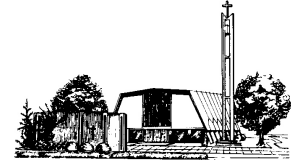


Campbell United Methodist Church

The Weekly Sermon



Practical Parables: #2-The Wheat and the Weeds

Rev Alan Jones

January 23, 2011

Matthew 13:24-30

I know that many of you are reluctant to call yourself a Christian because it feels like a heavy obligation, or ^{even} arrogant, and often you don't feel that you live up to the desired standard. As John Wesley might say you're *on your way to perfection* but you still feel that you have a significant distance to travel.

You may have heard the story about the cars stopped at a traffic light. At the front of the line there was a man who was stopped waiting for the light to change, and he became distracted and didn't notice that it had turned green. Immediately behind him was a woman in another car. She politely tapped her horn, but still nothing happened. She honked again. Still nothing. She was furious... banging on the steering wheel and keeping her hand on the horn. Finally, just as the light turned yellow, the man in the first car realized that it was time to go, so he drove across the intersection. The woman in the second car was furious as she saw the light turn red again. Her language slipped badly and her face was red with rage.

As this was happening she heard a tap on her car window. She hadn't noticed that the third car in the line up was a police car. "Lady, you're under arrest," the police officer said. "Get out of the car. Put your hands up." She was then taken to the police station where she was finger printed, photographed, and then put in a holding cell. She was still furious. Some time later the same policeman who had arrested her came back and unlocked the cell door. He walked with her out of the police station. "Sorry for the mistake, Lady," he said. "But I pulled up behind you as you were blowing your horn and cursing out the fellow in front of you. I noticed your bumper stickers. One said "Follow me to Sunday School" and the other, "What Would Jesus Do?" I just assumed you had stolen the car."

Weeds and wheat are often growing together. No matter how faithful and loving we struggle to be there is still an *alter ego* alive and well within our souls.

Last week I found an old episode of Star Trek, one of the original series, on line, where Captain Kirk is being beamed up to the *Enterprise* from a planet, and in the process his personality splits in two. There is a kind loving Kirk who is perceived as weak and feckless, and there is a strong, angry, violent Kirk who is seen as powerful. It really troubled me that

the scriptwriters needed to see a love of peace as being weak, and as anger as being strong.

If the scriptwriters for Star Trek were using your personality for this split, how would the script read? If you were a split personality between the productive nourishing crop and the weeds, which personality traits would appear on each side of the ledger? Do you see your own compassion as strength or weakness? Do you see your anger, your depression, your fear as strength or weakness? Where does faithfulness appear... as a strength or as a weakness?

Let me briefly revisit the details of the parable. Remember, that, again, Jesus is saying that the Kingdom of Heaven may be compared to this reality he is describing. The Kingdom is focused in the character of the landowner.

The man plants his crop, having done all the preparation necessary. But then, in the dark of the night, an enemy comes and sprinkles weed seeds throughout the wheat field. Nobody was aware of what happened until the spring, when the slave farm laborers go to the landowner to tell him that he has a field of equal parts wheat and weeds. They are so perfectly mixed together that it is difficult to separate them.

So the servants go to their master and ask, "Where did these weeds come from?"

The master answers, "An enemy has done this."

The slaves suggest that they get to work and pull out all the weeds so that the crop can stay healthy. Perhaps surprisingly, the landowner gives instructions NOT to pull up the weeds, because if they do this they will put the wheat crop at risk. He gives instruction to wait until harvest time... then he will tell the harvest crew to collect the weeds first, tie them into bundles to be used as fuel, and then the wheat can be successfully harvested and gathered into his barn.

Please note that the master isn't at all worried that the wheat crop will suffer because of the weeds. He knows that his seed is good and an excellent wheat crop will be harvested. And talk about *unintended consequences*... the enemy has actually not quite done the landowner a favor. The weeds which were supposed to be a problem become fuel for the winter fires, and so the landowner is quite pleased to be devoting less time to collecting firewood. There was an unexpected bonus in this crisis situation.

Let me just say a word about weeds. There is no really good definition of what constitutes a weed... I know, I know, you know it when you see it. Basic to the definition of a weed is the fact that it is a plant that is unwanted. One person's weed is another person's delight. As one who has experienced battles particularly with nasturtiums and with bamboo...

which I certainly experienced as weeds, under other circumstances I may well have appreciated the beauty of both plants... and who can deny the beauty of a meadow covered with dandelions!

And so I bring us back to the focus of this series. During these weeks of exploration of the parables of Jesus, we are exploring the inner meaning of these stories, to see what they tell us about our own inner spiritual functioning. I find weeds a really helpful image for the spiritual life... they are not, in and of themselves, bad or evil, but they can easily get in the way of the growth of beautiful flowers and tasty vegetables. They can be a real nuisance, and they often don't look good.

