

## **“On Being Wheat”**

The Seventh Sunday after Pentecost, Year A

*Matthew 13:24-30, 26-43*

Courtney Allen Crump

Weeds—what makes a weed different from any other plant that grows?

The federal government has a definition for “noxious weeds” and a federal weed list and many states have their own weed lists as well. In California baby’s breath (which florists often use) is considered a noxious weed, and in Kansas, Ohio, and West Virginia the ox-eye daisy, your typical white daisy with a golden center, is on the weed list. Ralph Waldo Emerson said that a weed was simply “a plant whose virtues have not yet been discovered.” But others say a weed is a plant growing where it isn’t wanted, a plant that interferes with farming or grazing, a plant that was not intentionally sown, or a plant that is persistent and detrimental to the plants around it, among others.

Even the US Dept. of Agriculture, struggling to find a unifying principle behind its pragmatic blacklists of weeds, admits that “over 50% of our flora is made up of species that are considered undesirable by some segment of society.”<sup>i</sup> Noxious weeds. Plants growing where they are not wanted. Plants not purposefully planted. Weeds. Undesirable. Without purpose. Unwanted by some.

“The kingdom of heaven is like a farmer who planted good seed in his field. That night, while his hired men were asleep, his enemy sowed thistles all through the wheat and slipped away before dawn. When the first green shoots appeared and the grain began to form, the thistles showed up, too.”

Here we have another parable about planting and sowing from Jesus. Jesus sounds a lot more like an expert when he speaks of carpentry, than we he uses agricultural metaphors in his parables. His parable about the wisdom of building a house on a sure foundation in chapter 7 of Matthew makes sense, right? But his agricultural parables...you know the one about a sower sowing seed recklessly and generously, even in places the seed is unlikely to grow! Talk about risky! Then we get today’s parable comparing the kingdom of God to a field where both wheat and weeds are growing together and the farmer doesn’t intend to do a thing about the weeds until harvest time! This makes me think Jesus may be a better carpenter than a farmer, but maybe there’s more to this familiar parable.

In Matthew 13, the kingdom is compared to a field with both wheat and weeds growing together. The weed described in the parable is believed to be the bearded darnel. Described by some as a ‘devil of a weed’ and without virtue, the bearded darnel roots surround the roots of good plants —taking in good nutrients and water and making it impossible to root out without damaging the good crop. But above ground, the darnel looks almost identical to wheat. Only when it bears seed can you tell what is wheat and what is bearded darnel—which is sometimes called false wheat. And it grows in the same field as the wheat, the good seeds. It seems there more ambiguity between the weeds and the wheat than we realized.

The servants in the parable say, “Master, did you not sow good seed in your field? Where did all these weeds come from? The land owner said, “An enemy is responsible.” The servants say, “Well, let us go out and pull all the weeds up.” Like the servants, who see the weeds and want to pull them up, we would really like to get rid of all the weeds—all of the things we see in people we believe are not like us—the theology that doesn’t fit with our own enlightened understandings, the hypocrisy of people claiming God but excluding neighbor, or the hypocrisy of judging those who exclude, and all the rest. Often, we are inclined to focus our energy on pulling up all of the dangerous or questionable expressions of faith, narrowing the circle, and ensuring the only people representing God and the church have passed the proper litmus test. And these days it seems like we have a litmus test for every theological, social, moral, and ethical question.

A few years ago, CBS news reporter, Steve Harman, confessed that he had a problem with weeds. At his home in upstate New York after his kids were in bed, he would go outside and weed until dark. He just could not stop pulling up weeds—mugwort, Canada thistle, and leafy goldenrod were some of his favorites to get rid of. His wife was a bit frustrated that her husband was spending all of this time weeding—because Steve wasn’t weeding a flower bed or a garden. He was weeding 5 acres. Several years before he had an idea to turn a weedy hillside into a prairie full of native wildflowers and grasses. Eventually he would plant plants like the purple coneflower, compass plants, and smooth aster. But before he could do that he had to get rid of all the weeds—or at least he thought he did. At some point he realized that he was taking his hobby of weed pulling just a little too seriously. He says he no longer obsesses about getting rid of all the weeds before cultivating and planting the prairie. Instead, he focuses on the three other blossoms, his three kids, who are growing like weeds in the only garden he tends that truly matters.<sup>ii</sup>

Augustine spoke of the church as the *corpus permixtum*, a mixed body of believers. So here in the mixed body of the church and in our world, where wheat and weeds grow together in the same field, it is tempting to spend our time identifying and removing the weeds. But the trouble with this is that we risk harming the good things growing in our midst if we do that. And we risk becoming so distracted by the weeds that we forget to live out the goodness God created us out of and calls us toward right here and right now.

So I wonder if this parable shifts our attention away from our attempts to rightly interpret what is “good” and what is “evil,” and instead invites us to focus our energy on the crucial Work of Love.

If you hate weeding your own flower beds and garden, then you might take this as good news. But more than that, if you’re overwhelmed by all that is happening in our world, I believe this is good news for how we can live as people of faith in anxious times.

Some wise soul has said that the only thing we have much control over is where we focus our attention. Rather than calling us to put on our gardening gloves and pluck out what we believe is questionable—questionable faith, theology, understandings of God and the world, questionable politics and mores—we are to be wheat, to do good, to produce good seed, to seek justice, even in a field where weeds abound. Instead of being sidetracked or distracted by what we perceive as noxious weeds, or anything not aligned with God’s love and the kingdom, what if we put all of our energy into being wheat instead of pulling up weeds?

Our lives as followers of Jesus must be focused on our steady, enduring, active, and resilient witness to God’s radical and enduring love, especially in a world in which weeds get misidentified and the signs of God’s reign aren’t always clearly perceived.

Ultimately, our presence in the world as Christians is not to seek out and purge sin and evil —God will tend to that. Our purpose as followers of Jesus in the world is to invest our energy in embodying this radical love of God in our everyday living, to love deeply even when love is hard to come by, to dream with God about what is possible even in the face of the impossible, to open wide our hearts...even in a field with some questionable plants.

Amen.

—Rev. Courtney Allen Crump © 2020

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<sup>i</sup> <https://www.wsj.com/news/articles/SB10001424052702303745304576359893430472866>

<sup>ii</sup> <http://www.cbsnews.com/news/steve-hartman-a-weed-addict-on-the-road-to-recovery/>