

The Wheat and the Weeds

Matthew 13:24-30, 36-43

Sermon by Lane Miller

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Since I have been living in Illinois, I've been hanging out with a group of Catholic young adults in an attempt to find friends in a new city. The local parish held an event on Wednesdays in June called Theology on tap. Young adults get together for supper and listen to a speaker present on some spiritual topic.

The second week of the series was called stump the bishop. I was pretty jazzed. I have a couple theological bones to pick with the Catholic Church and was at least curious what other folks had to say. The floor was open and the bishop offered answers on any theological question. The first one legitimately astonished me. It was,

“Bishop, are we assigned our guardian angels at conception, birth, or confirmation?”

It was one of those moments when you become starkly aware of the very small thought world you actually live in. For however broad I think my interests are, angels included, they haven't even considered the existence of guardian angels in some time.

That's just some back-story as to why I chose this text. When reading through the lectionary for this Sunday, the harvesting angels really caught my attention. I can preach on weeds. Can I preach on angels? Success remains to be seen.

I suppose I should 'cuz angels are a big deal in Matthew. Allow me a brief excursus on this gospel and celestial messengers.

An angel appears to Joseph and tells him to marry his pregnant bride. That's no small demand, given the social stigmas of the day. Note that unlike Mary's angel in Luke, Joseph's angel comes in a dream.

An angel returns to Joseph in just the next chapter telling him to get up and go to Egypt. That's no small trek. Look at a map and just meditate a bit on that kind of pilgrimage with their kind of transportation. Joseph really trusts

his dreams. And while I am not preaching on guardian angels this morning, should you have taken my story about stump the bishop as some slight of Catholic spirituality as a parochial folk religion by an enlightened academic, let's just be clear that Joseph has here an angel that does work very much like a proactive guardian.

The angels keep on coming in Matthew. "Angels" plural, come and "attend" Jesus after the temptation by the Devil in Matt 4. In total, Matthew has 19 references to angels. Luke has 24. Karl Barth, the famous Swiss theologian who said, to deny angels is to deny God, wrote a huge theological work called the Church Dogmatics. Despite the less than thrilling title, Church Dogmatics, it has been a really big seller since WWII. Granted it's a big work, but if I remember right, he devotes over 139 pages to discussing angels. Just as a side note, he writes only about 4 on demons.

Our next angels in Matthew come in chapter 13, but I've kinda gotten out of order at this point. The angels come in at the end, so we'll return to them at the end of the sermon.

Parables: Individual vs. Corporate

The parable of the weeds and the wheat comes amid a whole group of parables on the nature of the kingdom of God, including the parable of the sower and the seed. That's the one where you have seeds scattered on the path, among the thorns, on the rocks, and finally good soil. It shares with the parables of the weeds and the wheat many similarities. They are both in an agrarian setting. Both use similar vocabulary. Both parables sow seeds with varying levels of success and failure.

We may be tempted to conflate the two. But they are very different. They attend to different concerns. And I am going to look at both today as a means of both illustration and contrast.

The parable of the sower and the seed attends to your individual reality. It's concerned with the heart. The soil is your soul. Do you listen to the word? Or is your heart crowded out with thorns, a love of money and worry about worldly values? Or is your heart rocky, so organized around the needs or judgments of other people that you have lack the nutrients to make your

own heart fertile. Or does the traffic of your busy life leave your soul hard; concentrated elsewhere, so the word is snatched away? If you want to understand how the Word works in the human heart, look at the parable of the sower.

If you want to understand how the Word works in the world, look to the parable of the weeds and wheat. It attends to a corporate reality. The soil is the world, not the soul. The seeds are the children of God, not the Word. If the sower and the seed look at a tree, the weeds and the wheat look at the forest.

And it, like our world, is a mixed bag of righteousness and evil.

[And it is fitting that the two should appear together, for they beautifully illustrate two aspects of the kingdom: the now and the not yet.]

The trouble for me, however, as a preacher and a believer is that the interpretation given by Jesus to the parable of the sower and the seed is so practical. It means something to me. It teaches me about what **distracts me from discipleship**. But the interpretation of the weeds and the wheat seems to offer me much about discipleship.

