

“Bad Moon Rising” - Sermon on Matthew 13:24-30, 36-43

I'm not gonna lie to you; when I sat down this week and read this text preparing to write a sermon, upon my first readthrough, I said to myself, “Oh, I am not a fan of this.” Then I read it again and again, trying to discern how I would approach this text. As you might imagine, some of my reservations came because this text can easily be used to justify some wrongful exclusionary religious practices if we are not careful. I am comforted knowing that in this passage selection, there is a gap in which Jesus tells two more parables, the Parable of the Mustard Seed, a classic, the Parable of the Yeast, and then a short section explaining the use of parables. Then, whenever Jesus was finished and went into the house, his disciples, His closest companions, went to him and said, “Yeah, can you repeat that previous one about the weeds? I didn't get it.” Thankfully Jesus does explain a bit more, but even then, I was confused about what was happening. Don't get me wrong; it is spelled out quite clearly. So I ended up going down a bit of a rabbit hole because I had a hard time wrapping my head around this concept of separating a weed from wheat. I searched high and low to figure out what exactly is considered a weed, and I will tell you what the Bureau of Land Management defines a weed as. They define it as any plant growing where it is not wanted. I cannot express how frustrating it was to find that information. A weed is anything in our gardens, fields, farms, or forests that we find disagreeable. For example, to some, an orchid can be a pleasant plant they would love to have in their garden; to others, as Rev. Ann pointed out to me this week, it is a weed they must regularly remove from their gutters in Hawaii. To some, clovers and wildflowers are desired for their yard, while others would rather have a trimmed yard. Ain't no shame; cut your yard how you want. They say, “Beauty is in the eye of the beholder.” Some would say that how we define what is right and wrong is the same. There is no doubt that when this parable was first told, it was a word

of comfort to the disciples and followers of Jesus, whose opponents shared many weed-like qualities.¹ They were persistent, critical, challenging every move and word, and hostile in the midst of their ministry. They were opponents, not due to flaws or deficits in Christ's message, but rather to the work of his enemy.² While I wish this story continued only being about weeds and their destructive capabilities on the agricultural landscape, that is not Jesus' intention. This is a parable that very clearly identifies the struggle between good and evil in our world. A light is being shined on our preoccupation with drawing lines between who is "in" and who is "out."³ While it is not our place to decide, we love to determine what is appropriate, who is welcome to the table, and how we should believe. This parable does a great job of initially asking this question of us, should we go out and root out the bad seeds? Then the thought changes to, how soon should we go out and root out the weeds? Should we root them out when they are planted? How about when they start to grow? Another way to look at this to suit our current needs better; who here amongst us would be a weed, and who gets to decide who does the weeding? It becomes a bit more difficult to answer, doesn't it? That's because it is not our job to judge who is welcome in this place; we are not called to do the weeding. Our job is to imagine that everyone belongs so that in a world where seeds of hatred and injustice are sown daily, God is still in charge through sorting out the good from the bad. I came across a quote from Pastor Annie and will use what she said, "God calls us to welcome all. And that is what we strive to do here at First Pres."

A few years back, my mom took a fated trip to the local Dollar Tree and left with this one-dollar plant they were selling outside. She claims it was a "wisteria" plant, or so that is what

¹ Feasting on the Word, 261.

² Ibid.

³ Feasting on the Word, 261.

the tag said when she purchased it. I'm pretty sure it was Kudzu. After returning home, my mom planted this wisteria bush beside their house near the driveway. Within a matter of days, weeks, and months this thing grew from a tiny little bush into this massive drooping plant that had grown taller than me or my dad. Every time my dad cut it to keep it in shape and not get too big, it returned larger than the last time. He eventually cut it completely out and covered it with pine needles to make sure that it wasn't going to grow back because it was beginning to take over the garden. If you recall from last week, I told y'all how difficult it is to grow anything in North Carolina soil. I have never seen a plant cling to life with such strength as this wisteria plant. Wouldn't you believe it, that sucker, not even a month later, was back to the size of a bush. My dad was baffled, to say the least. I remember coming back from school, and he quickly got me to help him dig this plant out. We dug, and we cut roots, and we kept digging, but the roots kept going deeper and deeper into the soil. Eventually, we had the bright idea to pull out the roots; surely that can't go bad, right? Me and my dad never managed to pull the roots out ourselves. So, being the two intelligent guys we were, decided to hook up some rope to this now deeply rooted weed and pull it out with the mighty fine Ranger Rick, my old trusty Ford Ranger, another story for another time. We attached some rope or chains to the back of Ranger Rick and around what roots we managed to unearth and decided we would use the 207 horsepower of the 4.0-liter v6 bullet-proof motor built in what I hope was Detroit to assist us in pulling out this weed. So I hopped into the cab and slowly pulled the rope until it was nice and tight, and we gradually increased the power. We slowly increased it some more. We slowly began increasing the power until it really did become embarrassing for the two of us. No kidding, it was a good while, and one snapped rope later before that root finally started to come up. It was such a long while that ole trusty Ranger Rick was creaking and struggling to move ahead. To be honest, that's how

