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Sunday July 17, 2005
Matthew 13:24-30, 36-43

“The Summer Harvest”

A few weeks back I went with some of you to a Benedictine monastery out in New Mexico. Benedictines are serious Christians. Their rule of life revolves around the balance of prayer and work, work and prayer. Since I don't really work for a living, but talk for a living, and they spend most of their time in silence, which means I'd have to be quiet for a change, I rightly assumed this would be good for my soul.

The trip was a lovely experience and when I got back home to tell my wife, Abby, about it, she was shocked on many levels. She was quite confident I wouldn't be able to handle the not talking part, so when I told her it wasn't so bad, she suggested I practice more often around the house. I told her that one of my jobs was to weed the little wheat field on the monastery grounds. Each morning I'd spend a couple of hours down on my hands and knees doing my best to pull out the weeds without bringing the wheat with it. I discovered this was far harder than it looked, because whereas from above it was easier to see that the wheat was golden and the weeds were green, when you got down into the gravel, and water, and mud and began pulling the weeds out by the roots, you quickly found out that it was nearly impossible to tell the difference. The roots had grown so close together, become so intertwined, they had become something akin to organic Siamese twins. When you pulled weeds you inevitably pulled wheat, and often pulled more wheat than weeds.

I explained all of this to Abby and suggested this would make a great illustration for a sermon on the wheat and weeds, about how hard it is to tell the good from the bad, that sometimes when we are trying to do good we end up doing bad, and often times the best thing to do is to leave it alone and let the weeds and wheat grow together, sharing the same soil until harvest time. After I finished my long theological treatise on weeding, Abby, a divinity school student (I thought she'd really dig the deep theology behind this) looked at me and said, “I didn't know you knew how to weed? When did you learn how to weed? May I introduce you to our flowerbeds? In one week you learned how to listen and weed? When can you go back?”

This morning we have a parable; the parable of the weeds and the wheat, or the wheat and the tares, if one prefers the familiar King James Version. Parables are those sneaky literary ambushes Jesus sets for us. A parable begins by leading us gently down one path, and then, just when we think we know how the story is going to turn out, ambush! Jesus jerks us down another road and reveals a greater dimension of the Kingdom of God.

In this parable someone, a farmer perhaps, has gone out to his field and sowed good seed. But that night the enemy comes and sows bad seed. When the slaves discover that good seed and bad seed are growing together they say to the master, “Lord, should we go out and chop down the weeds?” But the Lord says, “no, let them be, for in gathering the weeds you would also gather the wheat. When it is time for the harvest, it

will be God who separates the good and the bad, the wheat from the weeds.” It may be bad farming, but it’s good theology.

Notice that the parable doesn’t deny the existence of evil in the world. If anything it confirms that yes, there are bad people out there doing bad things, there are “evildoers,” to use the language of the text. Notice that the parable doesn’t even suggest that nothing should be done about it. On the contrary, they should indeed be punished, with the gruesome threat of an eternal fire no less. It’s just that the parable says we, all of us who are wheat and weeds growing in the field, we don’t have the ability to make the call. In the upside-down-logic of the Gospel of Christ, God says, “let it be. It’s not for you to deal with. I’ll take care of it when the harvest comes in. And furthermore be careful, evil may show up precisely where you are convinced there is good, and good may be in the place where you think there is evil.” Out there in the world, where real human beings live and work and play everyday, sometimes it’s hard to know who is good and who is bad. Sometimes it’s hard to tell where the weeds ends and the wheat begins.

Perhaps in a civil democratic society, we need laws, boundaries to judge what is appropriate and inappropriate behavior so as to avoid anarchy. But that is more about us than it is about God, more about our sin than about God’s intention for our living. The Kingdom of God is not a democracy. Jesus says in the Kingdom, it is up to God to harvest the crop, up to God to discern who is wheat and who is weed, not us. Perhaps this parable is told for our own protection. Maybe Jesus knows us a little too well. Jesus knows our tendencies to want to harvest the crop. The story of human history, and in many cases the story of the church, is one of separation, one group taking the moral high ground, deciding who is in and who is out, who is good and who is evil. But Jesus also knows us well enough to know that deep down in the core of who we are, down someplace near our roots, we get so tangled up inside, that we cannot even recognize where the good starts and the bad begins in our own souls, much less in the lives of others.

Often times in life it is precisely when we are trying to do the most good that we end up doing the most bad, when we try to eliminate the weeds that we destroy the wheat.

“Don’t make it worse,” my mother would say, when the little thread holding my jacket button in place would begin to unravel and I would try to tie it up. “Don’t make it worse,” my father said before my chewed up fingernail would turn into a painful hangnail. “Do no harm,” was the first rule John Wesley gave before he sent his preachers out to proclaim the Gospel, knowing how easily God’s word could become toxic moral judgment rather than liberating grace. “I will do no harm,” the young physician says in the Hippocratic oath, before the letters M.D. are placed behind her name and a scalpel set in her hand.

