

2.17.19

Sermon - The Kingdom is Like...

Matthew 13: 24-43, NRSV

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²⁴[Jesus] put before them another parable: "The kingdom of heaven may be compared to someone who sowed good seed in his field; ²⁵but while everybody was asleep, an enemy came and sowed weeds among the wheat, and then went away. ²⁶So when the plants came up and bore grain, then the weeds appeared as well. ²⁷And the slaves of the householder came and said to him, 'Master, did you not sow good seed in your field? Where, then, did these weeds come from?' ²⁸He answered, 'An enemy has done this.' The slaves said to him, 'Then do you want us to go and gather them?' ²⁹But he replied, 'No; for in gathering the weeds you would uproot the wheat along with them. ³⁰Let both of them grow together until the harvest; and at harvest time I will tell the reapers, Collect the weeds first and bind them in bundles to be burned, but gather the wheat into my barn.'" ³¹He put before them another parable: "The kingdom of heaven is like a mustard seed that someone took and sowed in his field; ³²it is the smallest of all the seeds, but when it has grown it is the greatest of shrubs and becomes a tree, so that the birds of the air come and make nests in its branches." ³³He told them another parable: "The kingdom of heaven is like yeast that a woman took and mixed in with three measures of flour until all of it was leavened." ³⁴Jesus told the crowds all these things in parables; without a parable he told them nothing. ³⁵This was to fulfill what had been spoken through the prophet: "I will open my mouth to speak in parables; I will proclaim what has been hidden from the foundation of the world." ³⁶Then he left the crowds and went into the house. And his disciples approached him, saying, "Explain to us the parable of the weeds of the field." ³⁷He answered, "The one who sows the good seed is the Son of Man; ³⁸the field is the world, and the good seed are the children of the kingdom; the weeds are the children of the evil one, ³⁹and the enemy who sowed them is the devil; the harvest is the end of the age, and the reapers are angels. ⁴⁰Just as the weeds are collected and burned up with fire, so will it be at the end of the age. ⁴¹The Son of Man will send his angels, and they will collect out of his kingdom all causes of sin and all evildoers, ⁴²and they will throw them into the furnace of fire, where there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth. ⁴³Then the righteous will shine like the sun in the kingdom of their Father. Let anyone with ears listen!

Sermon

Thank you to all of you who helped us experience the parables today through drama, and for all of the work you did to prepare for this morning!

As we saw, Jesus says that the kingdom of God can be compared to three things. A field of wheat and weeds growing together, a mustard seed, and a load of flour with a bit of yeast hidden throughout it.

I want to address the explanation at the end of the wheat and weeds story (that was asked by the eagle in our depiction). The explanation seems so exacting, that some scholars think that the only reason it exists at all, is because early interpreters tacked it on to the end of these parables. It is possible, that those words of explanation were not original, *nor* actually spoken by Jesus.

I tend to agree with those scholars because for one, anyone who has gardened, knows that weeds happen, and that its much less likely for an evil one to sow weeds in a garden or field, and much more likely that a bird, rabbit, squirrel or the wind has passed through, dropped seeds, and unintentionally spread (in our case at home) mint, cottonwood seeds, or other weeds, among the desirable plants that were intended to grow there. I like to think Jesus meant for the interpretation to be a little more nuanced.

You see, as I mentioned in this week's Chronicle publication, the point of a parable is *not* to expound a single moral truth. Parables are subtler, more about *living* into a story. With a parable, you have to walk around in it, and try out the different corners of the story and the characters within it to find what fits. And it is different in times of your life. You see, I think Jesus might have known what all good story tellers know: that the more work a hearer or reader has to do in the story, the better the story is. And parables make us work. Maybe that's why they're still around.

I want to tell you a story about weeds. When we first moved into our house in Northfield, it was late April, 2015. I was pregnant with Henry. A week later, he was born. Elliot was 3, so curious and talkative, and Henry was a tiny peanut of a baby with thick black hair. Jon and I were tired, surrounded by some boxes, but all in all, things were pretty good.

As a gardener, however, looking around our yard, I was dismayed by how much I wasn't able to do in the gardens around our house, which were all new to me—dens of creative possibility that I knew I'd not be able to get my hands on that year. Rocking Henry on the front porch swing of our house that summer, I had a perfect view of the strawberries that came out in June, and the raspberries in July! But beyond them, from that swing, I could see the weeds growing in the veggie patch.

At first they were just little seedlings, that could easily be plucked or hoed. But soon, they became foot-high grasses choking the tomatoes, marigolds and nasturtiums. And though I knew I was right where I needed to be with baby Henry, helping Elliot adjust to the move, and navigating maternity leave, the gardener in me was irritated by those grasses. A very real part of me wanted to tear those grasses out, even in the hot of the midday sun or the bugs of the evening.

Well, maternity leave flew by, and back at church, I lamented the weeds over coffee hour one Sunday, to a parishioner who was an avid gardener herself. This parishioner is a powerhouse: a doctor, a business owner, respected, and unapologetically politically active despite that she was the minority party in town. She knowingly said to me, "yes, those grasses are the worst. Plus, their roots are all connected deep in the soil under there..." Then she cheerfully continued, "but you'll never think of grass roots organizing in the same way again after digging those things up. They're nearly impossible to get rid of!"

