

Title: Embracing Wheat and Weed
Date: 7/23/2023 (Proper 11, Year A)
Location: St. Alban's Episcopal Church
Service: 10am Holy Eucharist (Hybrid)
Readings: [Genesis 28:10-19a](#); [Psalm 139: 1-11, 22-23](#); [Romans 8:12-25](#); [Matthew 13:24-30,36-43](#)
Video Link: <https://youtu.be/jix1n-SYdZw?t=1496>

Let us pray in the words of the Psalmist
Search me out, O God, and know my heart;
try me and know my restless thoughts.
Look well whether there be any wickedness in me
and lead me in the way that is everlasting. (Ps 139:22-23)
Amen.

I have mentioned more than once that, when it comes to gardening, I have deadly skills, and **not** in a good way. If you go out of town, I am the **last** person you want to ask to take care of your plants. Even succulents that live indoors have died under my watch, so I can't blame the extreme cold of Chicago or the extreme heat of Austin.

But there **is** one gardening activity I really enjoy, pulling up weeds. I get into such a groove that I have to resist pulling up the weeds I see in other people's yards. Back when I was on congregation council, which is kind of like a vestry, I even had a meeting where we weeded and talked. It was like a suburban version of the walk & talk's you see on the West Wing. There's this deep sense of satisfaction and accomplishment that comes with seeing a pile of weeds.

The main challenge is, as someone who doesn't spend much time in the garden, I'm afraid I'll do it wrong. I worry about pulling up the wrong thing. "Oh, this isn't a weed? My bad..." I worry about not pulling up enough of the roots. "So, yeah, um, let's do this again next year." So, while I would be happy to pull weeds with you, you've been warned.

Speaking of warnings, today's parable ends on an ominous note. Just as the weeds are collected and burned in fire at the harvest at the end of the age, the angels sent by the Son of Man will collect all causes of sin and all evildoers. Those will be thrown into the furnace of the fire, where there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth.

This sounds pretty straightforward. But remember, this is a parable. Every time we think we know what a parable means, it's time to pick it up, turn it around, shake it, and see what falls out.

To start with, Jesus said, "The kingdom of heaven may be compared to..." and then he lays out this complicated scenario where someone sowed good seeds but then an enemy came and sowed weeds, and the difference isn't apparent until grain starts appearing on the wheat. Even then, we can't just start pulling up weeds, otherwise we risk uprooting the wheat before harvest time and losing the fruit of the good seeds.

It's tempting to go straight to this idea of a final judgment, to say that some people will end up in a furnace of fire while other people will shine like the sun. Both will burn brightly, but in very different ways.

Yet, the kingdom of heaven isn't a place we rush, least of all to judgment. It takes time to tell the difference between wheat and weed. And even when we start to see a difference, the two grow so closely together that removing one endangers the other. So, we watch and wait until harvest time, until the end of the age, until God decides that all things have come to completion.

Even then, **we** aren't the ones called to separate the weed from the wheat. The **angels** are the reapers, not us, maybe because we humans can't be trusted to tell the difference.

So, whether we think of the kingdom of heaven as a literal or metaphorical state, it's a place where we wait. It's a state in which we live with the tension of watching the weed growing right alongside the wheat and not being able to do anything. It seems like all we can do is trust God and God's angels to sort everything out in the end. Is this how we are called to be patient, or as Paul describes it in his letter to the Romans, to hope for what we do not see?

What aren't we seeing right now?

We're seeing a lack of compassion for workers. In LA and other cities, writers and actors are on strike because of concerns over the impact technology has had on the way workers are paid and content is made, as in Artificial Intelligence and streaming.¹ Closer to home, construction workers in Texas are about to lose mandated rest breaks, even as we deal with record-breaking heat.²

We're seeing a denial of historical records in Florida. In their new standards for teaching Black history, middle schoolers will be taught that "slaves developed skills which, in some instances, could be applied for their personal benefit."³ This makes it sound like people who were enslaved should be grateful for their tuition-free education rather than push back against the way they were treated as property, as objects, and not actual human beings.

Last Saturday, we invited a group called One Human Race⁴ to host a workshop here at St. Alban's. They showed the documentary, "Who We Are: A Chronicle of Racism in America." Speaking of streaming, you can watch it on Netflix.

