

Sermon for July 17, 2010
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OT Lesson: Genesis 28:10-19a
Gospel Lesson: Matthew 13:24-30, 36-43
Psalm 139
Romans 8:12-25

Like a baseball player missing a slider, we are prone to miss when biblical texts throw us a curve. We can miss the meaning of Jesus' teaching. The dead certain can be dead wrong. A poet writes, "**So much depends upon a red wheel barrow glazed with rain water beside the white chickens.**" *"We sent him on a sabbatical for this?"*

"That rain glazed a red wheelbarrow brightening the whiteness of chickens can be missed" (Stolen from Stanley Hauerwas, *A Cross-Shattered Church*). "Poetry [and I believe the parables of Jesus] is the struggle to understand that the way things are around here may not be the way things are with Jesus. If we think Jesus is with us on every issue, we need to look again. Jesus disturbs our notions of how things are. Jesus rattles our cage to open our eyes and make visible possibilities in his stories that we have missed, like the possibility that we need to repent of our allegiance to the world as it is. "To repent is not to feel bad, but to think differently."

Start with the obvious: there are weeds in every field. As far back as human memory goes, the ground has produced thorns and thistles (Genesis 3). Weeds are a ubiquitous part of our landscape: in cracks of concrete slab, front yards, flower beds and packed as seeds in cheap bags of topsoil. The weeds are reminders of the wreck we have made of creation, so that creation now groans for redemption (Romans 8).

Look at Jacob: He was a notorious weed, but we misread Genesis if we make Jacob a spiritual hero because he had this wonderful dream that supposedly changed his life. It's seems like our kind of story – after being spoiled by his mother, after stealing his brother's birthright, after deceiving his father to steal his brother's final blessing, Jacob has a dream. He wakes up and says a prayer and we are supposed to believe he has undergone this deeply spiritual experience. It's a sweet story, makes a good movie plot for Lifetime, but it is not what the text says. Jacob's prayer is a wheeling-dealing "Let's make a deal" prayer. Jacob is not in the least changed by his dream. He is the same old bargain-making Jacob. (Stanley Hauerwas, *In Good Company*, 36). Jacob sounds much like us: God is in this place, we don't know it, and we show up in church, we come and go, unchanged. Our rough edges remain rough. Our practices remain less than stellar. When is

the last time any of us changed our minds about anything? When God challenges our notion of the way things are around here, instead of repenting and changing, we are more likely to get angry, offended, or our feelings hurt. Jacob climbed the ladder where earth touches heaven, cavorted with angels, and met God. To no avail. He leaves church and cheats his father-in-law. He's the Bible's version of Bernie Madoff. Here are two philosophies. Jacob says, "What's yours is mine and I take it." Having taken his brothers birthright, Jacob says, "Give me your blessing as well. You won't be needing it." The other philosophy is that of Jesus: "If someone takes your coat, give your cloak as well. Give to everyone who begs from you, and do not refuse anyone who wants to borrow from you." One philosopher takes; the other gives. The radical generosity of the way of Jesus is not prevailing at this time in our country's life. Listen, there's the way we think it is in the world and there's the way of Jesus and the two are not the same. We miss it as surely as Drew Stubbs swinging at a down and away slider.

Now look at the weeds in the wheat field. At first glance this parable seems like a liberal Christian's dream. During my sabbatical I did research on the ways in which we, as Christians, have been hurt by secular philosophy that we have imbibed. For example, we are all the children of **John Stuart Mill**. He argued that freedom from social interference produces strong individuals who turn out to be necessary for creating societies in which the greatest good for the greatest number of people can be made a reality. Social Darwinism: The strong survive and the weak get weeded out. It's the great American illusion of independence. There are weeds and we are all, after all, sinners.

We shrug and say things like, "So there are weeds. So what?" "Who am I to judge? We are all sinners." "What I do is my business as long as I do not hurt anyone." Well, Jesus dissents from this kind of selfishness and says, "There are weeds and you are responsible for them in self-giving, sacrificial love."

We do not have to be dominated by a world shaped by John Stuart Mill. The good news is that we have been bought with a price, making it possible for us to be the body of Christ. We do not have to be alone in that "desperate loneliness fueled by the presumption that we are our own creator." So the parable of the weeds and wheat turns out not to be a liberal paradise, because the parable has judgment as its natural conclusion. And no matter how skeptical we are of God's judgment, even its possibility should elicit from us the response of Jacob: "And he was afraid." In fact, God scares us and I'm suggesting there may be good reasons for it. Do you think we have moved beyond ancient concepts like

judgment? Well, we are so afraid of death because we no longer believe in the judgment of God. Why is the most important thing in the world our attempt to make sure that we endow medical science with god-like capacity?

