

Weeds and Beans
Sermon by Pastor Heather Feltman
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Some of you may remember me sharing that during my high-school years I worked on a farm during the summer months to save money for college. This is where I learned how to milk and birth cows, bale hay, and drive a combine! The farm belonged to a family that were members of our church. The Schroeder's. Dave and Anita had 8 children and all of them and I had a variety of tasks we were responsible for to make sure the farm ran smoothly!

Since it is the middle of the summer, if I still worked on the farm, I would probably be "walking the beans." Now that phrase may sound odd if you've never lived or worked on a farm. It is hot and tedious work. I walked, Mrs. Schroeder walked, and a couple of their children, would walk too.

We walked up and down between the mile-long rows of soybeans. Down one row, back another. We walked acres and acres of soybeans to pull or chop the weeds out of the row. These were the weeds you couldn't get with the cultivator and tractor.

They were weeds right in the midst of the bean plants. Corn was easy. It grew from seeds dropped in the field the year before. Now in the cornfield it would have been considered part of the crop. In the bean field, corn was a weed and had to be chopped out with a machete knife.

I will confess to you that it was the milk weeds that gave me trouble. (You knew them after you pulled them because the sticky milk in the stem sticks to your

hands and glues your fingers together.) The leaves looked a bit like the soybean plants, mingling in with the beans like camouflage to fool us. Sometimes, when the day was very hot (which it almost always was in Coal Valley, Illinois in July) or when I was tired and didn't want to be there (which was more often than I care to admit), I'd look down at the weed in my hand and realize it was indeed a beautiful green soybean plant.

With any luck, Mrs. Schroeder would be several rows away from me, and I'd stick the plant back down into the soil, hoping no one would be around to see what I just did.

I wish I had been more familiar with Matthew 13 then. In my youthfulness, I probably would have proclaimed to Mr. and Mrs. Schroeder, "Hey! Remember that scripture passage about not pulling up the weeds, for in gathering the weeds we might uproot the plants along with them?"

Of course, they probably would have looked at me wondering if I had shaken a few marbles loose...yeah, right Heather! No, we are not going to do that! That is very bad farming!

Why does Jesus keep telling these stories about bad farming? Last week, Jesus talked about a sower who scattered seeds seemingly at random, on rocky ground and on well-traveled pathways -- even in the midst of thistles.

Some fell on good soil, but it seems almost like an accident. Mr. Schroeder would never have done that. He would say that that's a waste of good seed!

Whenever I read the parables like the one today, I usually think to myself, "Isn't it wonderful how Jesus uses such down-to-earth stories and images. Sowers and sheep, bread dough and fishing nets -- these would be well-understood by those first century Christians hearing them.

But suddenly it struck me. These parables about sowing seeds and leaving weeds must have sounded completely ridiculous to people who know something about farming back then too!

The seed parables in this chapter are crucially important in Matthew's gospel. The thirteenth chapter comes right in the middle of the book and is packed with pictures of the Kingdom of God.

Now, in the first seed parable -- the one where the farmer flings out the seed every which way -- Jesus explains to his disciples that the seed is the word of God. And we learn just how extravagant God is in spreading that Word and the joy that comes along with that kind of extravagance!

In this week's parable, the meaning of the seed shifts. Jesus says, "The one who sows good seed is the Son of Man, the field is the world, and the good seed means the children of the kingdom." Here the good seeds are people. They are children of God's Kingdom. And the weeds sown by the evil one? Well, they're people, too. In the parable, Jesus tells us that the good seeds and the bad weeds will grow up together, side by side until the harvest. And we are not supposed to pull or chop or spray the weeds lest we destroy the good along with the bad.

Yes, this is bad farming.

And it seems to be a crazy way to run a kingdom. Jesus' disciples probably didn't like the parable any better than we do. What good is it to be in the Kingdom of God if we're surrounded by bad seed?

So, it doesn't take long for people who think they have more sense than Jesus to try to reshape the kingdom. The disciples themselves have a hard time with Jesus' vision. Some of them argued about who would be greatest. They protest when people who are not part of their group cast out demons. But Jesus doesn't seem concerned about the competition though. Jesus keeps talking about the first being last and the last first. They began to wonder what sort of kingdom is this.

It isn't easy for the disciples to live the kingdom vision of Jesus. There is constant temptation to pull up the weeds which seem to be growing up all around them!

And the earliest churches had their own seeding problems.

Arguments broke out about who was in and who was out. There were questions about eating certain foods, disagreements about speaking in tongues, and pronouncements about who should be silent in worship. Rules were established to determine who belonged in the Kingdom of God and who did not.

You see God is not an all-seeing farm manager driving by to see how many weeds have grown up. God seems to be far more concerned about the weeds we pull up than the weeds we pass by. For the weeds are always people; people who are bullied and abused for any number of reasons, chastised, condemned, and flung

aside as having little worth...maybe just because they don't 'fit in' with our way of thinking or living.

