

Wesley United Methodist Church  
July 19, 2020  
Scripture: Matthew 13:24-30, 36-43  
Life is Messy

It doesn't seem to matter what the topic of conversation is lately it just seems that life is a messy affair. Whether we are talking about Covid 19, or Black Lives Matter, or the Economy, or whether or not schools should open or .... fill in the blank, it seems that everything is a challenge and we all have opinions about everything.

Twenty-three years ago, in 1997, Barbara Brown Taylor in a sermon on today's gospel passage said, "All of us wrestle with a world that is messier than we would like it to be."<sup>i</sup> The question for us today is the same as it was then, "What do we do about this mess?"

Jesus told a story about a farmer whose servants asked the same question. In the story, Jesus says that the farmer sowed good seeds, but while everyone was asleep an enemy came and sowed weeds. Believe it or not, this is something that really did happen during Biblical times. In fact, Roman law recognized it and there were prescribed punishments for sowing weeds or bad seeds in another's field.

This was particularly a problem for wheat farmers because there was a particularly nasty weed – the Bible calls it "tares" – but it is also known as darnel. In the early stages it looked so much like wheat that it was almost impossible to tell them apart. Later as they grew it was easier to identify the wheat from the darnel but by then the darnel had grown around the wheat so that the roots became intertwined and it was impossible to pull up the darnel without also pulling out the wheat. In addition to the aggravation, the darnel was also slightly poisonous, so it was essential that they be separated at some point.

Jesus used this wheat and darnel as part of a parable to talk about the kingdom of heaven which we would all hope would be filled with only good things. It's one of several parables in the 13<sup>th</sup> chapter of Matthew's gospel that try to give illustrations about the kingdom of heaven. Some of those parables appear in other gospels but this one is only in Matthew's. Like last week's, it's only one of the few that have explanations attached to them.

The explanation for this one is more of an allegory. This stands for that and so forth throughout the explanation that you just heard James read for us. Most scholars today believe that this explanation came from someone in the early church and was likely used by Matthew's early community to try to comfort those who thought that even the early followers of Jesus were becoming corrupt and should be rooted out. So, they drew great comfort from the idea that there would be a final judgment in which those who were not "true" followers of Jesus would be destroyed. Some may still find that comforting, but I doubt if that many of us would today.

The commentators that I read pointed out that this parable is much more of an ethical question for us, "what should be done in the face of the presence of evil in the world?" The servants were eager to pull up the weeds and get rid of them. However, as I already mentioned that was more complicated than it looked at first glance. Sometimes, it's really hard to tell the difference between the weeds and the good crop.

I once moved into a parsonage that had absolutely beautiful gardens. I quickly explained to people at the church that I knew nothing about gardening and could not be trusted to maintain the gardens. That became pretty obvious that first summer. I would walk by the garden and look at something that I quickly identified as a weed and thought, I should probably pull that out. Fortunately, I never did, because often by the next week what I thought was a weed would have beautiful flowers growing on it.

There are some today, who like the servants in the story, think that the best thing to do is to eliminate whatever they identify as weeds, or as something that they think doesn't belong. They want to pull them out, cast them out, cleanse the field. We hear that method being proposed in many places in our lives. Deny the reality of something by trying to convince others it doesn't exist, call it a hoax. Take harsh measures to drive people out of wherever you think they don't belong. Build a wall. Close the borders. Drain the swamp. In extreme times, Hitler sent people to the gas chambers to try to purify his world.

Barbara Brown Taylor points out that "wherever people are busy trying to purify the field by hostile means, they are doing what the servants wanted to do, only they are doing it without permission because the Boss said no."<sup>iii</sup> She goes on to ask why the Boss said no, and I think her answers provide a good framework for us.

The first reason she identifies is that the servants are not skillful enough to separate the good from the bad and that by the time they can be identified they are too intertwined to be able to remove one without damaging the other. I already described to you about how the wheat and the tares or the darnel look very similar and I mentioned how I can't be trusted to tell the difference between a weed and what will become a beautiful flower.

But it's also more complicated than that. What would you say if I told you that someone chopped off the leg off another person? I imagine that your immediate response would be that this was horrible, and the person should be punished for doing so. Get rid of that bad weed. But what if I then explained that the person who performed this action was a doctor and the procedure would be more accurately described as amputation, and it was performed in order to save the life of the other person? That sheds a whole different light upon things. Motivation makes a big difference, doesn't it?