We live in a world that is desperate for clarity, yet muddles along in a forest of complexity. One person’s dandelion is another one’s yellow flower. One person’s terrorist is another one’s freedom fighter. One person’s derogatory reference to a “gay lover” is a comment on another one’s beloved life partner.

I heard an oncologist say once how difficult it is to treat advanced cancer because the good cells and the bad cells have so intertwined with one another that often treatment kills more of the good cells than the bad ones.

Matt Rawle, one of our divinity school interns for next year, tells a story about taking a group of youth to do home repair for the rural poor in the rolling foothills of the

Appalachians. The family they were working with had a damaged and leaking roof and the youth were there to help fix the roof. While working on the roof, several of them noticed a busted fence, and since there were chickens to watch after, and perhaps the occasional fox to keep out, with great energy they decided to mend the fence as well. No problem. Easy fix. With gusto they began digging the hole for the first fence post when water began shooting skyward. They had struck the water line. Now the poor family had no roof, no fence, and no water. The man of the house noticed the commotion, calmly analyzed the scene, looked over the youth and simply said . . . “well” . . .

It’s not that our motives are bad our motives are usually good. We are trying to do right, wanting to make the world a better place. Sometimes, when we are sure that we’ve got a fistful of weeds, and we’re ready to rip them out, what we’ve really got is a fistful of wheat, and our efforts threaten the whole crop. Even when we know there is a problem in our lives or in the world, there is no easy way to fix it. The road to hell is paved with good intentions.

The world witnessed Live 8 a couple of weeks ago. Concerts organized by celebrities around the world to put pressure on representatives to the G8 summit, those leaders whose countries have the strongest economies in the world, to commit billions of dollars to eradicate extreme poverty in Africa. A young man from Ghana West Africa who had recently immigrated to the United States commented to me, “I’m glad people want to help, but they have used pictures and words to describe my home as a place where no one can help themselves, where there is only misery and corruption and poverty. We have plenty of problems he said, but Africa is also a place of profound dignity. It’s a place of home, and family and community, where people love one another tremendously, and love our beautiful land. We welcome the help, but please offer it with respect, and save us the Western paternalism.”

Two years back, Errol Morris did a documentary on the life of Robert McNamara entitled *The Fog of War*. Robert McNamara was a World War II whiz kid and secretary of defense for seven years during the height of the Vietnam War. Looking back on his experience helping to direct that war and other military action, McNamara said, “we were trying to do good, it’s just that, we often did far more bad than good, and more often than not, we couldn’t tell the difference.” It sounds like the parable of the wheat and the weeds.

If we can’t fix the problem, if we aren’t to root out weeds for fear of destroying wheat, what do we do? The Gospel suggests we simply go on living, in the midst of the field, surrounded by light and dark alike, we go on living, cautiously, carefully, striving for the good, praying to be wheat, but never forgetting in this life that we live it’s often difficult to tell what is weed and what is wheat, in the church, on campus, in our schools, in the depths of our own lives. That’s the way it is in the kingdom of God. For this parable is a story about God, about God’s grace and judgment, rather than our own. Our job, wheat or weed, or usually some of both all wrapped up together, is to remain in the field.

Ed Kilbourne is a singer-songer writer story-teller from the mountains of North Carolina. One of his best stories goes like this:

In a little country town outside the city limits, there was an old run-down convenience store, and on the other side of the street in an abandoned parking lot was a beat-up church pew where the local winos would meet and drink away the day. One

afternoon a young man came out of the convenience store with a paper bag and noticed the winos on the old church pew and thought he'd go sit with them for a while. After a few moments, one of the winos said, "so, what do you do?" The young man said, "well, I used to be a carpenter. It was a good job, being a carpenter, you get to hammer on some wood, fix things up and such. I learned how to do it from my daddy. He was a carpenter and I grew up in his carpentry shop. But, now, now I think I'm going to be a shepherd." "A shepherd," the other wino said. "Do you know anything about shepherding?" "Well, I don't know that there is much to know," said the young man. "You know, you lead the sheep beside the still waters and all, do your best to restore their souls. When one gets lost you go off looking for it and bring it back to the other 99, that sort of thing." Well, said the first wino, if you are going to do that kind of work you better take some of this. And he passed the wine down the pew. The shepherd took a drink, and then said, "well, we can't have any wine without having some of this," and he pulled a loaf of bread out of his bag and broke the bread and passed it down the pew to his new friends and said take and eat.

Friends here at Duke Chapel, I don't know about you, but that story speaks to me. Whether we're weeds or wheat, or both at the same time, I suppose all we can do is stay in the field, hoping by grace that we have more wheat in us than weed. After all, we're the ones the Lord is talking about. We're the seed that is growing in the field. On some of my best days, I feel a bit like wheat, but often I'm more a passel of weeds. I'll make you a deal. I'll try not to pull you out, if you don't root me out, and together we'll trust that God will sort it out – at the end. In the meantime, pass the bread, pass the wine, wheat and weeds alike, it's the only way we can grow. Amen.