How can it be that we good and faithful Christians know that Jesus made a way, broke down barriers, gave us everything and still we would find ways to exclude others - others from the table of grace and love?

How do we keep hanging on? How do we continue to be faithful disciples? Life is so hard right now, God. Why don't you just get rid of those weeds, so that I may grow and thrive and live among the wheat?

Maybe sometimes you think that way also. But I know the truth and you do, too. Humanity's field is full of weeds and it is full of wheat. It has been that way since the beginning –all the way back to Garden of Eden, and it will be until the end. There are a lot of wheat folks and there are a lot of weed folks.

And Jesus says, leave them alone, hands off; your job is not to judge which is which or who is whom. That part belongs to the patient, present, persistent, Prince of Peace.

All I know for certain is this. Jesus tells us to stop weeding. Yeah, I know it's bad farming, but it is the Kingdom of God. And if we take Jesus' words to heart, it just might change the church more than anything. And it will go a long way in changing the world!

Maybe Jesus knows even more so, as we do - that so often we are both -wheat and weed. Sometimes I think that if I examine mine closely enough, I will not find

wheat or weeds anymore. They have grown together for so long that a hybrid would be more likely, a mongrel seed that is neither one, nor the other.

So, the smoldering question is: Which am I? Wheat or weed? Blessed or cursed?

I suppose we have all had the experience of uprooting the raspberries or blackberries by mistake or protecting something interesting that turns out to be a thistle. The first time I saw dandelion soup and wine on a restaurant menu, I realized I am not very smart about determining what a weed is and what is not.

I don't know what makes us think we are any smarter about ourselves or about the people in our lives either. We are so quick to judge, as if we are sure we know the difference between wheat and weeds, good seed and bad, but you and I know, that that is seldom the case.

Turn us loose with our pruning shears and there is no telling what we will cut down and what we will spare. Meaning to be good and faithful servants, we go out to do battle with the weeds and end up standing in a pile of wheat instead!

Or we don't, because you and I—we—have the good sense to listen to the sower, even though those orders sound foolhardy and downright dangerous.

This is the truth of our reality, but it doesn't mean that we don't have something to say about it – or a way to move in it - through it. To grow in spite of ourselves and others.

I know what it feels like to be a faithful sturdy stalk of wheat. It feels like meaningful relationships with my family and friends, it sounds like shared prayer

and fellowship and good music even if all of that is being experienced virtually right now, or by practicing good social distancing. It tastes like sharing our food gifts with Hesed House, Lazarus House, and the community around St. Andrew who are our neighbors and who are hungry and in need, and it looks like - well, it looks like the gatherings of people in the many streets around the world who don't look like each other, or think like each other, or speak like each other, or even believe all together like each other, but believe that LOVE IS STRONGER and care about each other's well-being and confronting the systemic injustices of our institutions and societies.

I also know what it feels like to be a slinky, sly weed. Yuck.

It feels pretty lonely, and it sounds like a lot of complaining and not being grateful for the day that has been gifted to me. It tastes bitter and sour and looks selfish and uncaring...and it stays.

Dear siblings in Christ, we've all got some weeds in us and thankfully - thankfully, we've also got some wheat in us, too; all intertwined and growing together - connected to one another, in the soil of God's heart - in the soil of God's love - in this world where, for now, we are planted.

Dr. King in his Commencement Address for Oberlin College entitled, *Remaining Awake Through a Great Revolution*, speaks so clearly about our complete connectedness. He says, "All I'm saying is simply this: that all of humanity is tied together; all life is interrelated, and we are all caught in an inescapable network of mutuality, tied in a single garment of destiny. Whatever affects one directly,

affects all indirectly. For some strange reason, I can never be what I ought to be until you are what you ought to be.

And you can never be what you ought to be until I am what I ought to be. This is the interrelated structure of reality."

Yes, it is, Dr. King. When we recognize and begin to appreciate the reality of our connectedness, it becomes more difficult to judge the person who might be neighbor or stranger. When our hopes, dreams, hurts and pains become intertwined with those of our friends, enemies, co-workers, and family members, we can begin to realize just how much we need each other and the God who holds us all together in the good soil - in the faithful growth, that God can manage our needs - our fears - our shortcomings.

So, let's leave the weeds and wheat alone; let them both grow together, as Jesus says, letting us know that Jesus does not share our appetite for a pure crop, a neat field, or an efficient operation; letting us know that growth interests him more than perfection.

God's creation is for good. We are created in God's very own image - every one of us, beautiful and hopeful. And God's desire for us is to thrive, to live, to become, to be forgiven, to be redeemed, to be made whole, to grow and flourish in humanity's faithful field.

Thanks be to God!

Amen.

