

How Does Wheat Live Among Weeds?

Matthew 13:24-30, 36-43 (Pentecost 9)

When I served in Sugar Bush, rural New London, I was able to have a garden behind the parsonage. I wanted to give it a try since I had the space and it gave me a project each summer. It started off great. I planted things like carrots, zucchini, yellow squash, peppers, cucumbers, and tomatoes. At first, I was out there every couple days doing what I could to make sure that the weeds were kept out. However I couldn't keep up. For one reason or another, it seemed like the only days I could get out there were rainy days. Before I knew it, my garden was overwhelmed with weeds and I couldn't keep up with their rapid growth. It was discouraging, especially when I saw some of the gardens of my neighbors which seemed to have no weeds at all.

Last week, we heard Jesus tell a parable about a man who sowed seed and that seed fell in different places creating different results. Today, we hear Jesus tell another farming parable. He tells of a man who sowed good seed in his field, seed we find out later was wheat. However that night an enemy came and sowed weeds among the wheat. Nobody realized it until both plants started to grow and heads started to form. When the man's servants realized what had happened, they knew their master had not sown the weeds and wondered how they got there. "Sir, did you not sow good seed in your field? Where did the weeds come from?" they asked. Then what they said next seemed to make sense. When you see weeds, you want to pull them out so that the good plants aren't affected. "Do you want us to go and gather up the weeds?" they asked. However the man said to let them both grow together until the harvest so that the good seed was not harmed while trying to remove the weeds.

Of course, weeds are going to be a problem in gardens until the end of the world, but Jesus is using wheat and weeds as an illustration to describe the reality of the world. Just as wheat would live among the weeds until the end, so Christians live as wheat among the weeds of unbelievers until the end of the world. Jesus explained, "**The one who sows the good seed is the Son of Man. The field is the world. The good seeds are the sons of the kingdom.**" (vs. 37-38a) These are those throughout the world who are heirs of heaven because Jesus planted them. They know and trust Jesus to be the one who gives them forgiveness and life as the Holy Spirit causes them to grow in their faith. But because the devil hates God, he takes pleasure in hindering and destroying God's work whenever he can. The kingdom of Christ is a thorn in his eye, and he works hard to destroy that kingdom. Wherever Jesus is sowing good seed there also the devil is busy so the seeds of unbelief and opposition. Jesus explained. "**The weeds are the sons of the Evil One. The enemy who sowed them is the Devil. The harvest is the end of the world. The reapers are angels.**" (vs. 38b-39)

In the world, there are both Christ's kingdom, and the devil's kingdom of sin and darkness. They live side by side in this world, and may look very much alike. They work at the same jobs. They have the same customs. They even attend some of the same activities or share some of the same interests. And yet they are entirely different because of who they trust and the heads that are produced as a result. Believers and unbelievers will live side by side in this world until the end of time. Understanding this reality, life as wheat planted by God himself can be discouraging when we see the weeds right there all around us not always making things easy at times for us. Just as it can be difficult for wheat to live with the presence of weeds, so it can be difficult for us to live when all we see are the weeds of unbelief. So considering aspects of this parable deeper, let's ponder this question: How does wheat live among the weeds?

Like the servants, we might think that it's better for the wheat to be completely separated from the weeds. So they asked what seemed to be a natural question. "Do you want us to go and gather up the weeds?" But was that really the best thing to do? The man who sowed the good seed makes it clear that separation is

actually harmful for the wheat as their roots would be growing together. **“No...because when you gather up the weeds, you might pull up the wheat along with them.” (vs. 29)**

Just as weeds hinder the growth of the wheat, so also the unbelieving world often hinders the growth and flowering of God’s people. The world tempts Christians, and some fall, to be replaced by weeds. So the thought of separating the wheat from the weeds might make sense. Throughout history, Christians have tried to completely separate themselves from the world of unbelievers in some way. But was that really helpful? How many have tried to separate the wheat and weeds in the world by secluding themselves in monasteries, making legalistic rules, or using so-called “holy wars” to pull out the weeds from the world? Anyone who tries only succeeds in ruining wheat along with the weeds. They uproot the faith of the weak who fall into sin and trample the faith of the strong by feeding their pride.