Ranger Rick was on a good day anyways. This plant-turned-weed did not want to go, so after we pulled up what we thought was the main root, we covered the hole and moved on with our lives. This week, in preparation for this sermon, I called my mom to make sure what plant it was before coming up here. That was when she told me that every couple of months, my dad still has to go out there and pull up this weed. Nothing he can do will remove this weed from their garden. I mean, they could tear up the whole garden in order to root out this weed, but then that would ruin the rest of the hard work that went into the other plants that surround it. It took months before we realized that what we thought would be a beautiful plant ended up being a destructive weed which my family is still dealing with to this day. How many times in our lives have the struggles in which we faced been our fault? Where once there was something we would consider beautiful has now begun to choke out the life in the rest of the garden.

Last week we heard the Parable of the Sower, which is situated right before this parable, the Parable of the Weeds among Wheat. In this parable, Jesus encourages the church to endure patiently in, with, and for a world that, in many ways, cannot and will not acknowledge the reign of God coming in Jesus and his followers. More than that, this parable shows us what God's kingdom is like; not just what it was like in the past, or what it will be like in the future, but what it is like now.⁴ Even though there are weeds in the fields, it is not always our place to remove them. Despite this instruction, we cast judgment before that crop is fully grown. Instead, that is something that only God can know when it is fully grown and ready to be sorted. This also does not mean that there are no evils or weeds out there trying to diminish the life of others. Any policy, individual, or entity that tries to diminish the life of another, to take advantage of their power and abuse the sacred goodness inherently found in each of us, is one of the many weeds in

⁴ Connections, 171.

which an enemy is trying to sow. Sometimes *we will be tasked* with taking a stand against said injustices and going out to separate the weeds from the wheat. Many times it is not our place to sort out that weed. This parable by Jesus cautions against a rush to judgment. So, this may sound like a cop-out, but we must take things on a case-by-case basis and trust that God will lead our hearts in the right direction when the time is right. Not everything is as simple a decision as to remove that wisteria plant because we cannot always tell what is a good plant and what is not.⁵ As many times as we are able to name off proper injustices in the world and the church, we can also name off times in which we were wrong. That is true outside and inside these walls and in our personal lives when we have been wrong about our judgment and treatment of those around us. Me and my family were wrong about that wisteria plant and where we put it, and now they are still dealing with the ramifications of that decision years later. While our perceptions of others and ourselves, our lives, and this world may change, it will never change the fact that all of us are created in the image of God and that it is God alone who ultimately decides who and what is a weed and wheat.

This parable counsels us to be more than merely tolerant of others who are different than ourselves; it demands us to recognize and rejoice in the goodness of God in others, goodness freely given without distinctions. Our job is not to cast judgment on people based on how they look, how they dress, how they act, and how they come into this sanctuary. Instead, we are tasked with being welcoming until the very end because we will never know how God is working on their hearts. One general rule I follow in life and ministry is not to tolerate blatant disrespect toward anyone. To me, that is a weed in a wheat field that is ready to be harvested and removed. That is because we must be more than that; we must stand with open and welcoming

⁵ Feasting on the Word, 262.

arms to anyone who comes into this sanctuary or in our lives and offer respect to them because they are as much God's creation as any of us. Will others take advantage of this kindness? Of course. Should they ever be disrespectful to me, that is fine; I can take it, but should they ever be disrespectful of anybody here or out there while I'm around, that behavior cannot be tolerated. The same is true of how we treat others inside and outside this church. If we become the crops that diminish the life of other crops in the garden, then we are the weeds that need to be removed. I believe that it is fine to disagree in a civil way with what someone has said without disrespecting their humanity. Although I will be the first to admit it is a thin line to walk. That is why this is a challenging text. That is also why the final judgment will be left up to God. The good news that can be proclaimed from this parable is that God is at work to redeem and restore the whole creation.⁶ Despite the overwhelming threat of all that resists, opposes, and fights against God's kingdom - God's plan for the world will succeed.⁷ And that is a plan based on the love of one another. Another way to look at that darn Wisteria plant turned weed that refuses to leave my parents' garden proves that at the end of the day, it will grow alongside the rest of the garden regardless of our view. No matter how much my parents try to take it out, it always finds its way back in. Folks, there will always be weeds in the fields of our lives. There were weeds there before we came, and there will be weeds long after we are gone. As much as we do not like it, the same can be said for the greater evils found in the world. Even though we may wish otherwise, it is not our job to decide who amongst us is within and who is beyond God's attention. We may be able to do that at home in our own gardens but not here. Only God can determine who is a weed and a wheat. That job ain't for us to decide. **Amen.**

⁶ Ibid.

⁷ Ibid.