

## **Move I: The Dichotomy**

I have to admit I was kinda hoping Isabel would go into labor this past week so that I wouldn't have to preach on this challenging parable! This is a tough one, folks. As with last week, Jesus provides us an explanation of his parable, which leaves very little room for interpretation.

Today's parable seems to present a stark dichotomy: there are two kinds of people in the world: the wheat and the weeds.

The wheat, as Jesus defines them, are the children of the kingdom. According to Matthew's gospel, these are the people who repent, receive forgiveness, and do the will of God. The

weeds, on the other hand, are the children of the evil one.

These are the ones who do not repent, who do not do the will of God, and who continue to live in sin. In this parable, God promises, at the end of all things, to save the wheat and destroy the weeds.

### **Move II: The Danger**

We are stepping into some serious and dangerous territory with this parable. The natural response may be to start pondering who are the wheat and who are the weeds. Is the wheat Christians and the weeds everyone else? Is the wheat our particular brand of Christianity and the weeds everyone

else? Is the wheat moral people and the weeds immoral people? Is the wheat us and the weeds them? God hands us these labels, and we immediately start trying to slap them on anyone and everyone.

We often then resort to asking the same question that the slaves ask in the parable. What do we do with the weeds? Now I'm only an amateur gardener, but I do know that if you see a weed in a garden, you should remove it. It stands to reason, if we're following the metaphor of Jesus' parable, that we should

remove the weeds so that they do not harm the wheat. And that's where the danger begins.

There are countless examples throughout history of groups of people who have proclaimed themselves the wheat and undertaken to eradicate the weeds. In the late 1930s and early 1940s Hitler's Third Reich deemed itself the wheat. The Nazis then identified Jews and other minority groups as the weeds. Hitler and his followers then set out to exterminate all the weeds, murdering about 6 million Jews as well as about

another six million people with disabilities, Jehovah Witnesses, gay men, Roma, and political enemies.

Following the emancipation of slaves in this country, many white southerners deemed themselves the wheat and black men and women the weeds. They sought to exterminate the weeds through lynchings and other acts of violence, intimidation, and terror. The Equal Justice Initiative estimates that between 1865 and 1950 about 6,500 black men and women were murdered at the hands of white men and women.

In 1994, extremist Hutus deemed themselves the wheat and the Tutsi people the weeds. Hutu extremists murdered somewhere between half-a-million and a million people in this genocide, amounting to approximately 70% of the country's Tutsi population.

These are just a few examples of the murder and genocide committed by those who decided for themselves who are the wheat and who are the weeds. Both Nazis and the Ku Klux Klan considered themselves Christian organizations, and considered their actions justified by their Christian beliefs.

This is what happens when people in power decide that they are the chosen and other people are not. When those in power call themselves wheat, they will inevitably look for the weeds and start pulling.

### **Move III: Understanding Judgment Texts**

When we talk about final judgement in the Bible, we need to remember that the people who wrote the scriptures were never people in positions of power. The judgment texts found in Daniel were written by an Israelite who had been exiled and enslaved by the Babylonian Empire. The judgement texts written in Revelation were written by an early Christian who

was persecuted for his faith by the Roman Empire. The Gospel of Matthew was written under these conditions as well.

Jesus' disciples, the early Christians, wanted to hear a word of comfort in the midst of persecution. They wanted to know that this faith that was bringing them so much pain and suffering was ultimately worth it. And so you get parables like the one we have today. The message Jesus preaches is that, in the end, the oppressed and persecuted Christian minority will eventually experience justice, while the oppressive and persecuting non-Christian majority will eventually be punished.



This parable is meant to bring hope to those who are longing for justice.

It's important to note, however, that we are not in the same boat as the early Christians. They were in the minority. We Christians, in this country, are in the majority. Therefore, we are far more likely to fall into the category of oppressor rather than oppressed. We are not being persecuted; and so we must be doubly careful that we do not instead start persecuting others.

## **Move IV: Don't pull the weeds**

In the Gospel of Matthew, and throughout the New Testament, we hear over and over again that all final judgment belongs ultimately to God. *God* is the one who judges—not us; *never us*. When the slaves come to ask the sower if they should pull the weeds, what does the sower say? He says, “No!”

