

From the Pulpit

The First Congregational Church, United Church of Christ

444 East Broad Street, Columbus, OH 43215

Phone: 614.228.1741 • Fax: 614.461.1741

Email: home@first-church.org

Website: <http://www.first-church.org>

“Growing in Grace: Treasures and Trash”

July 20, 2014

By The Rev. Dan Clark
Designated Associate Minister

Sixth Sunday after Pentecost

A reading from the Gospel according to Matthew, Chapter 13, beginning in verse 24.

24 He put before them another parable: “The kingdom of heaven may be compared to someone who sowed good seed in his field; **25** but while everybody was asleep, an enemy came and sowed weeds among the wheat, and then went away. **26** So when the plants came up and bore grain, then the weeds appeared as well. **27** And the slaves of the householder came and said to him, ‘Master, did you not sow good seed in your field? Where, then, did these weeds come from?’ **28** He answered, ‘An enemy has done this.’ The slaves said to him, ‘Then do you want us to go and gather them?’ **29** But he replied, ‘No; for in gathering the weeds you would uproot the wheat along with them. **30** Let both of them grow together until the harvest; and at harvest time I will tell the reapers, Collect the weeds first and bind them in bundles to be burned, but gather the wheat into my barn.’”

36 Then he left the crowds and went into the house. And his disciples approached him, saying, “Explain to us the

parable of the weeds of the field.” 37 He answered, “The one who sows the good seed is the Son of Man; 38 the field is the world, and the good seed are the children of the kingdom; the weeds are the children of the evil one, 39 and the enemy who sowed them is the devil; the harvest is the end of the age, and the reapers are angels. 40 Just as the weeds are collected and burned up with fire, so will it be at the end of the age. 41 The Son of Man will send his angels, and they will collect out of his kingdom all causes of sin and all evildoers, 42 and they will throw them into the furnace of fire, where there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth. 43 Then the righteous will shine like the sun in the kingdom of their Father. Let anyone with ears listen!

Hear what the Spirit is saying to the church.

Thanks be to God.

If you prefer Biblical passages where all is love and everyone gets along, don't read the gospel of Matthew. You're more likely to find this harmony in John's gospel, the poetic and lovely version of the story. If you need things quick and clear and to the point, you should go to Mark, the impatient saint. Now Luke will have details for you if you need to make lists and check boxes. But, if you're looking

for a fight, you've come to the right place if you've come to the gospel of Matthew.

Matthew doesn't shy away from decisive and divisive language. After all, here in Jesus's little story about growing wheat and whether or not to pull the weeds along the way, we end up having the stuff of nightmares: there is a fiery furnace, there is weeping and the gnashing of teeth. Is it possible that this agrarian anecdote became a holy horror story?

Matthew's gospel can be harsh at times. But let's cut him and his writers and his first century community some slack. They were in a fierce struggle. They were struggling with what to do about the evil in the world – they sensed it in themselves, and they knew for sure that evil was around them – in the oppressive systems of a pagan empire, in the legalistic demands of the religious oligarchy. And they were frustrated by all of this. They needed encouragement to endure over and against the evil around them. They needed promises to persist through the pain and problems of ordinary life and everyday spirituality. And here, in this story, we're left feeling helpless, powerless, small and vulnerable. We had wheat growing, but now while we slept,

an enemy has trespassed onto our property and spread the seeds of weeds among our crop.

That is the basic summary of this parable. But, don't forget, parables are mysterious and even odd little stories. Parables – earthly stories with heavenly meanings, as I was taught as a child in Sunday School – don't attempt to give direct answers to direct questions. They don't offer head knowledge. Instead, parables are intended to move our hearts, speaking across the great distances of time and place and understanding. After all, this story *was* told 2,000 years ago in a backwater province of a worldwide empire 6,000 miles from here. If it is to mean something to them... and to us... it must travel to us with a bit of mystery.

Frederick Buechner says, *“Jesus speaks in parables, and though we have approached these parables reverentially all these many years and have heard them expounded as grave and reverent vehicles of holy truth, I suspect that many if not all of them were originally not grave at all but were antic, comic, often more than just a little shocking.”*

If that's true, then the parable of the wheat and weeds is a dark comedy. There are some funny things that go down – funny in a twisted kind of way.

Wheat is planted in a field. By the way, wheat then and there wasn't grown in rows like corn or soybeans here in Ohio. It is broadcast, scattered, and it grows everywhere in a field. Then, with a master and his slaves sound asleep, the bad guys sneak in. I picture them with ski masks and a sinister soundtrack. They plant weeds. Then the field grows and, *dun dun dun...* there is wheat *and* weeds in the field. The slaves ask the master what has happened. Though none of them saw it – remember, they were sleeping – the master instantly blames his enemies. This is easy to do and no one listening to this story even questions it. Not then, not now. Blaming enemies is something we humans are experts at. Then the farm slaves make a city-kid suggestion. They ask if they should pull the weeds. It sounds good to us – we weed our gardens and we live in a time and place with crops grown in rows. But this wouldn't work in a Jewish wheat field in the first century. The field would be a trampled mess by the end of the process. The crop would be damaged if you tried to walk the wheat field and pull out only the weeds. Even if they waited until later in the season, closer to harvest, then walking around a field, you could easily disturb the drying heads balanced on fragile stalks and knock the seeds to the ground – where they could not be harvested by the owner of the field, but instead

would be left for the gleaners – the poor to come and gather – this according to Jewish law. Dealing with these weeds before harvest is an economic tragedy. So the master farmer shows restraint and decides to let it all grow and deal with it later.

