his kingdom everything that causes sin and all who do evil. They (the angels) will throw them into the fiery furnace, where there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth.”

III. BUT IN THE MEANTIME?

In the meantime, he says: *“Let them both grow together”*.

That’s the reality. We’re pretty much stuck with the weeds until harvest time.

They’re everywhere. You’ll find them in the *world* / in the *church* / even in your own *heart*:

- Of course you expect to find them in the **WORLD**.
- But the **CHURCH**? Sad but true. My guess is that I’m speaking to some here this morning who have been wounded in past church experiences—perhaps by some “doctrinal purists”, well-meaning people who were acting like weeds at the time. Perhaps you’ve felt excluded, alienated, betrayed. And you’ve said (understandably), *“Never again!”* But you’re here today and I thank God for that. I trust He will bring healing and health to your soul.
- Scariest of all is when we discover weeds in our own **HEARTS**.

IV. SO, ARE WE TO DO NOTHING?

This is what troubles me about this Parable.

When I hear Him say, “*Let both (seeds & weeds) grow together*”
I want to say: “*What?! You’ve got to be kidding. Do nothing? Just let the weeds alone?*”
“*Are we to just sit back and tolerate sin & evil?*”

NO! That would be to misread the Parable. Certainly there were those occasions in the New Testament when people had to be “excommunicated” (thrown out of the church) because of immoral behavior. Take **I Corinthians 5:1-2** for instance:

“It is actually reported that there is sexual immorality among you—of a kind that does not occur even among pagans: A man has his father’s wife. And you are proud! Shouldn’t you rather have been filled with grief and have put out of your fellowship the man who did this?”

So it’s not like the Early Church wasn’t willing to take a stand for godly, holy living. . .and take the necessary action to back it up.

But there is a teaching abroad today that is somewhat dangerous to the church if we are not careful in its articulation. It is the doctrine of “*INCLUSIVENESS regardless of what you believe or don’t believe*”. How far can we go with being “*inclusive*” and “*tolerant*”—especially when it appears to allow evil and falsehood? Do we go so far as to accept the notion that spirituality is a smorgasbord (i.e.: pick a little of this and a little of that → make your own plate). Are we silly enough to imagine that “*sincerity*” is enough and that everybody should just follow their inclinations?

I remember sitting in my DENTIST’S CHAIR, and the technician cleaning my teeth was telling me all about her little 3 year old. She knew I am a pastor and was saying, “*I just don’t know what to do about the spiritual upbringing of my little boy. I don’t know which way, which church, which doctrine is right. I’m so confused. The other day, I finally came to this decision: I’ll let him make up his own mind.*” I couldn’t talk—my mouth was full of dental tools. But my eyes nearly popped out of their sockets.

How can you leave something as important as your child’s relationship to God and his spiritual upbringing—the thing that is going to give meaning to his life. . .that will shape and prepare him more than any other single thing to face all that life will throw at him—how can you leave that to “happenstance”?

[I didn’t say it quite that forcefully, nor did I say it all in that setting. But it’s a subject we talk about every time I go to have my teeth cleaned. She’s been here to our church once, and I’m sure would be back were it not for the distance. I’ve been trying to get her into a church in her area.]

When parents bring their **children** to the front of the church for BAPTISM, it’s an incredibly compelling and important moment. So much more is happening “up” here—and “out” here (meaning in the congregation)—than meets the eye. We are setting that child apart to face a world in which there is much that is “good” and much that is “bad”. . .where there is plenty of wheat and plenty of weeds. **Parents**, you have the biggest job on earth—training up your children in the way they should go. . .helping your kids sort out “right” from “wrong”, “good” vs. “evil”. . .and helping them to know who God is and what He wants for their lives.

Sure, they will make their own decisions about faith, the church, et.al. That’s what CONFIRMATION is all about. But you have a tremendous responsibility to lay a foundation so they can make an informed decision.

We live in a world that values “*DIVERSITY*”, and that’s not all bad. Appreciating the way people differ with all their divergent outlooks & customs can make life rich. To be able to get along and live in community with people of different cultural backgrounds / food preferences / skin colors / value systems / varied opinions on social questions is good. We need to teach our kids it’s never cool to say “you’re wrong” / “you’re weird” / “you’re stupid” to or about someone who’s different.

But sometimes the doctrine of tolerance gets carried to the extreme—to mean there is no objective truth. . .no ultimate right & wrong. . .anything goes. . .it’s up to you. No child will grow to maturity in Christ or into the

fullness of humanity if we believe that!

We've got to teach our kids to know what they believe and where they stand. . .even as they respect what others believe and do. We've got to equip them to discern "right" from "wrong".

We're in a world where the wheat and the weeds grow together—like it or not. It is imperative that we do not fall into the trap of thinking just because it's difficult to tell the wheat from the weeds, and dangerous to try to separate them, the difference does not matter. It does matter! It makes all the difference in the world. It is the difference between life and death. We can't uproot evil—or if we try, we realize we'll never get all the roots out. But we live fully aware of the difference.

V. HOW WILL IT ALL END?

I don't know about you, but I get sick & tired of the weeds getting intertwined with my life, my marriage, my work, what I'm trying to accomplish—and making a tangled mess. I'll admit, I'm a bit impatient. I get tired of waiting (Jesus is telling us we have to wait not just a little while, but all the way to the end of time—whenever that is). I want God to step in and do something NOW. And when He doesn't I want to grab my sword and start cutting off a few ears (like Peter did). ☺

Some of us may think God doesn't act fast enough in removing the weeds from the field. It may look at times like sin & evil are getting the upper hand in our world. But they aren't! That is the GOOD NEWS OF THE GOSPEL this morning. God is in control! The field belongs to Him. And He knows what He is doing. We've got to remember that His ways / thoughts are higher than ours (cf. **Isaiah 55:8-9**).

This Parable is His way of saying: "Trust me, I know what I'm doing. Be still and know that I am God" (cf. **Psalm 46:10**). How hard it is to put our faith and confidence in God. . .and to be patient as He works out His plan in our life, the church, the world.

- Don't get like the Disciples at the Cross (i.e.: thinking Satan had won)
 - Don't get panicky, like the Hebrews did at the Red Sea, thinking they were doomed (trapped between Pharaoh's army and the deep blue sea).
- ~ REMEMBER ~
- The tomb was empty on the 3rd day (just as He said it would be)!
 - The waters closed in on Pharaoh's army and destroyed them.

God always has the final word! Can you accept (believe, trust) that this morning?

CONCLUSION

Do you remember when *Saturday Night Live* began back in the 70's? Each week Chevy Chase and Jane Curtin would have the "Week-end Update News Show". He would begin the segment saying, "Good evening, I'm Chevy Chase. . .and you're not." Sometimes God needs to remind us in just the same way, "I'm God, and you're not."

In God's plan, a time is coming when there will be a separation. . .there will be a final reckoning and things will be set right. . .evil will be uprooted and evildoers (who are unrepentant) will be justly punished. But all of that is in His hands and His timing—not ours.

Until then, weeds are a fact of life. You will encounter weeds in the WORLD / here in the CHURCH / in your very own HEART. That's why we have this Parable. That's why Jesus told it—to get His followers (us) ready to face that reality AND to teach them how to deal with it in the correct way.