Matthew 13:24-30, 36-43

“Living with the Weeds”
Matthew B. Reeves

WHERE DID…. ...THE WEEDS COME FROM?

It isn’t that Jesus likes weeds. It’s that the job of pulling them all out doesn’t belong to us. Let’s just get it out there and say it: this teaching is hard.

We tend not to like weeds. At least not in our yard. Hence the bulletin announcement seeking help with weeding the church’s flower beds. Do you have half an hour to spare? Please give it. But we do so knowing, in a couple of days, we’ll need to give half an hour more. Weeds just keep growing. It doesn’t matter that you pulled them last night. You wake up the next morning and there’s another one peeking from the ground. Are there any that are fond of weeds?

But of course the story that Jesus tells isn’t for agricultural and horticultural instruction. It’s for wisdom for his followers living in a world in which what’s good and fruitful stands in the midst of what’s weedy and noxious. But it people, events, ideas, or just the variety of ways we experience life, the good and the bad are both there. It’s the nature of the human heart try and to get rid of what is bad. But Jesus says not so fast.

In Matthew chapter 13 Jesus is telling stories called parables about the kingdom of heaven. The kingdom of heaven has to do with the God of the heavens at work and in charge in the midst of the earth. But none of the heavenly kingdom stories pull us from the earth. Instead, they bring us closer to it, with characters like farmers and elements like seeds, crops, harvest, and weeds. We listen to [Jesus stories] and find, perhaps to our frustration, that Jesus isn’t trying to give us solutions to our problems. He’s cultivating lived faith in God who meets us right in the thick of them.

The story is about cultivation and it begins with a landowner that plants his field thick with good seed. Today, this seed would have been researched and bred at the Ohio State Agricultural and Research Development Center. It would come with assurances that, planted and cultivated properly, it will yield a healthy crop. The landowner finishes his work and goes home to sit on the porch in his rocking chair with a glass of lemonade. He imagines how, in time, his seed will sprout and grow a lush field of wheat that he can sell for a nice profit and use to make bread for his family.

You and I try to sow our lives with good seed. We plant opportunities for our children—good schools, athletics, lessons, enjoyable experiences. We try and seed our lives with jobs will yield a decent income and hopefully feel fruitful as we do them. We labor for homes, health, friendships, and families that add to the fruitfulness of life. But along the way, in spite of best efforts and intentions, we find there’s a lot we can’t control. In the midst of what’s good, rises aggravation, difficult questions, illness, and suffering we didn’t foresee and isn’t our fault.

Life includes weeds. It just does.

Some weeks after planting, the man’s servants come running from the field with aggravation on their faces. They ask, “Sir, didn’t you sow good seed in your field? Where did the weeds come from?” Not that it was surprising that there were weeds. These were the days before Roundup, so crops were bound to have weeds. But these were weeds of considerable magnitude—an infestation of weeds. And somehow they’d taken the servants by surprise.

The Greek word the text uses for weed tells us that the plant in question was called darnel. Darnel was a common Palestinian plant that closely resembled wheat—so closely that it was hard to tell the difference between the two, especially when they first sprouted. Only when they grew and the head began to open could you see the difference between darnel and wheat.

Like how you can take a job that seems fruitful, until you grow into it and find it include unsavory parts. Married couples and wake up one morning asking where “Where did these weeds in our marriage come from?” They’d likely been growing for a while, but some struggles and foibles that weren’t apparent when they walked down the aisle. A look into
your heart can shows that some of what you took as good growth—drive to succeed, desire to get life right, concern for the family’s wellbeing—can contain weedy characteristics upon closer examination. It’s all tinged with selfishness and a noxious tendency to live without much mercy toward self and others.

Darnel is a noxious weed. It’s poisonous to eat. If it gets harvested and ground with the rest of the crop, the whole crop is ruined. Which is why the landowner’s response is, “An enemy did this.” It was an act of agricultural terrorism. When, later, Jesus explains the parable to the disciples, he says the enemy that sows weeds in the world is, in fact, the devil.

But we notice that Jesus doesn’t go on to explain were the evil comes from. He doesn’t get in to why God allows it. He just says life in the world includes an evil force that’s opposed to God’s good and fruitful life, and he leaves it at that. We also notice the landowner doesn’t seem surprised that are weeds or that any enemy would do this. It’s as though he’s reconciled to things being like this, even as he doesn’t like it.

Which brings us to the central question of the parable: what to do about the weeds. It’s the parable’s central question because it’s a central question of our lives. What to do with the presence of the bad in our lives? What to do about that co-worker that seems to make work a hassle? That family member that seems to disrupt the peace? The people and groups that seem to corrupt national life? What do we do with the noxious attitudes we find growing in the soil of our hearts?

