

Beloved Community: Who's in? Who's out?
Matthew 13:24-30, 36-43 CEB
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Pastor Sarah Wiles

²⁴ Jesus told them another parable: "The kingdom of heaven is like someone who planted good seed in his field. ²⁵ While people were sleeping, an enemy came and planted weeds among the wheat and went away. ²⁶ When the stalks sprouted and bore grain, then the weeds also appeared.

²⁷ "The servants of the landowner came and said to him, 'Master, didn't you plant good seed in your field? Then how is it that it has weeds?'

²⁸ "'An enemy has done this,' he answered.

"The servants said to him, 'Do you want us to go and gather them?'

²⁹ "But the landowner said, 'No, because if you gather the weeds, you'll pull up the wheat along with them. ³⁰ Let both grow side by side until the harvest. And at harvesttime I'll say to the harvesters, "First gather the weeds and tie them together in bundles to be burned. But bring the wheat into my barn."'"

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

³⁷ Jesus replied, "The one who plants the good seed is the Human One. ³⁸ The field is the world. And the good seeds are the followers of the kingdom. But the weeds are the followers of the evil one. ³⁹ The enemy who planted them is the devil. The harvest is the end of the present age. The harvesters are the angels. ⁴⁰ Just as people gather weeds and burn them in the fire, so it will be at the end of the present age. ⁴¹ The Human One will send his angels, and they will gather out of his kingdom all things that cause people to fall away and all people who sin. ⁴² He will throw them into a burning furnace. People there will be weeping and grinding their teeth. ⁴³ Then the righteous will shine like the sun in their Father's kingdom. Those who have ears should hear."

I am not a gardener. There are plants around my house. I planted some of them. I like many of them. But I do nothing to care for them. I know I should. I often feel guilty. But I don't do anything about it. Only the hardiest of plants survive on the land I am responsible for tending.

That means our grass is always overrun with dandelions and clover and what I am pretty sure are wild violets. I love the clover. I wouldn't mind an all-clover lawn. The violets now own the southwest corner of our house and are advancing steadily. And, truth is, I adore the dandelions—even though they completely overran our yard in Tacoma and killed most of the grass. We were *that* house. I still like them. They are unkillable. There's something admirable about that. Their leaves are good to eat or steep for tea. And how can we not love something that reproduces not just by riding the wind, but also on the breath of children making wishes?

All of that is to say, I love this parable. I don't have to weed! Jesus says so.

However, that's often the only part of this parable I remember, so when I go back and actually read it, I'm always shocked by how violent it is: the enemy, the devil, fire and weeping and gnashing of teeth.

There's something to be said for one person's weed is another's wildflower, but also, there really are weeds. And they were planted by the devil. Talk of the devil always makes me nervous. Even if we don't take it literally—which we shouldn't—the way the idea can lead us to demonize each other is deeply harmful.

But there is something helpful here: There is evil in the world. Sometimes folks say evil's not real, it just looks like evil. It's all part of the divine plan, and things that seem bad actually aren't.

Nope, says Jesus. There are real forces that sow death among us. And the same way that love is more than the sum of its parts, so is evil. Love begets love. And violence begets violence. Always. Evil, like love, has a life of its own. No one is served by pretending it's not real.

But then the question becomes, if evil is real and completely entangled with the good, what do we do?

I may not like literally weeding, but I do love pointing out things that are wrong in the world, and in other people, which, of course, are always also the things that are wrong inside of me. And I want to eliminate all of it. Now.

So, it is confusing and frustrating for Jesus to say, You see all that bad stuff? Just leave it alone. Truth is, you're not actually so great at judging between the wheat and the weeds. Your desire for a monoculture is going to do more harm than good. Sit tight.

Now, this is not an argument for complacency. Within this same gospel there are powerful calls for ethical action, as well as guidance for holding people accountable and setting boundaries. Two things can be true at the same time. Yes, seek good and resist

evil with all your might. And also, recognize we're not always so great at judging which is which. And that impulse to judge and condemn others and ourselves usually does more harm than good.

We try to solve ecological problems by exterminating one species and then realize, oh, that was actually essential. We try to deny, or repress, or root out some part of ourselves we hate, and our problems end up multiplying.

This impulse to judge and cast out gets really dangerous when we get together in groups. We end up with inquisitions, and witch trials, and collaring people with burning tires. And we can't let ourselves off the hook and say it's just those *other* Christians who do that. All sides are just as inclined to these judgements of ideological, theological, or moral purity. There are more than forty-six Presbyterian and Reformed denominations. Forty-six! All born of judgment that the other has gone astray. That doesn't begin to cover all the flavors of Baptist or Methodist or the truly countless independent congregations that go it completely alone.

I didn't like group projects in school, in part because I always thought, if I could just kick that one slacker out or get rid of that one person who always complicates everything, *then* we'd have the perfect group. There was always someone who I thought was the problem—which might have been a clue that the problem wasn't out there, but in here.

John Calvin was not a particularly relaxed guy. He had pretty strong convictions about right and wrong and precisely how people should live. He even established a theocracy to make people act right. Which is why I was a little surprised to read his commentary on this parable and find that he said, "Under the pretense of zeal, many are more [contorted] than they need to be... for nowhere is an absolute purity seen, and they go mad... and ruin everything with their harsh strictness." We ruin everything with our harsh strictness. Calvin said that!

We can't solve our problems by rounding up all the people who are wrong and putting them against the wall or locking them up. That's been tried. It doesn't work.

The truth is there are forces out of our control at work inside and out. Getting rid of the bad apples won't help if the barrel itself is moldy. And the promise, the incredibly good news is that there will be, ultimately, a refining fire that we don't have to start.

That may not sound like good news. But I think it's a relief. I don't have to judge—others or myself. I can't do it accurately anyway. And I don't have to fix it all.

The author of Matthew has an unfortunate habit of categorizing people as all good or all bad. It's hyperbole. No one is all good or all bad. None of us is all wheat or all weed. We're all a field of both. The fire promised here can't be a fire of eternal torment for

everyone who isn't up to snuff. That would be all of us. I believe what Jesus is talking about is what the prophets called a refining fire.

Fire turns weeds into ash that, mixed into compost, can return lime and potassium to the soil. Fire melts, burning off the dross, leaving only pure gold. Fire renders meat and tough vegetables edible, unlocking calories we otherwise couldn't get. And fire can clear the ground of overgrowth and warm the soil, bringing the microbes to life that turn decaying plants into useful nutrients that make the wildflowers bloom and the bees and butterflies dance in ecstasy.

Yes, there are weeds. Evil is real. But it is not ultimate. It does not get the last word. Love does.

~ Sarah W. Wiles, 2023