

The Parable of Weeds and Wheat. . . with Some Kudzu
Matthew 13:24-30

I don't do much gardening and I don't buy many seeds. But I think I am confident in saying that no seed store sells kudzu seeds or dandelion seeds. Now, I still don't know what's so bad about dandelions. Up in Ohio where I grew up, at least dandelions gave the yard a little green in the gray days of early March. And, what's to say that the dandelion flower is not beautiful? But you know the reason. Dandelions are weeds. And weeds can be defined as plants created by God that take root where people don't want them to be.

In fact, someone once wrote to a gardening magazine and said, what can I do about dandelions? I have taken them up by the roots, I have poisoned them, I have plowed them under, and they keep coming back. What should I do? The answer, "Sir, we suggest you learn to love them."

But then kudzu. Kudzu came to America in 1876, part of a Japanese government display of a Japanese garden. Up in Philadelphia, kudzu behaved itself. But then when it got to the south, it found itself a home. Charlie and Lily Pleas, bless their hearts, sold kudzu from their Florida nursery. It was used for cattle feed. And then the government, and folks, remember that when the government gets involved, good things ALWAYS happen, promoted kudzu for erosion control during the Depression.

Well, Kudzu loved the south. It didn't behave nicely as it had in Japan, and so soon became known as the Plant that Ate the South or My-lo-mo weed. And in 1972, the plant the government promoted, was declared by that same government, ours, that kudzu is a weed.

And to this very day, we are trying to decide what to do about this weed. Some people make kudzu syrup. It doesn't sell very well. Others still feed it to moo cows, but there's always plenty left over. Some deep-fry kudzu leaves. How shocking! Who would ever have thought we Americans might take some food that might be good for us and then fry it? There is also kudzu quiche that someone makes.

But I suppose most folks would simply like to tear up every last kudzu plant they find. Talk about a lifetime job, but that's beside the point. The deeper problem is this. Uproot the kudzu, and you uproot other stuff as well. Light poles and trees would all come tumbling down, as could walls and fences wires. The cure might be worse than the disease.

Which, at long last, leads us to this parable, long called, the parable of the wheat and the tares. A tare is a weed, a weed that lives among the wheat. And in some languages, Middle Dutch for instance, the word for wheat and the word for tare, sound exactly the same.

I think Jesus would have liked that. He also would have liked the fact that in English, wheat and weed sound very much alike. You can't really tell the difference. And that's the point. Who can tell?

What Jesus does do is to talk about a certain plant that looks just like wheat. (What we have translated as "tare.") It is also called cheat, perhaps because it is a plant that cheats. It looks like wheat, but it is not. It is an imposter.

So suddenly we have a field filled with both wheat and cheat, wheat and weed? Whatever are we to do? And you know Jesus isn't talking agriculture, he's talking spiritual culture. Kingdom culture.

But wait. Let's back up. Where did these weeds come from?

Now, at one level, Jesus is being outlandish in this parable. He's concocting a story to make a point. Why would the master sow the good seed? He has servants to do that. Why would the servants be surprised to find weeds among the wheat? Isn't that the problem with every garden outside Eden that has ever been planted? And why would the enemy go to the trouble of gathering up enough weed seed to scatter? Wouldn't the enemy have found a more efficient way of harming the good farmer?

Well, it's a story. And Jesus invites us to live at the center of the story. A story which is not about a wheatfield, it's about the Kingdom of Heaven.

Kingdom of Heaven. What's that? In the parables, it is never the place where we live after we die. No, the Kingdom of Heaven is earth when earth finally is the way God wants the earth to be.

Back to the parable.

An enemy plants bad stuff. Jesus never defines who this enemy might be. But to the extent that the church is a foretaste of the KOG, what might the enemy be? Satan? Sure. Jealousy. Indifference. Pride. Excessive love of the past. Excessive love of modernity... Any idea or attitude that is OURS, rather than that instilled by Christ...

The parable is about trusting God enough to do our job and let God do His. It's about not being too quick to cast out those whom we deem to be unfit for one reason or another.

It's about looking at the weedy wheatfield that is, and trusting in the harvest yet that will be because God has the final say.

Job of the church is not to root up sinners and cast them away, but rather to nurture the wheat.

And here's where we must remember a parable is just a story, that it is not meant to tell all there is to tell about God and theology. Because, we all know that wheat is wheat and weed is weed, and kudzu is kudzu. The church is a redemptive community.

We must always trust the power of repentance, the power of rebirth, the power of changed

lives. Weeds cannot become wheat, but souls turned from God are not forever condemned to be cut off from God. The ministry of the church is to change hearts, transform lives.

A holy church is not defined by how many sinners are kicked out, and how many sins are condemned, but rather, how many sinners lives turn from darkness to light, from despair to peace, from selfishness to service.

But back to the parable. The church is a foretaste of the Kingdom of God, but it is not yet perfectly realized. In fact, if the church is compared to a wheatfield, we must be aware that there are also plenty of weeds among us as well.

But the point is this. God knows the wheat from the weeds, but we don't. Therefore the purpose of the church is not to uproot and cast aside, the weeds, because we might throw away some wheat by mistake.

The church's calling is to proclaim God's mercy and grace, to the congregation and to the world. And to trust God to sort it all out. And if in fertilizing the wheat, we fertilize some weeds as well, that's all right. . . because the alternative is far worse... to throw away what we think is a weed only to find out it's wheat, after all.

If Jesus had lived in Carteret County, and seen a tree engulfed by kudzu, do you think he might have told the parable of the kudzu?

And would he have said, take care not to uproot the kudzu, lest you uproot the church as well. Or might he have said, don't uproot the kudzu, but learn to love it, and find a good purpose for it?

Might he have suggested that for us, kudzu is just a weed, but in God's hands, maybe kudzu becomes the food for our cattle, and ethanol for our engines.

But Jesus didn't know kudzu. He knew weeds and wheat. He knew of enemies that seek to destroy the wheat. And shockingly, tells us not to spend our time trying to destroy the weeds, but in nurturing the wheat.

And what about the weeds, that so desperately need to be dealt with? Dare we leave judgment and punishment to God?

This is exactly what Jesus invites us to do. At least in this parable. Amen.