The gardener in me was disheartened, but over time, I found myself chewing on her words. Slowly, each time I saw weeds, I became more uplifted by her image of grass roots. Those weeds, those irritating, hearty, connected things, became a sign of hope—despite and perhaps *because* of the fact—that I might not ever fully get rid of them.

In front of us today, we have a parable about weeds. Jesus is talking about wheat and weeds, mustard, and yeast, which have something in common. I'll get to that soon. First Jesus says that the kin-dom of God can be compared to a field of wheat and weeds. The farmer in the parable says, "let them grow together, because we don't want to uproot the wheat when we pull the weeds."

Now there's a lot in this parable, but one thing Jesus is saying here is, *who are you to decide* which is wheat, and which is weed? If this seems strange, get this: the gospel of Matthew makes this point again and again. Matthew, who lists all of Jesus' ancestors at the beginning of his gospel wants hearers to remember that a woman, Rahab, a sex worker, and another woman, Ruth a Moabite foreigner, are in Jesus' lineage.

Then in Jesus' birth story, Matthew wants us to remember that the Magi, the Zoroastrians, people of the different religion from the east, are the ones who recognize Jesus' significance, but Herod's chief priests don't. Then when Herod *does* get it, Jesus and his family must flee to Egypt, the place the Israelites fled *from*, because he's in danger among his own people. Let it be said that plenty of Jesus' own people *do* get it, as we see later in his life, but Matthew is asking us to realize that God is radically inclusive. Even of what we might see as weeds, apparently. One point Jesus is making with the wheat and the weeds and the overall point Matthew's gospel wants to say is that *it was never up to us* to discern who is in and who is out.

Jesus is saying, maybe the weeds are bad, but the worse thing to do is to be the person who thinks they get to decide and then condemn. He's saying "stop dividing people in the world. Take a good look at yourself. We're all more complicated than that...." At every turn, Jesus [adjusts] the interpretation of the laws of the day to embrace, to include, to welcome at every turn, knowing full well his [own] ancestry," his own story.¹

Now just in case we don't get it, and to further his point, Jesus gives us two more examples of what the kin-dom is like. The mustard seed and yeast. Now I mentioned weeds, mustard, and yeast all have something in common. The mustard seed, he says, is tiny, but grows into a huge shrub in which it can shelter animals. Now mustard had its medicinal, edible, and dyeing purposes, but it spread so easily that in Jesus' day, *no one was allowed to plant it in town*.² It was considered a nuisance, like thistle, or buckthorn, or even wild parsnip.

Then Jesus moves on to yeast. I feel you all should know there are no positive examples of yeast or leaven in the Bible. None. They're all negative. Plus, then Jesus uses a woman, a second class citizen in the ancient near east, in the parable. He says the kin-dom is like this woman *hiding* yeast in the equivalent of 50-60 pounds of flour. That is what the kin-dom of God is like.

Are you sensing a theme yet? Wheat and weeds, a mustard seed, and yeast are all examples of things that intrude and invade. Like grassroots. Thinking about that parishioner who cheerfully told me about grass roots, I have to wonder, did Jesus tell these parables with a funny glint in his eye and a smile at the corners of his mouth?

Because we know Jesus' lineage has weeds in it. And fire was usually a symbol for purification in the Hebrew bible. Jesus is saying that the kin-dom of God is like a bunch of subversive weeds, growing underneath the Roman empire, or anything that is maintaining the unequitable status quo. But before we get caught pulling one main meaning out of these parables, and readily agree to be the subversive weeds spreading God's kin-dom, let's make sure that we also remember that wheat and weeds aren't always easy to tell apart, and when we label ourselves one thing and others another, things may not be as clear cut as we think.

¹ These three paragraphs are informed by a lovely summary of Matthew's gospel by Alan Storey, sermon, July 27, 2014, "The Kin-dom of Heaven is Absurdly Welcoming," on Romans 8:26-39; Matthew 13:31-33, 44-52. Sources: David Buttrick & Robert Funk. <http://www.aslowwalk.org/wp-content/uploads/2015/02/2014-07-27.mp3>

² Ibid.

Ultimately, perhaps we are called to be weeds among the presumed wheat of the world. But remember when wheat and weeds have roots intertwined, you can't pull one up without the other. I couldn't pull up the grass without also possibly pulling up the tomatoes and nasturtiums.

Perhaps one thing Jesus wants us to remember there is no us and them. That anytime we draw a line or a border, Jesus is on the other side of it. And that ultimately those lines aren't between countries, or peoples, they're within the human heart. I think Jesus wants us to see that the kin-dom of God is radically welcoming, and also, because of the examples he uses, that God's kin-dom is rather pesky. That God's kin-dom is tenacious and hard to get rid of. That it can feel like a nuisance. That God's kin-dom can be ordinary looking at first, unassuming, and hiding in plain sight.

Could it be that Jesus is inviting us to look for it in the places and people we least expect? Can you see it around you? Are you willing to be it or help it grow? May it be so.