

For the past couple of summers, the Blair-Huntingdon pastors have met outside for our monthly Conference meetings. Last week we met at Canoe Creek, and two of the pastors brought their kids, who explored the area while we were having our discussion. One of the little girls said, “Look at all of those flowers! It’s like a huge garden!” We looked where she was pointing but couldn’t see anything. “Where?” “The whole hill,” she said. “They’re everywhere!” She was pointing to the yard around the pavilion, which did have flowers all over it—the little white flowers on the clover that is all through the grass. Her dad, who I should mention is fanatical about the landscaping at their house, said, “Yeah, those are what Daddy calls weeds.” And, realizing what the gospel was for today, we all looked at one another and felt chastened. Oh, to have faith like a child...

Today Matthew gives us another seed and sowing parable that Jesus explains to his disciples after giving just the metaphor to the crowds. An enemy sows weeds among good seed so that as the wheat begins to grow, the weeds grow with it. The slaves want to pull up the weeds, but the sower tells them they can’t do that without uprooting the wheat as well. The reapers can sort it all out at harvest time. To the disciples, Jesus names the sower as himself, the Son of Man, the enemy as the devil, the reapers as the angels, the good seed as the children of the kingdom, and the weeds as the children of the evil one. Again, there will be a sorting and judgement, but at the “end of the age.”

An overall theme of Matthew’s gospel is distinguishing between good and evil, dividing what is righteous from what is unrighteous: wheat and weeds, sheep and goats. But Matthew gives us these portrayals of a *final* judgement in part to remind us that we are not there yet. The focus of this parable is not on the harvest. The lesson that the sower has to teach the slaves is that it’s not helpful but in fact destructive if they try to uproot the weeds when the wheat is still growing. Notice that in Jesus’ explanation of the parable, all the characters have a counterpart *except for* the slaves who want to go tearing up the garden. In Jesus’ vision of the kingdom, there is no place for people who appoint themselves arbiters of who should and shouldn’t get a chance to grow. It is not now—nor will it be at the end—*our* job to decide who gets to shine like the sun in the kingdom and who gets thrown out. We’re supposed to be the wheat that is growing into a good harvest; we’re not supposed to be the eager but foolish slaves whose plucky initiative would end up doing more harm than good.

One reason why we shouldn’t be out there pulling weeds is that we’re not very good at it. We always see ourselves as the wheat and others as the weeds. But people aren’t all good or all bad. With last week’s parable we talked about ourselves as soil, how we’re not consistently

receptive, that circumstances affect how productive we are at different ages and stages of life. The same could be said in this parable: sometimes I act like wheat and sometimes I act like a weed. The conflict is not between me, the wheat, and you the weed, or between us and *them*. Especially as Lutherans with our understanding of being simultaneously saint and sinner, we see that battle as an internal one, albeit a battle that is ultimately already won on our behalf through Christ. Instead of worrying whether we're going to get to the end of all things and be categorized as wheat or weed, we might look forward to the time when all of the weedy parts within ourselves are removed so that what's left is the good wheatiness of our nature. And if our hope rests on God showing us that much patience and grace, then that's the same patience and grace we are called to extend toward others. We're all still growing.

Jesus doesn't need us surveying the field and deciding who is a weed that needs to be pulled up and thrown out. We contribute much more to the kingdom by growing into good wheat—that is, growing more and more like the healing, forgiving, liberating, lover that is God incarnate in Jesus Christ. It's an ongoing, never ending process, but we can take heart that even in our weedier moments, God is capable of working through imperfect people. After all, that's the only kind of people God has to choose from. Like my colleague's daughter, pointing to the field of clover, "Look at all those flowers! It's like a huge garden!" —somebody could be saying that of us, just like somebody could be saying that of whomever looks to us like weeds.

Strictly speaking, this morning's Genesis passage is not supposed to relate directly to the gospel because we're using the semi-continuous and not the thematic first readings. But it happens that Jacob's story does echo this same point. If you have some time, do a deep dive on Jacob to see how he was anything but an example of honesty, integrity, or righteousness. Yet God still worked through Jacob; and in the midst of God working through Jacob—who, though far from perfect, certainly becomes the central character in this part of the ancient story—we still see God working through others. In his vision, Jacob dreams of the Lord standing beside him, but Jacob also sees angels—the word "angel" means "messenger"—God's messenger-angels ascending and descending the ladder to heaven. So while the Lord is speaking to Jacob, God's other messengers are on their way to and from God's other children as well. When Jacob wakes up, he exclaims, "Surely the LORD is in this place—and I did not know it!" And so it is for us, as well. We sometimes get so wrapped up in what we think God is calling us to do that we forget God is at work with others as well. May God give us the perspective to say, "Look at all those flowers! Surely the Lord is in this place!"...even and especially where and with whom we might not expect.