

## **The Wheat and the Tares**

(Matthew 13:24-30, 36-43)

Sermon delivered by The Rev. Matt Rhodes at Christ Church, Millwood, Virginia  
The Seventh Sunday after Pentecost, July 23, 2017

In the name of one God – creator, redeemer and sustainer. Amen.

When I was 11 years old, my family moved to a farm in Bedford County, just outside my hometown of Lynchburg – a few miles down the Blue Ridge from here. It was a working dairy farm, but we weren't responsible for any of that. The friends who owned it were letting us live in the old family home place, a house with one wing built in the 1700s and an addition from the 1950s.

The four years we were there were among the happiest of my life. Lots of solitude. Hundreds of acres of woods to explore on the weekends. Nights during which you could actually look up and see stars, not just guess that they were there. The house even had its own resident spirit, a lady in white who my mother and sisters saw at various points over the years either standing on the stairs or walking in the yard.

Countless, wonderful memories.

One thing I remember vividly is the garden my parents had in one part of the huge yard. Rows and rows of tomatoes and corn and beans and potatoes, each laid out carefully and yielding more vegetables in those few years than I'm sure I'd ever eat, before or since. When it came to weeding, my father had a very simple plan: plant the rows far enough apart that the lawnmower fit between them. That way, he could mow down the weeds with minimal effort and without having to worry about the safety of what was supposed to be growing.

In this case, it was easy to tell the two apart. Here is the corn; here are the snap peas. Anything here is weeds and can go. But what about the gardens where the vegetables and weeds are growing more closely together? What do you do when you can't tell them apart?

That is the imagery used in today's Gospel reading – wheat and weeds that are growing together. As with many of his parables, Jesus has put this one in terms that would have been easy to understand for the listeners. Once again, he's putting his lesson in the context of agriculture – of the wheat needed for the bread so many relied on for survival, and the harmful weeds often found growing among the legitimate crops.

But unlike the weeds growing in my family's garden that were easily distinguishable and could simply be mowed down, the ones Jesus refers to are different – and more dangerous. They are known as tares, or bearded darnels. The roots of the tare grow around the roots of healthy plants, intertwining with them to the point where you can't pull one out of the ground without harming the other. And the head of the tare looks very much like the head of wheat, but rather than being a helpful ingredient for something sustaining life like bread, the head of the tare is poisonous and destructive – and fatal.

There are many wheat fields from which we harvest to make the bread that is our lives. There is this field, the field of Christ Church, and the wheat that we raise here. There are the fields that are our jobs. We harvest wheat from the fields that are our families. Some of the wheat comes from the fields that

are our relationships and our work in the community. But no matter how much we would like each of these to be fields full of nothing but healthy, golden wheat, we often discover that there are tares sowed among the crop.

Sometimes the tares are relationships with people who have been brought into our paths. They may be coworkers or social acquaintances who on the surface may look like folks who want to help with what we are trying to do, but in fact may be distractions intended to pull us in other directions. As someone who used to work in the realm of politics, I can tell you there are tares in the field of government – the lure of television sound bites and national exposure and of making a point by obstructing some, rather than listening to the sounds of the electorate and working for progress for all.

Sadly, people may even encounter tares that grow up in the fields of faith – people in the pews or ministers in the pulpit who condemn others in the name of the Gospel or who for instance may preach a prosperity gospel as a quick shortcut to heaven and the route to quick financial success here on earth.

Talitha Arnold, a minister in New Mexico, has written that the negative things that have been sowed in our lives sometimes are even subtle enough that we don't notice. She refers to "the countless distractions that derail us. E-mails, phone calls, and endless meetings can make it look as if we are working on the realm of God, but they may simply be symptoms of our own divided souls."

When we finally can see clearly enough to find the weeds in our lives, the obvious ones and the subtle ones, I would wager that the gut reaction of many would be the same as the field workers in the parable: "Do you want us to go and gather them?" When we're walking in our yard and see a weed in a flower bed or in the garden, the easiest thing to do is stop and pull it. It's quick, it's easy, and it ensures the health of the garden or crop. But quick and easy isn't always healthy – and, as Jesus points out, it's not always our responsibility.

Just like tares and wheat are almost indistinguishable from one another and nearly always intertwined at the roots, often those harmful people or situations in our lives are deeply intertwined with all that is good. On the surface they look normal and just like everything else, and we don't even know the difference. And because of that, we shouldn't try and clean out our fields all by ourselves, particularly when we risk damaging some for the health of the remainder.

No, this is where we need to yield to God. As Jesus says, we should leave it to the heavenly reapers – to the angels and to the hands of God. This is where we need to let the Holy Spirit move freely through our lives, guiding us to the decisions that will keep us healthy. No matter how clearly we may think we see the weeds, we may not be able to get rid of them without causing harm.

A coworker that we may try and move aside because of their negative influence is the one with whom we still need to work to get our job done.

The family member who sows dissension and should be ignored may be the one who is the first to come to our aid in a time of crisis.

The Christian who uses the Gospel as a weapon rather than a support and as a tool to condemn rather than lift up Gospel may be the only glimpse of God someone else gets.

Ultimately, how these people are handled is neither our decision nor our responsibility. Whether the weeds in our lives are separated from us by a bit of space or have roots wrapped around our own, we shouldn't worry.

We should simply focus on making sure the wheat grows and yields a harvest worthy enough to bring to God.

That's it. Use your lives as a way making sure the wheat grows and yields a harvest worthy enough to bring to God.

Raise the best wheat you can – **be** the best wheat you can be. God will separate the wheat from the weeds and use it to make the bread that will sustain us.

Amen.