

First Presbyterian Church  
Bible Study Discussion Starter  
Matthew 13:24-30, the Parable of the Wheat and the Tares (Weeds)

A farmer plants good seed, but weeds spring up along with the good wheat. Many weeds look remarkably like the plants near which they tend to grow, and these “tares” or weeds are probably darnel which imitates young wheat plants. In the parable, we read that an enemy has sown the weeds in the wheat field, but the farmer shows no concern with the enemy except to note that, yes, the seed he sowed was good.

The field hands offer to go right out into the field and pull out the weeds, but the farmer knows better. Even if they can tell the darnel from the young wheat, the hands will undoubtedly pull up some of the good plants along with the bad. So it is with many situations in life: extracting the bad can harm the good or simply be impossible. This is a helpful parable for a world that is seldom just black and white, good versus evil, but exists in shades of gray. Nevertheless, the farmer assures his hands there will be a harvest neither the malice of an enemy nor the presence of the weeds can stop.

Jesus often employs a teaching method we now call “argument from lesser to greater.” He uses a common human situation to show us something, then expands the idea to the greater situation between God and people.

A farmer would have enough sense not to let his field hands wreck his crop by trying to pull out the weeds too soon. Let the wheat grow tall and strong first. There will be time to get rid of the weeds later when there’s little risk to the good plants. The farmer would also know there would still be a harvest. He would not lose sleep over the weeds.

The world is a field of wheat and weeds sown together. So is the church. So is my life and probably yours, too. The person who believes in Jesus, who trusts the grace of God, still has plenty of weeds, and some of those weeds would be hard to tear out because they are intertwined with the good. Life gets tangled. Some hurts do not fully heal, some faults persist, some temptations recur, and some chains cannot be fully undone in this world. Life is, as the song “Sunrise Sunset” (*Fiddler on the Roof*) says, “laden with happiness and tears.” Will God be defeated by the weeds we cannot pull out? Well, if the farmer will not be, do we think God will? “Let the two grow up together until the harvest.”

As you can see in my sermon, I reject the allegorical interpretation of this parable that leads to determinism, as though God made some people to be wheat (the elect, the saved) and other people to be weeds (the reprobate as our Calvinist ancestors called them, the lost), and neither could change. I am wheat but also weeds. So are you. Salvation is by God’s grace, not by my purity (thankfully).

<http://home.earthlink.net/~rsind/sermon060924.htm>

This understanding of God's grace should not be misused to play down the damage done by real evil, but it should lead us away from judgmentalism and petty legalisms. It should also guard us against discouragement with ourselves. If I were purely wheat, I would have no need of salvation; if I were a weed, I would have no hope of it. But I am a field of "wheat and tares together sown."

So, the church can focus its attention on representing God's grace to people and not on keeping itself a pristine garden free from weeds. Besides, our judgments upon people are inevitably false. We see what's on the surface and often judge by our own prejudices, anyway. God "sees the heart" and knows what it is to be human.

#### Questions for Thought and Discussion:

1. Someone has said Jesus comforted the troubled and troubled the comfortable. What do you think?
2. What are the differences between certitude and faith?
3. What are the dangers in presuming to have too much of "God's plan" figured out?
4. On a scale of, say, 1-10, where would you put a healthy church if one pole (#1) is the purity of its membership in belief and practice and the other pole (#10) is its compassion and openness to people?
5. Nathaniel Hawthorne wrote an allegorical short story, "Young Goodman Brown," about a man unable to accept humanity's sinfulness, represented by participation in a witches' sabbath. His Sunday School teacher and even his own Faith (his wife's name) go to the sabbath in his vision or dream. The next day he can no longer accept them because he has seen their participation in evil. Goodman Brown lives out his days a morose and bitter man. Can you relate Hawthorne's story to Jesus' parable?