The documentary was really comprehensive. It covered a lot of history, from 1619 to the present day. It helped draw this line connecting the policies of the past and the policies of the present. It showed how laws put in place to control slaves continue to influence the way things are and the way things are done in the present day. As we talk about affirmative action and voting rights and privilege, we aren't just talking about this snapshot in time, we are talking about the fruits of seeds sown long ago.

The narrative of the documentary showed us the weeds entwined with the wheat. It encouraged us to hold the tension of seeing weeds growing alongside wheat, the pitfalls alongside the promise. That is true of history, that is true of today, that is true of each one of us.

None of us are all wheat; none of us are all weeds. Even the church is a mix, not to mention our families, our workplaces, and our cities. Sometimes, it takes a while to see the fruits of the seeds that are sown, before we know whether we have wheat or weed.

Whenever I share my personal spiritual journey, I tell people that the arc is only apparent in retrospect. All along the way I saw dead ends and broken pieces. It is only by the grace of God, by following the call of God, and through the love of the members of the body of Christ that those dead ends and broken pieces have come together as something more than I could have ever imagined, more than I could have ever hoped for. I didn't see **this**.

And it's important to remember that we are not the seeds. We are not the wheat that will be harvested and stored in the barn, nor are we the weeds that will be bundled and burned. Each of us might be the field, and when we are asleep, when we are not aware or **awake**, the enemy comes and sow weeds without us knowing. But as individuals, we don't have the energy to be vigilant all the time. Also, only time will tell what is wheat or weed, and even then we are not good enough at telling them apart that God would trust **us** with the reaping.

So, what are we called to do?

To wait and to hope until the end of the age, until things have come to completion?

As hopeless as that sounds, perhaps that is exactly what will bring us hope.

Here, it's helpful to remember that God has called us to love in a way that is about more than having warm feelings or being nice or tolerating difference. God asks us to love with our whole heart, soul, mind, and, yes, with all the might of our body.

We pray with thoughts and words **and** deeds, with our hands and our feet, by being present with those who are in pain and suffering, guided not by our needs but by **theirs**. Likewise, even as we wait and hope, we are called to be led by the Spirit. It is an *active* waiting, an *active* hoping.

With the passage of time, we have seen how particular seeds have born particular fruits. Some of those fruits are medicine, some are poison. Some of those fruits give life, some choke and suffocate. We may not be able to pull up all those plants, nor can we because the roots and stalks are tangled in such a way that we can't safely pull them apart.

But if enough of us learn from the arc of history, if enough of us take turns staying aware and awake, maybe we can keep those particular seeds from being planted again. If enough of us see our heroes and idols, parents and grandparents, for the flawed human

beings that they are, we may be humble enough to strive for goodness without the burden of being perfect, without the burden of carrying on a legacy that's not shiny as we once thought it was. We too will fall short of our aspirations, and future generations will see our faults and our fruits in a way that we can't. But that's no excuse for passively waiting, passively hoping.

At the same time, the kingdom of heaven is a place of weeds **and** wheat. Even **the kingdom of heaven** is a place with these tensions. So, maybe God calls us to see and **embrace** those tensions, not to eliminate them.

Life is more complex than the binaries we want to impose, good and evil, light and dark, worthy and not, male and female. These binaries may help us make sense of things, but putting things and people in neat categories and expecting them to stay there is more about our comfort than the way things actually are, than the way things have been, if only we had the eyes to see, if only we had the ears to see.

So let us follow the Spirit, so that we won't fall back into fear, so that we will no longer be in bondage to decay. Let us follow the Spirit and recognize that our heritage is more than human history; it is this long-running relationship between God and the people of God. Let us follow the Spirit, so that we will no longer rely on flesh, on our own power, on our limited capacities and understanding. Let us follow the Spirit, so that our goal is not perfection and uniformity but truth, truth in its **full complexity**, and to follow Jesus as faithfully and lovingly and humbly as we can.

Amen.

¹ <https://www.theverge.com/2023/7/17/23798246/strike-hollywoods-writers-actors-wga-sag-aftra>

² <https://www.npr.org/sections/health-shots/2023/07/21/1189179220/amid-a-record-heat-wave-texas-construction-workers-lose-their-right-to-rest-brea>

³ <https://www.nytimes.com/2023/07/21/us/desantis-florida-black-history-standards.html>

⁴ <https://onehumanraceaustin.org/about/>