So, who is the wheat? Who are the weeds? What analogies can be drawn to the master, the slaves, the enemies? Well... Jesus seems to answer these questions rather directly to his disciples behind closed doors. So, are these the right questions for us to still be asking? I guess not. So what do we do today with this strange little story?

On this week when our newspapers reveal the ugly reality that evil and good grow alongside one another—in the world and even in our own hearts—the parable of the wheat and the weeds seems especially weighty. As reports of civilian casualties mount – in Ukraine, in Israel and the Gaza strip – we see that, just as Jesus warned, human attempts to “root out evil” on our own, by force, result in the destruction of innocent lives. Every. Single. Time.

Perhaps the Prince of Peace is instructing us here to leave the drawing of dividing lines to something or some One with a wider view. Because one thing’s for sure, we’re good

at drawing lines. You/Me. Us/Them. Right/Wrong. In/Out. Or, to be less general and more specific... Black/white. Gay/straight. Christian/Muslim. Catholic/Protestant. We're good at taking our spiritual Sharpies and creating borders. But it's not that simple. And it actually doesn't work. If what we're after is peace and harmony, love and justice, drawing sharp dividing lines doesn't work. Just like pulling weeds in a field of wheat doesn't work – the farmhands would just end up trampling the crop in their attempt to extract the unwanted plants. Then the master in this story would be left with nothing. Well, nothing but an enemy, that is.

Pulling weeds and drawing lines is not that simple.

Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn in his Nobel-prize winning account of life in Soviet forced labor camps, *Gulag Archipelago*, comes to the conclusion even in that horrific prison system that pulling weeds and drawing lines is tricky business. At one point in the massive three volume work, he says...

“If only it were all so simple! If only there were evil people somewhere insidiously committing evil deeds, and it were necessary only to separate them from the rest of us and destroy them. But the line dividing good and evil cuts through the heart

of every human being. And who is willing to destroy a piece of his own heart?”

If we're intent on pulling weeds and drawing lines, we might find that we're destroying ourselves in the process, ravaging our own hearts, separating our own selves, destroying our own connection to the divine.

Perhaps Jesus's admonitions to love our enemies and love ourselves are actually two sides of the same coin. We talk a lot about loving God and loving our neighbor. We see how these things relate. What about loving our enemies and loving ourselves? Are these two related also? I believe they are if it is true what the Russian novelist says. That “the line dividing good and evil cuts through the heart of every human being.”

If this is true, then each of us alone make up a weedy wheat field. And to read this parable with the hope that comes from being gospel people – people living in, with, and for the good news of God – then I have to believe that it's okay to be a weedy wheat field. And our loving God will keep watch while the good-in-me blooms and the bad-in-me burns. Oh. There's the burning. Did you think I was going to ignore the fiery conclusion to the passage? I was

tempted, but I won't. In his explanation of the parable, Jesus tells his disciples that angels will gather... let me give it to you in Greek... *pas skandalon kai poieo anomia*. The English Standard Version renders this "all causes of sin and all evildoers," but as I dig deeper into the text, and as I pull back to take in a wider view, I think a more helpful and even more accurate translation is "everything that sets traps and makes trouble". *Pas skandalon kai poieo anomia*. *Pas* means everything. *Skandalon* is clearly where we get our English word scandal, but it was used in the first century to refer to the hunk of raw meat set on a trap to draw a wild animal into a pit. *Poieo anomia* means simply 'making trouble'. Everything good in me will bloom, but everything bad in me will burn. That is, God in God's mercy will gather the parts of me and the things around me that set traps and make trouble and set them ablaze. And just like when exercise burns fat, we'll end up with a healthier human. Just like when explorers burned ships, we'll end up with life in a new world cut off from the old way of living. This fire and its holy heat is a compassionate element. Fires are essential to life – with them, we purify and heat and cook and keep warm. And with fire, we see. The fire that consumes the traps and trouble in our lives also gives light, so that as Jesus says, the children of God will shine like the sun.

Rachel Held Evans is blogging through the lectionary this year. About this text, she says, *“Like it or not, this parable challenges, (perhaps even mocks), our notion of “precision airstrikes,” of getting rid of the “bad guys” without hurting the “good guys.” The fact is, we don’t see the world as God sees it. We are not equipped to call the shots on who deserves to live and who deserves to die, who is evil and who is good—especially when, if we’re honest, we can feel both impulses coursing through our own bloodstreams.”*

It is true what Evans says, “We don’t see the world as God sees it.” How could we?!? I don’t even see the world as you see it. And you don’t see it as I see it. And I can tell you for sure that I don’t see the world as my five year old Sadie sees it. Because Sadie thinks dandelions are pretty and she calls them flowers. Maybe weeds can be redeemed. Maybe if we see them as a child does. After all, Jesus says later in Matthew, in chapter 18, that we should turn and become like children to be a part of this kingdom he has described as a weedy wheat field... or, in twenty-first century American terms, a lawn with both green grass *and* dandelions.

So we are left with wonder at this mysterious story. This wonder can lead us to gratitude – thankful that a loving

God gives us the freedom to grow – even when we’re trapped and troubled, even when we’re less like wheat and more like weeds, even when we’re pretty like a dandelion – because in the end, as King David the Psalmist says,

“The earth is the Lord's and the fullness thereof, the world and those who dwell therein.”

Everything and everyone is God’s: the blooming wheat and the burning weeds, friends and enemies, roses and dandelions. All of this and more belongs to the realm of an infinitely loving God. So maybe it’s time to stop pulling weeds and drawing lines. Maybe it’s time to stop and smell the dandelions. Amen.

Copyright 2014, First Congregational Church, UCC