



## Broad Street Presbyterian Church

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### “Pulling Weeds”

Matthew 13:24-30

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Another parable about seeds! A farmer sows good seed in a field. At night, while everyone sleeps, an enemy sows weed-seeds in the same field. No one realizes until weeds and wheat grows alongside one another. It's a mixed-up mess; there's no telling where the good stops and the bad begins.

This summer, I've got a plot at the Bexley Community Garden. Two Broadstreeters kindly have combined their three plots with my one. It is a great arrangement; the other two are farmers. They plant, water and weed regularly. My plot looks much better under their care than under my own. You see, I'm an absentee gardener. The problem is I just don't show up.

A few weeks ago my guilt peaked. One Saturday morning I weeded. It felt good to pull out the big, spiky weeds growing along the path and in our plots. There's something in me that doesn't love a weed; that wants it pulled. I plan to keep weeding. Maybe then I can enjoy a luscious tomato harvest with a clearer conscience!

So what is a weed, anyway? By definition a weed is a plant considered undesirable in a particular situation. In other words, a weed is a plant in the wrong place. A weed is a plant that has crossed a border. As gardeners, we know where our borders are and what plants are welcome and what plants aren't. It is the crossing of that border, into our territory, that turns a harmless plant into a weed.

In our parable servants suggest pulling the weeds. But the farmer refuses. Remember, our story was told before the invention of selective weed herbicides. If servants do weed, they will uproot the wheat along with the weeds. Bottom line, the farmer wants bread. The farmer directs the servants to let both wheat and weeds grow together until the harvest.

The distinction between weeds and wheat creates categories of enemies and friends, of outsiders and insiders. Servants in the parable identify weeds. “Uproot them!” “They don't belong.” “Throw them into the fire!” In every age there are zealous Christians who want to purify the church and the community by pulling out weeds. Some people in Matthew's congregation likely share this agenda. They think their judgment is pretty good and they trust their ability to read people. They know who is worthy of God's attention. In a weeding frenzy, when we are certain of the difference between weeds and wheat, who knows what damage we inadvertently do.

Take bamboo. It has been called the wonder material of the 21<sup>st</sup> century. It is useful for many things. Years ago, in our first home in California, bamboo grew almost 15 feet tall in the backyard. How hard could it be to remove a little bamboo? I still remember my spouse armed with a pick axe, bandana around his neck, heading out to do battle. It took him about a month and a great deal of sweat and focused energy to rid our back yard of that weed. And he killed just about everything else around it in the process. This is what happens when we take on the role of master weeder.

In our lives as citizens, we learn to identify what's a weed and what isn't, who belongs and who doesn't. It is ever so tempting to see our ideological opponents as weeds! But the farmer sees the field differently than the

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servants do. The farmer keeps the goal in mind, the desire for harvest, the desire for bread. The farmer knows that applying hoe to weeds cuts the roots of wheat, too. In a weeding frenzy, who knows what damage we inadvertently do?

And then there are our neighborhoods, the places we live. I like my neighbors, really I do. But there is one who plays loud music late into the night. On the 4<sup>th</sup> of July we stayed up, helping our fearful, frantic dog endure the fireworks. She finally settled down after midnight and that's when the music began. I tried to go to bed but couldn't drift off. The music was so loud. My frustration grew. And then it happened. Within seconds I became a self-declared master weeder and my neighbor became the weed! I considered calling police. I wanted to uproot my neighbor! And then at last the music ended, I fell asleep, it was morning; a new day dawned.

The servants in the parable want more than anything to weed the field. They want to pull out the bad and make room for the good. They have legitimate concerns and they like order. The field grows out of control. But the farmer's response is both restrained and clear. "Let them grow together."

Let them grow together. It sounds like we followers of Jesus may actually harm the new life Jesus brings if we put on gardening gloves and head out to pull weeds; if we're certain that we know what is useful to God and what is not.

Our parable warns against relying on our own capacity to know God's intentions. It proclaims that God's tolerance for risk is higher than our own. What might appear to be good and right to us might not be good for God's whole field.

Jesus says, "Just leave the weeds alone." God knows what's good and what isn't. The problem is we often don't know what's good or even what's bad. Yet in spite of our not knowing, in our lives we face necessary, difficult choices, times when we have to make a decision. Someone with a grave illness has to choose between different treatment options. Someone else faces a decision at work between firing a team member or supporting that same employee, a person who pulls the quality of the team down. A student faces a choice between colleges; balancing preferences with costs.<sup>1</sup>

In life's most challenging, ambiguous situations our parable offers a promise that, in the end, God sorts things out. We celebrate some of our decisions and we regret others. The outcomes of some of the choices we make may not be known for months or even years. Yet we still have to face those hard choices and make them. God's promise doesn't say our faith prevents hardship. What it does say is that God's love for us ultimately doesn't depend on whether we make the right choices.

God loves us no matter what, and in the end, God will hold all of our choices and all of our lives together in love. By grace no decision we make will be wasted; God can use all our choices, all our experiences.

Our parable works out in the end. Not only do the weeds not destroy the wheat, but the weeds end up as free kindling for the farmer; as if God can transform even the worst that evil can do into energy to serve divine purposes; as if evil is ultimately temporary and only the good endures.

There's something in me that still doesn't love a weed, that wants it pulled. But my job, our job, is not to weed out those we consider bad or evil. As much as I like weeding, I don't want that job. I can't do that job. Let's leave weeding to the angels. God will sort things out. We don't have to defeat evil – that's God's job. Our job

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<sup>1</sup> <http://www.davidlose.net/2014/07/pentecost-6-a-on-wheat-weeds-and-ambiguity/>

to get on with Jesus' mission, to be more compassionate and less judgmental, to care for neighbor, to speak out against injustice, to support those in need, right now, right where we find ourselves.

The parable gives us work to do that is both simple and yet hard. Our job is to show restraint and to respect the infinite patience God has for each of us. Our job is to cultivate an imagination that sees others as wheat; that imagines everyone belonging, even ourselves, even on our worst days. Our job is to mirror the farmer, who resists premature clarity, who cultivates ambiguity; holy, purposeful ambiguity. Amen.