

OPENING SENTENCE: Let them turn away from evil and do good; let them seek peace and pursue it.

Sermon: "Bearded Darnel"

Matthew 13:24-30; 36-43

24 He put before them another parable: 'The kingdom of heaven may be compared to someone who sowed good seed in his field; 25 but while everybody was asleep, an enemy came and sowed weeds among the wheat, and then went away. 26 So when the plants came up and bore grain, then the weeds appeared as well. 27 And 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?" 28 He answered, "An enemy has done this." The slaves said to him, "Then do you want us to go and gather them?" 29 But he replied, "No; for in gathering the weeds you would uproot the wheat along with them. 30 Let 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." '

36 Then 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.' 37 He answered, 'The one who sows the good seed is the Son of Man; 38 the field is the world, and the good seed are the children of the kingdom; the weeds are the children of the evil one, 39 and the enemy who sowed them is the devil; the harvest is the end of the age, and the reapers are angels. 40 Just as the weeds are collected and burned up with fire, so will it be at the end of the age. 41 The Son of Man will send his angels, and they will collect out of his kingdom all causes of sin and all evildoers, 42 and they will throw them into the furnace of fire, where there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth. 43 Then the righteous will shine like the sun in the kingdom of their Father. Let anyone with ears listen!

ADORATION:

God of all glory, on this first day you began creation, bringing light out of darkness. On this first day you began your new creation, raising Jesus Christ out of the darkness of death. On this Lord's Day grant that we, the people you create by water and spirit, may be joined with all your works in praising you for your great glory. Through Jesus Christ, in union with the Holy Spirit, we praise you now and forever. AMEN.

The Bearded Darnel (*Lolium temulentum*) is a devil of a weed. Known in biblical terms as "Tares", bearded darnel has "NO" virtues. Its roots surround the roots of good plants, sucking up precious nutrients and scarce water, making it impossible to root out without damaging the good crop. Above ground, darnel looks identical to wheat, until it bears seed. Those seeds can cause everything from hallucinations to death.

When the wheat has reached the proper stage of development, where the grain has headed out (Produced seed heads), the tares have done the same; and there a child cannot mistake them for wheat or barley; but when both are less developed, the closest scrutiny will often fail to detect the difference. Even farmers, who in this country generally weed their fields, do not attempt to separate the one from the other. They would not only mistake good grain for tares, but very commonly the roots of the two are so intertwined that it is impossible to separate them without plucking up both. Both, therefore, must be left to grow together until the time of harvest.

The wheat and tares could not be safely separated when both were growing, but in the end, they had to be separated because the seed of the bearded darnel is slightly poisonous. It causes dizziness and sickness and is narcotic in its effects, and even a small amount has a bitter and unpleasant taste. In the end, it was usually separated by hand. Women have to be hired to pick darnel grain out of the seed which is to be milled. As a rule, the separation of the darnel from the wheat is done after the threshing. By spreading

the grain out on a large tray which is set before the women, they are able to pick out the darnel, which is a seed similar in shape and size to wheat, but slate-grey in color.

The picture of a man deliberately sowing darnel in someone else's field is by no means only imagination. That was actually sometimes done. To this day in India, one of the direst threats which someone can make to an enemy is, "I will sow bad seed in your field." And in codified Roman law, this crime is forbidden, and its punishment is laid down.

No wonder Jesus uses this noxious "Cheat Weed" to illustrate evil incarnate. Bearded darnel, also known as false wheat, is the botanical equivalent of the "ravenous wolves ... in sheep's clothing" of which Jesus has already warned. (Matthew 7:15). Moreover, Jesus says, this evil is intentional. Unlike the "Parable of the Sower", this is not a parable about happenstance, good seed falling onto infertile soil. Here the enemy deliberately sows bearded darnel in a field of good wheat. Paradoxically, this unflinching focus on evil gives the parable its pastoral power. Jesus clearly acknowledges the reality of evil. His parable illustrates evil's pernicious nature, underscoring both the necessity of eradicating it and the difficulty of doing so. It may well be said that in its lessons this is one of the most practical parables that Jesus ever told. It teaches us that there is always a hostile power in the world, seeking and waiting to destroy the good seed. Our experience is that both kinds of influence act upon our lives – the influence which helps the seed of the word to flourish and to grow, and the influence which seeks to destroy the good seed before it can produce fruit at all. The lesson is that we must be forever on the guard.

It teaches us how hard it is to distinguish between those who are in the kingdom and those who are not. Some people may appear to be good and may in fact be bad; and others may appear to be bad and may be good. We are much too quick to classify people and label them good or bad without knowing all the facts. It teaches us not to be so quick with our judgements. If the reapers had had their way, they would have tried to tear out the darnel and they would have torn out the wheat as well. Judgement had to wait until harvest came. In the end, we will be judged, not by any single act or stage in our lives, but by our whole lives. Judgement cannot come until the end. It is possible to make a great mistake, and then redeem ourselves and, by the grace of God, atone for it by making the rest of life a lovely thing. It is also possible to live an honorable life and then in the end wreck it all by a sudden collapse into sin. No one who sees only part of a thing can judge the whole; and no one who knows only part of an individual's life can judge the whole person.