We are so afraid of death that we see medical science as our one chance of getting out of here alive. The nasty debate over health care is rooted in our theology: We are afraid of death and we are afraid we will run out of money. I can't ignore judgment or biblical language that speaks the word of judgment. Someone has suggested that hell is where we have to do what we want to do forever and experience the loneliness that results. Maybe hell is where we keep doing what already is making us miserable, angry, and alone forever. I don't know, but I would rather fear God than worship a silly, superficial god who tells us "Don't worry be happy." "Whoop it up, have a grand old time, praise the Lord, and go home and live as you please."

The parable also hits at the very heart of the conservative Christian project. There must be something about religion that wants to get rid of weeds. **"Master, do you want us to go and gather the weeds and [burn them]?"** The question is a rhetorical attack on the grace of God. Something in us rebels against God having the gall to offer the benefits of grace to strangers, aliens, and foreigners. Down in Alabama, the speaker of the house asks, "What part of illegal alien do they not understand?" OK, here's my question: What part of Leviticus 19:33 do we not understand? **"When an alien resides with you in your land, you shall not oppress the alien. The alien who resides with you shall be to you as the citizen among you; you shall love the alien as yourself, for you were aliens in the land of Egypt: I am the Lord your God."** Add that verse to the national debate about immigration reform.

Even churches insist on getting rid of the weeds. The mainline churches in America are being torn apart by questions about **who belongs** and **who doesn't belong**. These fights have produced divisions the churches don't know how to heal. And many don't want the division healed. There are good people on every side, but what a mess we have made.

What we have is an epistemological (knowledge) clash. Some claim a superior knowledge of Scripture. In fact, one side insists that the Bible and God are on their side on every issue. *They say things like, "God said it, not me," or "I'm just following the Bible."* The Bible bullies presume privileged knowledge that makes them right and everyone else wrong.

Wouldn't it be more honest to say, about any issue, *"This is what I think the Bible says"?*

There is always a mixture of weeds and wheat in every field. Even in church, there are weeds. July 3 we went to church with my Dad. The preacher preached for 62 minutes about the valley of dead bones in Ezekiel. He raised a lot of hell and told us there were almost no churches in the Midwest and the few he saw were deader than a doornail. But that night as we went to sleep, I heard my Dad's voice. He was on his knees by his bed praying. His voice filled the small house. His sheer love for God and his humble obedience to God echoed in the darkness. The house felt filled with the presence of the living God. *"Surely God is in this place."* I have no idea how the preaching I heard earlier that Sunday formed the kind of faith I was hearing in daddy's prayers, but on this one night, a 61-year-old man fell asleep listening to his daddy praying for our country, for our leaders, for his church, for his family. Mixed in with all that drives me crazy about religion is the voice of my dad praying for me. Religion is always a mixture of weeds and wheat.

Yet still it is jarring when Jesus says, "Leave the weeds alone." This was not the expected answer. Someone must have said to Jesus, *"Excuse me Rabbi, but you must not be from here. We get rid of weeds."* But Jesus insists, "Let both grow together."

Still we protest: "Why do we have to leave the weeds alone?" Practical application is called for at this point. We **can't tell the weeds from the wheat**. If we start ripping out alleged weeds, our acts of violence will no more harm than good. There will be collateral damage. Some wheat, including some of the little ones so loved by Jesus, will be destroyed.

A church in Virginia decided they needed to weed the membership. There was a 16 year old girl in this church and she was as wild as a march hare. Only 16 and she had been around the bend and back. The church was embarrassed so they met and told her not to come to church for a year. That decision tore the church apart. It tore up two or three families. It tore up the town. And there's no way of knowing what it did to that young woman, but there are people whose lives have been ripped apart by the judgment of a local church. The list of the wounded searching for a church that will welcome them is too long, and like the unemployment statistics, this doesn't even include those who have simply stopped looking.

Long live the weeds, because **some weeds grow up to be good wheat** producing fruit for the kingdom of God: There's Moses, murderer of an Egyptian; Jacob, stealer of birthright and blessing; Joseph, arrogant, spoiled son of Jacob; Saul, killer of Christians. They all looked like weeds at first but they all turned out to be among the special wheat of God's field.

Wheat is what weeds were meant to be. What if the wheat is God's ideal form? Weeds can be transformed. If you stand next to a really good person day after day, if you see them in action, if you observe that their words match their deeds, then some of that will rub off. "What looks like a weed can become wheat (Fred Craddock, *Cherry Log Sermons*, 29).

There are two potential transformations: one is the work of the Holy Spirit to transform a weed into wheat, and while that may sound impossible, remember we are dealing with the God who raised Jesus from the dead; the other is the transformation of our vision so that we see that what we labeled a weed was wheat all along. Many of the folks being labeled weeds in this country have been God's wheat all along. Some of us need a change in our thinking. In the church we call this repentance.

Long live the weeds and the wilderness yet.