

*I speak to you in the name of the Father, and the Son, and the Holy Spirit, AMEN.*

**OPENING:**

There is a famous spoof about how we try to understand parables.

I will give you the PG-13 version.

In it, the interpreter explains to a listener the Parable of the Good Samaritan as an allegory. It goes:

“Now the Good Samaritan is Christ,  
the man who needed rescuing is the human race,  
the Inn that the latter was put in is the Church,  
the innkeeper is the Pope,  
the oil and wine represent the two Testaments.”

After this, the listener thought for a second and said:

“But what about the beast/ the donkey who transported the wounded man?”

“Oh, I forgot: the *ass* is the one who made up this interpretation of the parable.”<sup>1</sup>

**PARABLES**

Allegories are helpful but, ultimately, they become too clumsy, too safe and comfortable if relied on too heavily.

Jesus did not use parables because his particular audience were ‘too country’ or not sophisticated enough to figure out what he was trying to say.

Rather, he used parables because they, and us, are supposed to wrestle with the meaning, because his teachings can never be reduced to a simplistic formula.

It’s been said that, “alert listening to—and preaching on—a Jesus parable is like plugging in an electric hair dryer while standing in a puddle of draining bathwater. You may find the experience more thrilling than you had hoped.”<sup>2</sup>

So, parables are dangerous “live wires” of Jesus’ teaching and message.

Dangerous because the world they exist in is dangerous, dangerous because the man who relays them can be also.

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<sup>1</sup> Capon, Robert Farrar. 2002. *Kingdom, Grace, Judgment: Paradox, Outrage, and Vindication in the Parables of Jesus*. Grand Rapids MI: Eerdmans. 111.

<sup>2</sup> Long, Thomas G. and Cornelius Plantinga, eds. 1994. “Parables and Children’s Sermons” in *‘A Chorus of Witnesses’: Model Sermons for Today’s Preacher*. Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans. 48.

## LAST WEEK:

So let's draw on a few things that Christine mentioned last week about parables. First, her definition: "a metaphor or simile drawn from nature or common life, arresting the hearer by its vividness or strangeness, and (this is the part she highlighted) *leaving the mind in sufficient doubt as to its precise application to tease it into active thought.*"<sup>3</sup>

Second, she talked about how important the title of the parable is, as one can go far afield just by what it's called.

For example, in last week's reading, Jesus called it the "Parable of the Sower", but we tend to think of it as the "Parable of the Four Soils."

This week, the disciples do the misnaming. Jesus tells a parable about wheat, but the disciples lick their chops, and say "Tell us about the weeds."<sup>4</sup>

That is, the focus for Jesus in his telling was on how the farmer sows seeds and seems willing to take a chance on what happens next.

The focus for the disciples in the hearing was on the weeds and how and when they might be able to destroy them.

Finally, we have, just as with last week, both a parable *and* an interpretation. I will echo what Christine said that that interpretation is probably not Jesus', but Matthew's, and is written to talk about problems going on a few generations later.<sup>5</sup> The interpretation seems clumsily added on, it even makes Jesus sound a little like the interpreter lampooned at the start of my sermon.

## WEEDS:

So let's stick with the parable itself.

I was excited to preach on this parable because I am not a farmer, I am not a fisherman, I don't own a vineyard, I am not a carpenter, I don't hire out people to work in the fields. Those are the subjects of many of Jesus' parables.

I do think that I know something about weeds, though. Like many of you, COVID has allowed me, forced me, to engage with the weeds in my yard over the last four months.

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<sup>3</sup> C.H. Dodd. 1961. *The Parables of the Kingdom*. New York: Scribner, 16.

<sup>4</sup> Capon, 7-8, 109-110; Matthew 13.36b

<sup>5</sup> Hays, Richard B. 2007. *The Moral Vision of the New Testament*. San Francisco: Harper. 108.

Since I have become an expert on Weeds, I leapt at this reading.

Still, all those hours that I have spent trying to rid my lawn of the pestilence of crab grass, dandelions, bitter cress, and wild onions, that thrive in the Virginia soil, failed to prepare me for this parable!

The breed of weeds involved in this story is a particular weed, the darnel, sometimes known as wheat's 'evil twin' or 'mimic weed' because it looks exactly like wheat as it is growing.

Only when the wheat is to be harvested and refined can one tell that, indeed, it's this dangerous 'mimic weed' that can be harmful to the other crops and harmful if ingested.<sup>6</sup>

### **JESUS:**

Knowing that, what is going on in this world that Jesus is portraying in this parable?

Every instinct of the farmer or the gardener says that you must uproot that sort of weed, deprive it of life, rip it out, so the other plants can grow.

Every instinct of us as human beings is to draw lines and barriers, to remove those whom we don't feel belong.

So, every instinct of the church is often to do that too: to excommunicate, to judge, to not grant forgiveness.

But Jesus here is saying, "hold on, not so fast. You don't get to do that, you can't tell the difference between wheat and weeds."

Jesus seems to tell us, as we cannot stop salivating over the opportunity to wield sickle and pitchfork and thunderbolt, "That's my job."

Jesus had seen that in his ministry, he sees these flawed disciples and says "maybe they can grow, maybe Peter will develop into something more than a rock, maybe James and John will be able to control their tempers, maybe even Judas deserves this soil."

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<sup>6</sup> Talitha J. Arnold "Pastoral Perspective" in Bartlett, David L. and Barbara Brown Taylor, eds. 2015. *Feasting on the Word*. (Year A, Vol. 2) Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 260.

## CONCLUSION:

So what is this parable telling us *to do*? What does it *mean*?

I think both those questions should make one pause, because that's our instinct, to own and defeat and conquer the parable through our own willpower or goodness or analysis.

Maybe a better question is:

“How can I continue to live inside the world of this parable in a faithful manner?<sup>7</sup>”

With this parable, Jesus is saying that we are just not qualified. We cannot tell the weeds from wheat. Maybe *we* are the weeds? Or maybe we don't have enough weeds amongst us?

Maybe we should be saying: “I have got these weeds right where I want them.”

It's worth noting that all the utopian communities that have been started have failed, all the experiments by the church and others to make a perfect, weedless, society have turned out to look an awful lot like the world they left behind: flawed, sinful, and human.

In place of that, I think Jesus is offering a view of time, where the church can offer its message of love and acceptance, that is *in it* for the long haul. Leave the judgement to God, we must be patient with each other, and even patient with the weeds that make us fearful and afraid.

I would like to end with a prayer from our Prayer Book that I have found helpful during this time of Pandemic, that allows for humility and patience. The Prayer is intended for sick person, for persons suffering from illness, perhaps who are willing away in a hospital. It's intended for the weeds. It goes:

*This is another day, O Lord. I know not what it will bring forth, but make me ready, Lord, for whatever it may be.*

*If I am to stand up, help me to stand bravely.*

*If I am to sit still, help me to sit quietly.*

*If I am to lie low, help me to do it patiently.*

*And if I am to do nothing, let me do it gallantly. Make these words more than words, and give me the Spirit of Jesus.<sup>8</sup> AMEN.*

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<sup>7</sup> Ulrich Luz quoted in Stanley Hauerwas. 2007. *Matthew*. Grand Rapids, MI: Brazos, 128.

<sup>8</sup> *Book of Common Prayer*, 461.