“No, for in gathering the weeds you would uproot the wheat along with them. Let both of them grow together until the harvest; and at harvest time I will tell the reapers, ‘Collect the weeds first and bind them in bundles to be burned, but gather the wheat into my barn’” (Matthew 13:29-30).

It is not the slave's responsibility to pull the weeds, Jesus says. This means that even if we *think* we know who the wheat and the weeds are (and I would seriously question anyone who thinks they've got that figured out), we are not to do anything.

We are not to start spraying weed-killer, we are not to pull them out of the ground. Doing so would only lead to our own demise. The destruction of the weeds is God's responsibility, not ours—*never ours*.

To people in power, this commandment is a sweeping condemnation of any action that would seek to destroy or

condemn anyone we consider weeds. Put aside genocide for a moment; here Jesus says that it is *never* our place even to speculate about who God will save and who God will damn.

When members of Westboro Baptist Church show up to protests with signs that say “God hates [LGBTQ people],” they are breaking this commandment of God.

To people who are oppressed, this commandment is a call to endurance and a sign of hope. God does not command the early Christians to rebel and take arms against their oppressors. After all, the sower says that the wheat and the weeds must

remain together until the end. God calls the oppressed to endure, to continue in the work of following Jesus, with the promise that at the end of all things, judgment will be rendered and the oppressors will be punished.

In short, we don't pull the weeds because it might damage the wheat. If we attempt to take on God's role as judge, we risk only heaping judgment upon ourselves.

### **Move V: Love Your Enemies**

So if we are not permitted to pull the weeds, then what are we to do instead?

In today's parable, Jesus talks about "the enemy." That word only shows up a handful of times in Matthew, and it is first used in Jesus' Sermon on the Mount. Jesus says, "You have heard that it was said, 'you shall love your neighbor and hate your enemy.' But I say to you, 'love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you'" (Matthew 5:43-44). This is the lens through which we must understand all references to enemies in Matthew.

Even if we are convinced that we are the wheat and someone else is the weeds (and again, that is not for us to

decide), the only thing we are permitted to do as followers of Jesus is love—love our neighbors, love our enemies. All other actions are off limits. God reserves all acts of final judgment and condemnation for God's self; God allows us only the action of love.

### **Move VI: God's Call**

God is calling us today to treat everyone as though they are the wheat. It is not our place to pull the weeds, and neither is it our place to speculate about who the weeds might be. That is for God to worry about. Not us.

Our responsibility is to treat all people with love, to assume that it is the destiny of all people to shine like the sun in the kingdom of heaven. Protestors who take to the streets for Black Lives Matter or LGBTQ rights do so because they believe that there are people in this world who are still being treated as though they are weeds.

People who rally around the families of Heather Campbell and Matthew Bowersox, the couple that was gunned down in a local restaurant parking lot last week, do so because they believe that Heather and Matthew deserved to be loved as



wheat, not murdered as weeds. People who ponder the shooter Christopher Fernandes' brutal actions will wonder why he viewed himself as nothing but a weed, why he labeled Heather and Matthew as weeds, and why he thought it was his responsibility to pull the weeds.

Hating is easy. Loving is a whole lot harder. It is easy to pronounce judgment on people. It is easy to write off those who think, believe, or act differently than we do; easier still to write off those who wish us harm. It is a lot harder to show love to those who differ from us, to suspend our judgments, and to

see those people not as weeds, but as the finest stalks of wheat and beautiful children of God.

### **Move VII: A Concluding Interpretation**

There is perhaps another way we can understand this parable. Jesus says, in his explanation, that at the end of the age, the Son of Man will ultimately destroy all causes for sin. It is perhaps the case that we each have wheat and we each have weeds growing within us. We struggle, in this age to bear the fruit of our wheat and not the fruit of our weeds. And so we can pray fervently for the day when Jesus will arrive with his purifying fire. On that day, Jesus will burn away all that is evil

within us and leave behind only that which is good. And on that day, we will all enter the kingdom of heaven, shining like the sun.

Come, Lord Jesus.

Amen.