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## Weeds and Wheat

Mark 4:26-29 (The Message translation) 26 Then Jesus said, "God's kingdom is like seed thrown on a field by a man 27 who then goes to bed and forgets about it. The seed sprouts and grows - he has no idea how it happens. 28 The earth does it all without his help: first a green stem of grass, then a bud, then the ripened grain. 29 When the grain is fully formed, he reaps - harvest time!

Jeremiah 29:11:14a 11 For I know the plans I have for you, says the LORD, plans for welfare and not for evil, to give you a future and a hope. 12 Then you will call upon me and come and pray to me, and I will hear you. 13 You will seek me and find me; when you seek me with all your heart, 14 I will be found by you, says the LORD....

Not long after my wife Barbara and I moved to the Bay Area in California in mid-90s, some members of her church wanted to take us on a day trip touring the Sonoma Valley Wine country. Now, while I have never been much of a wine drinker – or one who can talk very much about wine beyond the fact that wines are usually either red or white and they come from a bottle, a box, or (you can tell I'm such a connesieur!) a screw top – this nonetheless sounded like it would be an enjoyable day, getting to know some her church members and seeing some very beautiful country. And it was. But after about six hours of this, I was ready not to be going to wineries, taking little sips of what all pretty much tasted the same to me (I told you I don't have highbrow tastes!), and trying to pretend interest in the talk from those who did in fact know a lot about wine ("This one has a fruity head with overtones of oak and just a hint of trout...." You know what I'm talking about). Finally we were headed home and one of the members said "Wait, wait! I know of another winery that's really near to us." And I said, perhaps a wee bit cynically, "Oh goody! But maybe next time we could go on a meat-tasting tour."

I do have to say, though, that what I did find fascinating about the seemingly

endless wine tour was seeing the amazing variety of grapes and realizing yet again – you can get food from a plant! Now that sounds like one of those extraordinarily silly, penetrating-glance-into-the-obvious statements – and it is! – but for this suburban-raised boy who mostly grew up thinking food came from Safeway, I still truly do find it just really, really cool that food literally grows on trees, and even though I am not the world's best fruit and veggie eater, I do have this utter awe for the bounty that nature provides in this way. The strawberries of the Salinas valley in California, the lychees and papaya and rambutans in Hawaii, the incredible peaches that come from Colorado – all of these just utterly fascinate me in how you can get such tasty things from plants! Now, Barbara – who spent a lot of time as a child on a farm – just rolls her eyes when I say this sort of thing; she knows where food comes from! And she rolls them even more as I confess to a wish, though, that somehow scientists could make a tree or a bush that not only would grow fruits or vegetables, but would also grow shrimp and steak and barbecued ribs.

Now, you are no doubt wondering what is the point of this confession of my silliness in regards to the fact that indeed food grows on plants, but I think that this sheer **fascination** with the fact that food grows on trees and on bushes and on plants is exactly the sort of attitude that Jesus is counseling with the parable he told his disciples about the wheat. As Debbie read this story from Mark's gospel from Eugene Peterson's translation, Peterson does capture the sheer wonder of it, doesn't he: "*When the grain is fully formed, [the farmer] reaps - harvest time!*" But there is even more going on here than just a fascination and a wonder that God has designed this good earth to be a place of bounty and beauty, something that is a profound point for your faith and mine.

And although I think this profound theological point is *implied* in Mark's version of this story, Matthew's later version of this same parable shows even more clearly the this profound point for our faith. Hear, then, how Matthew tells of how Jesus told this

parable:

..."The kingdom of heaven is like someone who sowed good seed in his field; but while everybody was asleep, an enemy came and sowed weeds among the wheat, and then went away. So when the plants came up and bore grain, then the weeds appeared as well...." The servants said... "Then do you want us to go and gather [the weeds]?" But [Jesus] replied, "No; for in gathering the **weeds** you would uproot the **wheat** along with them. **Let both of them grow together until the harvest....**"

To see the theological point that Jesus is getting at here, though, we have to understand something about the farming practices of the day. In first century Palestine, farming was done pretty much as this parable describes: seed was scattered into a field, and then harvested when it was ready. It wasn't a lot more complex than that. And yet the parable, as **Matthew** re-tells it, says that while the owner and his family were sleeping, enemies came and sowed weeds in the field. Now lest you think this is farfetched, there was an actual Roman law on the books that made such a practice a serious crime. And you and I both know that there usually aren't laws prohibiting something unless that very thing has happened at some point. Now, this sowing of weeds into a newly planted field at night wasn't merely an annoyance, either. It wasn't just fun-spirited prank. No, it was deadly serious. For the kind of weed that was sown is called "darnel" and darnel has the property of looking, in its early growing stage **exactly** like new wheat and in its later stage its roots are tangled with the roots of the wheat so that pulling up the weeds means pulling up a lot of the wheat. So the farmer's in a bind. If he tries to root out and get rid of the darnel weeds *early* in the growing cycle, he is just going to have to hope that he guesses correctly as to which is which. For if he guesses wrong then much, much grain will be forever destroyed. But if instead he tries to get rid of the darnel weeds a little bit later in the growing cycle, he's also very