So what are the weeds growing in your soul and mine? In the story of the woman at the traffic light, the woman's anger was real and genuine. Her anger didn't make her a bad person, but it was getting in the way of being a gracious, forgiving and loving human being.

Notice in the story, the landowner isn't panicked by the news of the weeds. He doesn't seem to be concerned that the wheat crop will suffer too much. He knows that what he has planted will come to harvest.

In the same way, we need not to panic or be immobilized by our weeds! But I think often we forget that we can turn the weeds into an asset. When the spirit of God is at work in our souls, nothing can stop it or block it. Nothing can choke the power of love, forgiveness and grace. The Kingdom of Heaven is forever. Even when it's difficult to discern signs of the kingdom, the seeds of God's grace are alive and well, growing, always growing, within us and among us. It would appear from this story that even the worst that evil can do has the potential to be transformed into energy to serve God's everlasting purposes. Burning it can bring heat and light where it is needed most.

What is the most difficult in this story is the master's instructions to the servants that they shouldn't immediately separate the weeds from the wheat. He even goes so far as to say that if they could easily end up damaging the wheat. The parable appears to be saying that we can do soul damage to ourselves if we try to eradicate our own personal spiritual weeds prematurely. So, be careful about getting out your spiritual weed-killer spray before you have discerned what can work for you.

It is important to discern what is "growing" within your own soul. The division between wheat and weeds may not always be clear, and may not need to be. What is important for us is that we know ourselves well and understand our strengths and shortcomings in such a way that the spirit of God can bring a bountiful harvest through the way we live our lives.

I so often hear people telling me what they cannot do... *I can't work with homeless people, I*

can't go into a prison, I can't pray out loud, I can't solve the problem of world hunger or stop violence and war.

It is so easy to see these kind of statements as negatives, as wrong and bad... but this parable invites us to look at everything that immobilizes us and explore what it means about who we are, and look for ways to tap that energy for positive ends.

Are you a person who blames easily? I often jokingly use the phrase from this parable: "An enemy has done this!" –when things go wrong. We live in a blaming culture which invites us to identify the bad person who causes everything that is wrong and immoral and unjust. The alternative to blame is to let the weeds and the wheat grow together, and look for a different kind of harvest.

Martin Luther King Jr. told us:

...there is and always will be a penumbra of mystery surrounding God. What appears at the moment to be evil may have a purpose that our finite minds are incapable of comprehending. So in spite of the presence of evil and the doubts that lurk in our minds, we shall not surrender the conviction that our God is able.

(Dr. Martin Luther King Sermons: *God is Able*)

This parable helps us to recognize and inhabit our own complexity, and it invites us not to be limited by it. It reminds us that God is the one who is bringing growth to our souls, and just as we can do nothing to make a flower grow in our garden other than planting the seed and making sure it gets watered. The divine forces of nature bring life and growth. The same is true for us.

There is so much that we can learn from the tragic events that took place in Tucson just two weeks ago. At the risk of superficially sounding as though I'm saying that there is always a *silver lining*. I think that in spite of the horror of this terrible tragedy, some extraordinary positives have emerged.

Whatever the political pundits may be saying, the shooting happened because 22-year-old Jared Loughner was suffering from terrible mental illness. Did you notice how, for the first few days after the shooting, we saw pictures of him looking like a typical college-age kid, some with a smile and a mop of unkempt hair. Now, the only picture we see is one where he has a shaved head and crazy-looking eyes. I would like to think that this situation has reminded us again of how easily we neglect mental illness. People who are mentally ill often really struggle and need support, even when they may not be easy to support.

One of the men killed was a conservative Roman Catholic Republican judge who was just stopping by after daily Mass to see his Jewish Democratic congresswoman friend who happens to be married to an Irish-American space shuttle commander. Nine-year-old Christina-Taylor Green, who was killed, was a star student from another Catholic family. 79 year old Phyllis Schenk, a volunteer in her church, was a Republican who admired Giffords. Daniel Hernandez, who saved the congresswoman's life 20, is a gay Mexican-American college student. The surgeon who performed miraculous surgery was a Korean American, whose religious background I couldn't discover.

Who would believe that such an extraordinary orchestration of religious, political and ethnic diversity could happen in Arizona!

God is at work the seeds are growing. Weeds and wheat together... but it can work and it will work. We simply need to let our seeds of the soul grow and prosper and there will be a great harvest. That is exactly what the Kingdom of Heaven is like! And you and I have a key role to play in the harvest.