One of the dangers with this quick way of thinking is that it acts from the idea that everyone and everything is either all good or all bad. Quite frankly, while I try to do good things, I know that I do not always succeed. Things get very complicated. Reinhold Niebuhr, a great theologian, in the mid 1900's said that the fundamental dilemma in US political history and in all human agency is the ironic, unintended consequences.<sup>iii</sup>

There have been decisions to go to war that may have been made with the best of motives and intentions, but the consequence is still the death of humans. Does the one outweigh the other? We know about that consequence; but sometimes as Niebuhr points out there are also unintended consequences. Think, for one example, about how quickly we are willing to send clothes to an overseas earthquake zone. They may be greatly needed and meet an immediate vital need. But they may also undermine an already fragile textile market. Life is messy and decisions are complicated.

The second reason that Barbara Brown Taylor suggests that the boss may say no, is that the weeds may turn out to be useful in the end. In first century Palestine, lumber and coal were hard to come by. Dried weeds or manure were used for most heating and cooking. By letting the wheat and the weeds grow together the farmer had

almost everything needed to make bread. He had the wheat for the flour and the weeds for the fire to bake the bread.

She also observed that sometimes the weeds wake the wheat up and remind them of who they are. She wrote, “Good seeds that once toasted in the sun taking everything for granted remember that surviving as wheat is going to take some effort.” I thought about some of the things that might awaken us to who we really are – or who we want to believe that we are.

Covid 19 has been terrible and it continues to be. But one of the results of it, I think, has been showing us who we really are and what is important to us. Many of us have found ourselves looking at what is most important in our lives.

Recently my 7-year-old grandson told me he hated Covid, as he was lamenting the many things that he is not able to do right now. I agreed with him and told him that I hate Covid also and hate not being able to do many of the fun things we used to do, but that I would hate it even more if he or his sister, or parents or someone else we love were to get really sick from Covid. So we have to continue to do the things we are doing and not doing some things we want to do. He agreed with that. We identified that the health of people we love is more important to us than being able to do some other things that we enjoy.

The many demonstrations after George Floyd’s death have helped awaken many more people to the realities of what it is like to be black in our country. It has helped many of us remember that we are a country where we profess in our Pledge of Allegiance that there is “liberty and justice for all.” Many of us have awakened to the reality that this is not yet true and has never really been true, but that if we believe it and want it, we can put our energy into making it true, making the American dream be a reality for all, not just for some.

So, how then shall we survive as wheat? How shall we grow as wheat that produces good grain? How shall we deal with the weeds that are surrounding us? Do we spend all of our time attacking the weeds or do we devote the same amount of time to being wheat?

Barbara Brown Taylor suggests that the third reason that the Boss says no to yanking the weeds is that the wheat runs the risk of turning into weeds themselves. “It

is one of the trickiest things weeds do, to get the wheat so riled up and defensive that they start acting like weeds themselves – full of prickles, full of poison, good guys who turn into bad guys trying to put the bad guys out of business.<sup>iv</sup>

It becomes easy to respond to someone's criticism with our own. It becomes easy to become snarky when someone is snarky to us. It is easy to respond to name calling by doing the same. It's easy to use the language of the weeds as our own. When we keep doing this, we wake up one day and discover that we are no longer wheat, but that we have become weeds or are turning into them.

Our job is to be wheat in a mixed field and to devote our energy to being wheat that becomes the best wheat we can by seeking justice and equity for all people, being the instruments of God to share God's love with all people so that they may also grow as wheat in God's field. "Our job is to be wheat, even in a messy field and to go on bearing witness to the one who planted us among those who seem to have been planted by someone else."<sup>v</sup>

Let us pray:

O Master Gardener, we are grateful that you planted us in your field. When life seems messy, help us to focus on being the people who made us to be, help us to stay centered in you so that we may resist the temptation to become thorny or prickly. Help us to be open to the times when you need to get our attention to remind us that we are starting to act like weeds rather than wheat. Draw us closer to you, help us to be nourished by you so that we may spread your love in all places and among all people. Amen.

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<sup>i</sup> Brown Taylor, Barbara, *Bread of Angels*, Sermon, "Why the Boss Said No" pp. 146-150, c. 1997 Cowley Publications. I am indebted to her sermon for providing some really good ideas that are part of this sermon.

<sup>ii</sup> *Ibid*, p.147

<sup>iii</sup> *Feasting on the Gospels*, Matthew 13:24-30

<sup>iv</sup> Brown Taylor. P. 149

<sup>v</sup> *Ibid*, p.150