And let’s just ask: What do we do about weeds in the church? The church has always been a weedy field, with some of them terribly noxious. The past hundred years alone shows a church complicit in sexual abuse, genocide, racial oppression. Go back further and there’s crusades, the Spanish inquisition, Reformation era heresy executions by Protestants and Catholics alike.

A common element of these weeds is that they grew out of a church trying to purify itself, or purify the world, of what we named as evil. The weeds can appear to be good, until it becomes apparent that are not. History tells us that the Evil One loves nothing more than the church doing battle with the devil’s weapons. Which is why most of the church’s purity crusades end up condemning those that conduct them.

Part of why church is distasteful to some today is that the church has lacked kind of humility Martin Luther once expressed when he said: “The church cannot be without evil people. Those fanatics who don’t want to tolerate any weeds end up with no wheat either.”

That is the concern driving the landowner’s instructions to his servants. They ask him, “Do you want us to go and pull the weeds up?” Which is to say, do you want us to take charge of purifying the field? Just say the word and we can uproot all the evil? But the landowner’s response was: “No.” Plain, simple, and direct: No weed pulling. That’s not your job.

Did this take the servants aback? Why should they not try to undo the enemy’s work? Why should they let the bad grow alongside the good? The reason, their master says, is, “While you are pulling up the weeds you may uproot the wheat with them.”

It turns out the darnel weed has roots that grow deeper than wheat. If you pull the darnel you’re bound to pull up some of the good crop with it. And anyway, the two look so similar, even when full grown, you might rip out the good, thinking it’s the bad. Which, if you talk to some that have sworn off church, you will find actually happens. That Christians of earnest faith, hope, and love have been treated like weeds, and have become uprooted from the church where they were meant to be planted and growing.

The result of the parable is an uncomfortably ambiguous situation. The servants have to reconcile themselves to the presence of the weeds. They won’t be there forever. Eventually, harvest will come. Everything will be cut and the weeds will be sorted out. When he interprets the parable, he says the harvest is the end of time, when he will send his angels to uproot every kind of sin and evil.

So the parable comes with assurance: God is just and will take care of the weeds. But it also comes with warning that’s not the church’s work right now, because God’s judgment might not be as straightforward as we think. For now, the church is to live and grow and be the wheat right in the soil of the world that includes weeds.
In this parable, the danger isn’t in the presence of evil or sin or impurity, but in the attempt to take charge of rooting out all the sin we see, as though we are in the place really to judge that; as though we ourselves could really make our lives our lives, or others, or the world to be pure. Which is why one of the church’s spiritual greats, Thomas Merton, once said, “Nothing is more suspicious, in [one] who seems holy, than an impatient desire to reform other [people].”

We face impure choices and ambiguity all the time. It’s the older person that sees the good of leaving their home some other living arrangement, while also seeing at the implications that feel so bad. It’s the young parent that weighs whether to stay home with the kids or pay for childcare and continue the career. It’s the supervisor torn between the pain of firing someone and seeing the quality of a work team suffer. It’s the choice between the college you want to attend and the one you can actually afford.

Perhaps the weed is called darnel because you’re it seems like you’re darned if you leave it and you’re darned if you don’t. Isn’t that how life can be?

The point of the parable isn’t that we’re excused from exercising discernment or that we can grow comfortable with evil. It’s that we can live trusting that God is the one that finally in charge working things out. Which means we can live with patience, striving for Jesus’ good and fruitful life knowing that we’ll get some things right and we’ll some things wrong. But it’s God that will finally sort it all out. And when he does, our whole life—truly the whole world—will pass through the refining fire of his love.

“Let both grow until the harvest,” says the landowner. This verse contains a small word that might be the most important in the passage. It’s the Greek word translated “let”—“let both grow.” It’s the same word that appears the Lord’s Prayer where it’s translated forgive. So it’s like master is saying, for now let the field be forgiven for being so mixed. Which is insight into how God looks on the world, and on us. Not from a searing eye of judgment that’s fixated on what’s ugly but from a gaze that that stems from a heart of forgiveness.

What if we tried that? What if we lived forgiving our lives for being such a mixed bag? What if we confessed and forgave the church for creating suffering as well as blessing? What if we reconciled ourselves to a world that, until Christ comes again, is going to lack for peace? This would not be to like or condone the presence of weeds. But it would be to relieve us of responsibility for what only God can do, and do well. Which is to judge the world with fairness and people with perfect truth, and deal with evil in ways consistent with the holy love shown in Christ.

It can come as a great relief to let God really be God. Because then you can just live as God’s beloved child, not having to manage the field of your life, with all that’s growing around you, but just letting God grow you deeper into the soil of grace. Which would mean treating others, even those that seem like weeds, as God’s beloved children too.

Because really, is it our place, to say that they’re not? Amen.