

Funny thing about weeds. “Weeds” didn’t exist until about 10,000 years ago, when humans first started cultivating crops. The innovation of agriculture created the idea of botanical trespassers – plants that were in the “wrong place.” Our human activities create the entire category of weeds. But as far as nature is concerned, there are only plants.

Nine thousand years after shifting to an agricultural lifestyle, Jewish scribes captured a story about YHWH throwing humans out of the Garden of Eden because they ate from the tree of knowledge of good and evil. YHWH compelled the humans to work the ground from which they were taken. YHWH also cursed the ground so that they would have to toil and sweat to cultivate plants for their food, and what’s more, YHWH told them: “thorns and thistles it shall bring forth for you.”

Weeds.

A comparatively mild evil, weeds. They are naturally strong competitors for the water, the light and the space we want for the plants we prefer. And so, we spend billions of dollars annually to control or destroy them. People and nature both pursue breeding programs. It’s just that we breed plants for yield, while nature breeds plants for survival.

So, even as we manipulate natural processes to our benefit, nature is persistent. We can control some weeds while others thrive. By moving plant species out of their natural homes and disrupting natural systems with our plowing and spraying, we are responsible for weeds like purslane and witchweed in our cornfields. The weeds choking out the native flora of the Everglades are aquarium exotics that people have tossed out.

Now, we can’t let weeds run rampant or we won’t survive. But the harmful threats that weeds pose are woven together with beneficial gifts. Some provide habitat and food for beneficial insects, like milkweed for monarch butterflies or like clover for bees. Some function as a kind of ecological immune system, moving into soil stripped of natural vegetation to stabilize soil and keep it from washing away or repairing nutritional imbalances. Some act as nature's plant

pioneers, breaking up hard-pan, drawing nutrients up from deeper ground or recovering otherwise dead soils.

Some even evolve to become useful crops. The wheat that people grow on more land worldwide than any other crop began as a weed-grass called wild emmer. And some of the earliest remains of that ancient crop have been found in Syria and Jordan.

That's the region around Galilee where Matthew's Jesus is telling this parable: a parable about the kingdom of heaven featuring a weed-grass used for food, called emmer, and an inedible weed called "darnel."

Now, wild emmer and darnel seeds are nearly identical. The immature plants look almost exactly alike, both lush and green. You can only tell them apart after they mature and produce either large, gold *wheat* berries – grain full of nutrients – or small, gray *darnel* berries – grain full of poison. The roots intertwine so that even if you could identify the difference, separating one from the other would have been beyond the abilities of the servants in the parable.

Picking through weed encounters must be done with care. And never more so than in navigating this parable. Jesus *is not* imploring us to divide the world into people who are good "wheat" and people who are bad "weeds." Jesus *is not* telling us that we just have to put up with people we don't like and be satisfied that eventually God will burn them for all eternity. Jesus is also not suggesting that we just sit back and do nothing until Judgment Day. He is definitely acknowledging the existence of evil, but he is not explaining evil.

The master in the parable says, "An enemy has done this." Now, if you are at all like me, it feels good for a minute to have someone or something to blame. Blame, in fact, is often the first thing that sprouts when something goes wrong. And sometimes there's just enough truth in blame to make it look right. Just like darnel looks like wheat. Until it begins to produce poisonous berries.

Blame holds someone or something responsible that isn't me. Pointing at someone else can momentarily relieve anxiety and even win a few short-term "blame buddies." But eventually, it begins to generate a sense of powerlessness and alienation. And while blame spreads like a weed, it rarely produces much good.

Even if we are blaming the devil, we can't change much if *all* our attention is deflected to where we have the least amount of influence. And if we assign *all* responsibility for evil to another person or group of people, we've taken the first step in scapegoating. Taking action can feel right, like pulling weeds, but the unthinking actions of scapegoating lure us into *participating* in evil.

For Christians, it can seem right to assign tragedy and evil to some greater plan God supposedly has for us. In our attempts to explain evil away, we tell people who have been forced from their homes by war not to worry because "it's part of God's plan." We tell a friend whose cancer has returned not to worry because "God never gives us more than we can handle." We tell a family whose house has been robbed of all their possessions that "God's purpose for this will reveal itself in time."

None of these words are the words of evil people. They are the well-intended actions of God's servants who have become preoccupied with weeding out the undesirable. We can unintentionally take on the role of the angels charged with that job. Our words intended to comfort end up assigning God responsibility for tragedy and brokenness.

But this parable suggests is that God does not will evil for us, not in any way. Tragedies are not part of God's plan. God never, *ever* wants us to suffer. Something shifts, something opens up, when we relax our focus on weeding and turn our attention to the harvest. There's a slightly different and life-affirming perspective available if we have ears to hear it.

In this parable about the realm of heaven, the master says, "Let both the weeds and the wheat grow together until the harvest." Good and evil co-exist in the here and now. The evil that we deplore is intertwined with the good in our socio-political systems, in our communities, in our church, in our homes and within each one of us. And the presence of that evil is not cause for inaction.

We can trust that the presence of evil woven with the good will never overcome what is good because creation is God's field. We can and should stand up to evil and nurture what is good, in ourselves first, and then in our homes and in each other. There is far more good in God's creation than there is evil.

Evil is a parasite feeding on what God has created and so must rely on our help. And we spread evil by taking judgment into our own hands. Evil tempts us into imagining that we are shining with righteousness. And if we are blinded to our *self*-righteousness, we can easily step into the role set aside for the angels.

Waiting for God's harvest to come can be frustrating. Evil and pain seem to thrive, blotting out all is good. But as Paul wrote to the Romans, "hope that is *seen* is not hope...if we hope for what we *do not* see, we wait for it with patience." To hope, then, is to counter evil with patience; we can *name* it and *unmask* it, but we do not have to *defeat* it. God does that. We can strengthen what is good in us and around, we can stand up against injustice and we can support each other, but we are not responsible for burning away the causes of sin and evil.

The fire of God's Holy Spirit does that.

By the time God gets around to the harvest, weeds just won't matter. God's redeeming and transforming love liberates you and me to encounter all of God's creation trusting in *God's* judgment; God's transforming love frees us to engage our own accountability trusting in God's mercy.

In the meantime, we can remind each other that to get a crop of wheat, the entire field must be treated as the intended crop: it must *all* be watered, fertilized, protected from weather and tended with care. That's what the realm of heaven is like. God loves all that God has created and showers love equally. Trust God's participation in this imperfect life, and treat yourself and everyone you encounter with forgiveness and compassion.

The purpose of growing wheat is not just to bring more wheat into existence, but to produce food. To transform one whole thing into another whole thing. The fire of the Holy Spirit does not condemn, but transforms. God will harvest us in all our wheatiness and our weediness into a whole crop of love.

God will bring that harvest to a heavenly banquet that we can all share without worrying about who or what is wheat and who or what is weed. God's desire for every person, for every part of creation, is wholeness, love and joy.

That's what the realm of God's heaven is like.

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I am indebted to an email post from David Lose's "...*In the Meantime*" (20 July 2017) for inspiring this sermon.

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