It teaches us that judgement does come in the end. Judgement is not hasty, judgement comes.

It may be that humanly speaking, in this life the sinner seems to escape the consequences – but there is a life to come. It may be that humanly speaking, goodness never seems to enter into its reward – but there is a new world to redress the balance of the old.

It teaches us that the only person with the right to judge is God. It is God alone who can discern the good and the bad; it is God alone who sees all of an individual and all of a person's life. It is God alone who can judge.

So, ultimately this parable is two things - it is a warning not to judge people at all, and it is a warning that in the end there comes the judgement of God.

There is not a person in our congregation who does not know what Jesus is talking about. Sometimes our own lives resemble the farmer's infested field, with weeds and wheat intertwined in our souls, hearts, and minds.

The Apostle Paul certainly knows it: "I do not do what I want, but I do the very thing I hate" (Romans 7:15). Members of AA or Alanon do too. The First Step confesses, "We are powerless over alcohol and our lives have become unmanageable." The Fourth Step is to do a "fearless moral inventory," sorting out the wheat from the weeds within.

Our personal experience of the enemy's sowing may be more subtle, as in the countless distractions we let derail us, E-mails, phones calls, and endless meetings can make it look as if we are working on the realm of God, but they may simply be symptoms of our own divided souls.

Sometimes our jobs can feel weed infested and under assault by the evil one. Like the servants of the parable, many in our congregations face the challenge of separating the weeds from the wheat in their workplaces. Maybe it is the middle manager who is glad for her company's big profits but is not sure about the bookkeeping behind them. Maybe it is the teacher facing a clique of parents whose well-meaning criticism chokes out the creativity and care for the students.

Perhaps it is the lawyer who is asked to look the other way for the "Good of the firm". This congregation may not be first-century Galilean farmers, but they confront evil every day, Jesus does too. Just before he tells his parable, the Pharisees – leaders of his own faith – try to trick him and begin their plot to destroy him. They look like true leaders, but they are as false and deadly as any bearded dandelion where he is concerned.

Jesus and Matthew also know that evil can infest the community itself. Elsewhere in the Gospel, Jesus warns against "False Messiahs and false prophets," those who cry, "Lord, Lord," and seem faithful and caring, but who lead people astray and harm the community (24:24; 7:22). In contemporary terms, Kenneth Haugk, founder of Stephen Ministry, describes such people as "antagonists in the church". By any name – antagonist, weeds, wolves, false prophets, false wheat – they are a reality in the community of faith. Jesus' parable acknowledges that hard truth.

At the same time, his parable clearly cautions against a rush to judgement. We cannot always tell initially what is a good plant and what is not. My grandmother, a master gardener, once transplanted some flowers from her garden into our front yard.

Two days later, she was back, frantically digging up the same plants, "I made a mistake," she said, sweat dripping from her eighty-year-old face. "These are weeds, not the flowers I had intended! Quick, give me a hand before your mother gets home!" Although my beloved grandmother is scarcely the evil one of Jesus' parable, her story underscores the challenge of distinguishing good from bad, wheat from weeds, loyal opposition from heresy, healthy conflict from destructive antagonism.

Thus, the landowner tells his servants to be patient and wait until the harvest, when they can see the difference by the fruit that is borne. Such patience is not an excuse for inaction or conflict avoidance. Later in Matthew, Jesus outlines how to deal with poisonous behavior within the community (18:15-17). If the behavior does not change, the person is to be considered a "Gentile or Tax collector," separated from the community as the reapers separate weeds from the wheat at the harvest.

That separation may seem harsh and unchristian, but Jesus knows only too well the wiles of the evil one. He knows the failure to deal with evil allows it to spread, just as seeds of the noxious dandelion multiply and infest other fields. In his interpretation of the parable, Jesus identifies the reapers as angels who come at the "End of the age." The harvest of the ripe wheat. The fact is, the weeds often win out in "This" life. Jesus knows that. So do the people we serve.

The parables ending affirms that there is One who is stronger and smarter than the weed-sowing enemy. God will sort out the good from the bad. Again, that may sound harsh to our tolerant, enlightened ears, but this harvesttime judgement is the ultimate good news, be it for the person facing corruption in the workplace or those living in times and places of oppression. In a world where seeds of hatred and injustice are daily sown, the parable affirms unequivocally that God is still in charge. As an old hymn proclaims, "Though the wrong seems oft so strong, God is the Ruler yet. AMEN!"

PRAYER: O God, you have designed all things good for us. Give us such faith that, by day and by night, in all times and in all places, we may without fear entrust those who are dear to us to your never-failing love, in this life and in the life to come, through Jesus Christ our Lord. AMEN!

BENEDICTION:

Each of us is some mixture of wheat and weed, of Holy and Unholy, of potentially fruitful and potentially destructive. This kind of social relations would turn the normal conclusion regarding what is fitting action away from waiting for God to sort at the final judgement and toward attending as a community and as individuals to that which increases the potential for holiness. But let us wait till the harvest.