---Typical Interpretation---

Many traditional interpreters have tried to apply this parable by asking the following two questions:

1) How do we tell if someone is a weed or wheat, especially since we all still commit sins?

And this is my most pressing question as well. How can you even separate individuals based on good and evil? Surely we can all name a few folks throughout history who seem wholly evil, and we all know some folks who do seem quite saintly. But the reality for most of us is that we are a mix of both. And given the secrecy of our hearts, how could we ever judge another person's real moral identity?

2) Can there be weeds, evil people, in the church?

St. Augustine says yes. There is a hidden church of wheat stalks growing somewhere in our midst, but it is up to God to sort out who. Our Anabaptist forebears said the church shouldn't be a mixed bag, and so cut off those it saw as weeds. Their success was mixed.

Well, before these questions get too far along, let me say that they are both bad questions. Both of them are asking something the parable is not. They are asking about the individual. Is this person a follower or not? Are they a Christian or not? Are they faithful or not? Are they wheat or weed? This quest to categorize and identify is concerned with the tree, not with the forest.

Let me put it back in farming terms. We are talking about a field. Harvest is not about individual plants. It is about overall yield—how much a field produces. No farmer has time to compare one ear of corn to another, despite the various ills—like poor pollination, fungal growth, or insect damage—that it could have.

A) I am not saying the composition of the kingdom is unimportant, but that such analysis is not central to discipleship. While the owner clearly instructs his servants to leave the plants all mixed up, there is a human tendency, in the church, to retreat into like-minded and morally homogenous communities. We like to be with folks like ourselves. Maybe we'll form a school where we can teach our kids the way we prefer. Maybe we'll all live in the same neighborhood so our social circle is all Christian, or environmentally friendly, or all Democrat, or any other identifier. None of those values are necessarily wrong. But how does that impulse fit with this parable's vision of the kingdom? Is it faithful discipleship?

We are the salt of the earth, the seasoning, all *mixed up* with the world.

B) Many of you know I have moved to IL for the summer. My father is running for Congress and I am home to help out with the campaign. If you hadn't heard the news, I'll let that sink in a moment. Yes *US* Congress. The House of Representatives. Yes he won the primary so he is running in the general. He has run before as a Republican. He is running now as a Democrat.

Okay, back to my sermon. This political experience has thrust me into a very foreign field. I am in circles I never imagined. I talk with powerful people. I

shake the hands of senators (on occasion). I see the wheels of political power behind the scenes. I hear some unnecessarily polemic speech. Often times I have thought, there is something evil here.

But I have just as often seen good where I didn't expect. Whatever problems our political system has, it is at root a bunch of normal people trying to persuade their neighbors as to their vision of justice. I never thought I would see the American political system as fundamentally, at its most basic level, a structure for good. I'm not sure my Christian discipleship had room for such a notion a few months ago.

Another surprise: I have talked with veterans with PTSD, something I may have never done otherwise. Some have so impressed me with their commitment to service, which they understand as to their fellow citizen, that I have had to reassess my own service to Christ. I never expected a military service member to show me something of Jesus.

Jesus' warning against judging because of the log in your own eye is also in Matthew. I have found good fruit in places I never expected. Sometimes, especially in the church, our judgments about what fruit is good or not, is nothing more than a flavor preference. What we deem to be moral license or legalism, even what we think is love or hatred, *might* be nothing of the sort. I am NOT advocating a new kind of moral relativism. I am not arguing we are incapable of saying anything about good and evil. I'm saying we shouldn't categorize people as weeds or wheat. We are poor at judging of our counterparts. As plants in the field, we are ill-situated to judge its yield. And our impulse to separate, congregate, and abrogate our social arrangements often just tears at the roots of the kingdom.

Now I said we'd get back to Angels. But why are the angels here?

--Good News

Their presence in the gospel demonstrates an awareness of the spiritual that we often fail to foster today. They are part of a cosmic order that saves, sustains, and supports the work of God. They should serve to shock our spiritual vision into focus. The future of the Kingdom of God is not on our shoulders. In a real way, moral

ambiguity is not a curse, nor it is cause to disengage from discernment. But it is grace that we do not have to control the world. Just grow in it. That takes such courage, however, that we may well need angelic help aid after all.

So remember that our urge toward homogeneity is shortsighted. In it we attempt the work of angels instead of the work of discipleship