

“The Parable of the Weeds & Wheat”  
delivered Sunday, July 17, 2011  
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Matthew 13:24-30, 36-43

When my friend and mentor early in my ministry, Doug Oldenburg, was called from being Pastor of Covenant Presbyterian Church in Charlotte, to become President of Columbia Theological Seminary, he became passionate about a particular property issue. The green space behind the main academic building had been used as a sort of backyard, not as well kept as the seminary’s front yard, with dirt paths worn through the grass where people regularly walked. A mixture of various grasses and lots of weeds. What Doug noticed was that with a Library expansion at one end of campus, and the building of the Frank Herrington Continuing Education Center across from the main Campbell Hall, the seminary had grown to have a real quadrangle. So Doug had a vision to claim this green space as the center of campus, to put down sidewalks on the dirt paths where folks actually walked from Florida Hall to the Richards Center, and to seed and water and keep up the lawn. Indeed, it became a place of beauty and activity, of campus wide events, alumnae gatherings and inaugural ceremonies. Classes met out there sometimes in a circle on the lawn, and you would often see a student and professor in conversation on one of the benches. Back yard neglected no longer, and a community grateful for his vision, when Doug retired they named this vibrant, spacious and beautiful center of campus the Oldenburg Quadrangle.

Not long afterward a conflict erupted over it. Some students were running about barefoot, throwing a Frisbee as I remember it, and realized their feet were turning blue. They began to question – what kind of chemicals were being used to keep this lawn looking so perfect; they enlisted some environmentally conscious professors and took on the administration – asking things like – “What is being used to keep this grass so green... and what’s in it... and at what cost to the environment... and Oh, by the way – what is the matter with a few weeds anyway?”

On the seminary campus of my childhood, same kinds of turf wars between the thoughtful young adult students and the staid old administration represented, in part, by my business manager father. In those days – the 1960s – the seminary students were asking things like – “Let us see the investment portfolio; we want to make sure the school is not investing in companies profiting from the war in Viet Nam... Why can’t the school cafeteria be used to house and feed the Freedom Riders heading south for Civil Rights?” (I remember the students won that one with support from administration, thank goodness).

You see at the heart of a theological education – as I imagine in any institution of higher learning – there are always going to be debates about the ethical and moral principals for which the institution stands, and whether or not the institution itself abides by what it teaches. This is what was going on in the early church, according to the Gospel of Matthew, addressed to an early Jewish-Christian congregation. There

was a concern that the community of Jesus' followers were not following as they should, that they were somehow being corrupted, and that the church was suffering from weeds growing up among good wheat.

The disciples of Jesus were decidedly – from the very beginning – a mixed lot. They had left everything – families, possessions, their day jobs – to follow Jesus. They learned a new vocation – how to teach and heal and distribute food in his name. They also never lived fully up to the standards of righteousness that Jesus preached. As the circle of Jesus' followers began to expand more intense questions arose about how they would be Children of Light in a world of darkness. They were not perfect followers in and of themselves, and the world around them was filled with powers contrary to the teachings of God's love, mercy and justice.

This Parable of the Weeds and the Wheat appears only in Matthew, several chapters after the Sermon on the Mount which lays out a tough row to hoe – as far as true discipleship is concerned. Three full chapters of instruction like: Love your enemies; pray for those who persecute you; do not judge others, lest you be judged; if you are going to fast, at least don't tell anyone; don't store up your treasures on earth, but in heaven; you cannot serve God and wealth; don't worry; do unto others as you would have them do unto you; enter the narrow gate, for the road is hard that leads to life; be doers and not just hearers of God's word.

I don't know about you... but I'm feeling more like a weed than wheat right about now...

Do you remember the grand finale of the Sermon on the Mount? The closing verse reads: "Now when Jesus had finished saying these things, the crowds were astounded at his teaching, for he taught them as one having authority and not as their scribes." "The scribes?" – they sit in the quadrangle of the seminary campus and represent that old religious institutional loyalty – who sometimes get off track and miss the essence of Jesus' teaching. Because such institutions are generally where good and well meaning folks hang out together, sometimes it's hard to perceive what is a measure of faithfulness and what is not.

That's why Jesus tells this Parable of the Weeds and the Wheat, and probably why it is only one of two parables out of forty, that Matthew goes on to interpret for us. Weeds and wheat look a lot alike, Jesus says, and you cannot always tell them apart; so let them grow together, and only when the harvest time comes, shall they be separated by God. (1) He is calling for the community to practice patience with one another, and forbearance in the world. Ultimately, God will be the judge between weed and wheat, and we can trust God to be a fair judge.

When recent Dreher High School graduate, Carter Strange, was severely beaten in Five Points a few of weeks ago, I was amazed at something his father said in court. He looked at the oldest of the young men who had brutally attacked his son and said, "I pray that you get your life right. Find God. If you pray for forgiveness, he will forgive you. I don't have that in my heart right now. Maybe one day, but not today."

(2) That honest statement from a father in agony over what his son suffered is an example, I believe, of letting God be the one to sort the wheat from the weeds.

This Parable is not suggesting that we do away with law enforcement and courts and jails and let criminals run free because they'll meet their Maker someday and be held accountable for what they have done. Nor does it mean that the church's proclamation of grace means you have license to do whatever you want. Within the bounds of God's grace and freedom, there are limits, and there is huge responsibility. That's why at Shandon we have a strict Child Protection policy to assure the safety of our very young; when the youth go off on trips together they sign a Covenant agreeing to a certain standard of behavior; our ordination criteria for leaders is demanding. This parable certainly recognizes the lures of sin and evil and the toll they take – but it is addressed to a community of those who are trying to be faithful – such as a seminary... the church... the Christian family... The parable asks all of us to struggle together to discern how we can follow a good path – morally and ethically – and yet live in the world where sin comes in by stealth.

Jesus himself says, that “*While we were sleeping Satan entered the field and scattered bad seed.*” He does not chastise us for going out looking for evil; this is not something we could have even prevented. It happened in the middle of the night when we were sleeping like we're supposed to. (3) It means that all of us are a mixture of good seed and bad seed, and even the tallest grains of goodness among us, stretching upward toward the sun, can get entangled in weeds.

Derek Bok served Harvard University as Dean of the Law School in the late 1960's, an incredibly turbulent time in this country, and then as President in the 1970's and 80's. When asked about his expectations for students who would receive a Harvard education, he said, “Tolerance for ambiguity.” Not a bad summary of the purpose of this parable. Bok went on to explain that in this kind of world, some problems are so complex that the most you can hope for is different opinions from people of integrity rather than a clear delineation of who is right and who is wrong. (4)

Jesus understood this – looking at that motley crew of fishermen and tax collectors and the women who clanged around in the kitchen and the ones who sat at his feet – people who were trying to be faithful but didn't always get it right. Jesus understands this about us too. The challenge of being in the church, and of being the church in the world, is to try to look upon other people through the eyes of Jesus Christ, rather than through our own limited, judgmental, human perspective. Because the truth is – the good and the bad among us, and the good and the bad within us, are often inseparable. “In God's garden, good wheat and bad weeds flourish together”... Jesus says, “Leave the final judgment to me.” Let those who have ears to hear, hear.

AMEN.

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- 1) Robert Farrar Capon, *The Parables of the Kingdom*, p. 102.
- 2) Carter Strange story remembered from TV and precise words found at [today.msnbc.com](http://today.msnbc.com).
- 3) Will Willimon, *Pulpit Resource*, July 2011, p. 15.
- 4) Derek Bok story, Mark Trotter, *What Are You Waiting For? Sermons on the Parables of Jesus*, p. 25.