When I think about all of those attempts to separate wheat from the weeds, believers from unbelievers, especially secluding themselves in places like monasteries, over the last few months I’ve been concerned about a new form of seclusion which could become a danger to faith as well. This pandemic rolls on keeping many of us from gathering together and for good reasons (personal health or caution over larger gatherings). We are still being watered by the Word and growing in our faith. Technology has been a blessing to do just that, but complete and indefinite separation from the rest of the wheat isn’t the answer either. My friends, we pray that this pandemic does come to an end, and perhaps Christ will return before it ends, but until that day comes the weeds of the unbelieving world aren’t going away. Even if we isolate ourselves for the most part from the world, we are still living as wheat among the weeds in the world.

So what seemed good and beneficial at the time can in the long run actually become harmful to our life of faith. New habits of isolation and separation from each other could form as we prefer to settle for something that the writer to the Hebrews never really had in mind when he encouraged, **“Let us also consider carefully how to spur each other on to love and good works. Let us not neglect meeting together, as some have the habit of doing. Rather, let us encourage each other, and all the more as you see the Day approaching.” (10:24-25)** The master’s will was to let the wheat and the weeds grow together. Believers and unbelievers will continue to live side by side in the world, but living as wheat among the weeds, we always want to have in mind the blessing of growing in our faith together watered by both Word and Sacrament. In this way, mutually encouraged, Christ’s Church grows even stronger even though the weeds remain present.

As wheat grows heads of grain begin to form and are seen as fruit of its growth. What may not have been completely obvious becomes very obvious. Wheat is different from the weeds. The word Jesus used to refer to weeds in his parable actually is a specific weed, the zizania. It resembles wheat as it grows. It cannot be easily distinguished until the heads form which is why the servants didn’t notice a difference. The grains of the zizania weed are black and harbor a fungus that is poisonous as opposed to the heads of the wheat which produce food.

As I said before, believers and unbelievers at first glance may look very much alike. And yet they are entirely different. What sets believers apart from unbelievers even though they might look alike is the fruit, the heads of grain that are seen. As the wheat produces heads of grain that are valuable to the one who planted them, so believers produce fruit that is valuable and good in the eyes of their planter, God. These heads are pleasing and valuable to God because of the heart which produced it - a thankful heart of faith in Christ. Unbelievers produce fruit that is no fruit at all. The actions of unbelievers have no value and are not pleasing before God since their motivation is not from a heart of faith and trust in Jesus as their Savior.

So when we think about that question further, “How does wheat live among weeds?”, the answer becomes quite obvious. Live differently than the unbelieving world. In other words, be wheat. As wheat among weeds, live in such a way that demonstrates you are wheat desiring to live according to God’s will. Live your faith with words and actions which are pleasing to God. Live your entire life in thanksgiving for the forgiveness, salvation, and the certainty of life you have at the coming harvest all because of Jesus. As a result, everything we do actually testifies to the truth of Christ to the weeds around us. While it is not up to us to remove the weeds from the world, it remains very much our purpose to testify to the truth every way we can while living in the world by simply being wheat waiting patiently for the harvest.

For now until that time it is the will of our Savior that both weeds and wheat, believers and unbelievers, remain in the world until the harvest. Jesus tells us in his parable that at the end of the season the weeds and the wheat are both harvested. One burned and the other gathered into the barn. At that time, on Judgment Day, the day of the final harvest, that’s when believers and unbelievers will be forever separated. The weeds are thrown out and burned, but the wheat is taken into the barn. **“Therefore, just as the weeds are gathered up and burned with fire, so it will be at the end of the world. The Son of Man will send out his angels, and they will pull out of his kingdom everything that causes sin and those who continue to break the law. The angels will throw them into the fiery furnace where there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth. Then the righteous will shine like the sun in the kingdom of their Father. Whoever has ears, let him hear.” (vs. 40-43)**

At the end of the world when Christ returns it will be a harvest of judgment. Yet we wait for that day with confidence. We do not fear it coming. We look forward to it, but right now we are still living as wheat among the weeds. We are still growing, still producing the grain of faith’s fruit. Yet we are waiting patiently for that harvest to come knowing that we will be gathered to God’s heavenly kingdom where Jesus says we will shine like the sun.

Despite the weeds in my garden which discouraged and frustrated me, there always seemed to be something that still produced crops. I had plenty of zucchini, yellow squash, and tomatoes. Despite the presence of weeds, the wheat in Jesus’ parable still grew. It still was fruitful. Ultimately it was brought into the barns at the harvest. Despite the presence of unbelievers and sin in this world, we are still growing in our faith by the power of God the Holy Spirit. We are living who we are in the world. We are looking forward to that coming harvest. Knowing that, living as wheat among the weeds, we are never discouraged, but encouraged even more waiting patiently for the final harvest. Amen