likely to destroy a lot of wheat when those co-mingled roots come out of the soil together. But if he is patient enough and courageous enough to **not** do anything precipitous – even in the midst of that anxiety all throughout that growing season – and if he waits until the very end, he and his workers can easily identify which is which and the wheat can be harvested and the weed successfully ignored.

Are you beginning to see the point that Jesus is trying to make here? Although this parable is often seen as a parable about **judgment** (with those folks in this world who are “the weeds” getting their just desserts at the end of time), I actually think this parable is not really so much just about *judgment*, but about **hope**. **And it’s about not trying to control what can’t be controlled and about trusting God to do everything God can to make what looks like it might be a weed into wheat.** What do I mean? Well, sometimes what looks for all the world like a weed turns out to surprise us, to be wheat. Sometimes that which we thought was no good, something that we thought was destined for a bad end, turns out instead to be wheat. God can work some amazing surprises. And if we know or should know anything about God at all it is that ours is not an angry God who is eagerly looking to make final judgments and takes some kind of joy when life gets overrun with weeds. No, God wants **you and I** to turn out to be wheat, and that means that God will patiently and persistently and passionately and tenaciously try to make that happen. ***God gives what may look to be weeds every possible chance to turn out in fact to be wheat.***

Because when all is said and done, this parable is not just about the judgment at “the End,” but is also in fact a judgment now on all of us who would be too quick to pronounce someone a weed – and it is a call for us to cooperate in God’s patient work that **all** might turn out to be wheat! But, my friends, in order to do that, in order to trust in God’s patient work to turn what is apparently weeds into what can become wheat, we

have to give up our tendencies to want to control – because sometimes those very tendencies to try to control a good outcome can in fact make a bad outcome more likely! If you've ever baked a cake and are anxious about whether it is doing okay and you open the oven door thirty-seven times you will find yourself with a collapsed cake. If you hover too much over your children as they grow up and chart new ways and make new decisions, if you try everything you can to help protect them from making bad decisions, you often will help ensure that they will rebel and go out of their way to do stupid things which they may well not have done if you hadn't tried so hard to control them! The reason, as the old saying goes, that a watched pot never boils is because we can't stand just watching the pot, we want to intervene and we get impatient and we take the lid off to check – thereby lowering the temperature and assuring it won't boil! If you or I, out of our anxiety or our impatience or our worry attempt to control the changes in life or relationships or church we will often be assured that the changes will be worse than if we had resisted our attempts to control the future.

Now, this never means that instead we simply become passive, simply resigned to whatever happens, ceasing to do those things that God calls us to do. But it does mean that we must always be careful never to make premature judgements or take actions that would cut off God's possibility, the possibility that what indeed seemed to be weeds can in fact become wheat by the grace of God. And I suspect that every one in this room knows that is true: I invite you to think of a time, a moment in your life where it seemed that the lot of your life was filled with more weeds, more brambles, more thorns than anything else. Have you had times like that in your life? And have you then found that God was patiently, persistently, tenaciously working in that weed-filled lot of your life to bring good from it, to bring things of beauty, to move you from blight to bloom? I know I have had those moments, those times. And I know that I give thanks to the God who in those moments, those times, patiently worked with me and

waited with me and hoped with me that indeed through the workings of the spirit and the word that I might instead bloom.

The disciples found this parable hard to understand. We find it hard to understand. After all, in times of anxiety and change we do tend to want to know how it all comes out, we have a sometimes huge urge to try to force, almost, a situation to become wheat – even if doing so will sometimes paradoxically make it more likely that things will become weedier! But, my friends, the disciples, steeped in the Hebrew scriptures and the teachings of the prophets, should have known better. For there is a sense in which what Jesus is trying to convey about God's hope and work for good and God's counsel to resist premature judgment could have been found long before in those wonderful, incredible words from the prophet Jeremiah that Debbie also read:

For I know the plans I have for you, says the LORD, plans for welfare and not for evil, to give you a future and a hope. Then you will call upon me and come and pray to me, and I will hear you. You will seek me and find me; when you seek me with all your heart, I will be found by you, says the LORD....

That is God's job, God's character, God's everlasting promise to us: to always work to bring good, to always offer us, indeed, a future and a hope that is full of wheat amidst what we worried might only be weeds. For that abiding good news, thanks be to God. Amen.