

# The Lord is not a Slacker, as Some Suppose

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**Genesis 28:10-16; Matthew 13:24-30**

Jesus' parable of the wheat and the weeds is one of my favorites and *not* because of its profound theological truths or spiritual depth.

No, it's because this story pretty well sums up my approach to lawn care: let the plants and grasses and weeds all grow together. And then when everything turns into a real mess-- right before the neighbors start complaining--call the yard guy in to clean everything up.

Obviously, I'm not the sort of weekend warrior featured in those commercials where the suburbanite dad stands, arms crossed, beaming with pride over his perfectly manicured lawn. For I have discovered with Eeyore from *Winnie the Pooh* that "weeds are flowers too, once you get to know them."

So it is that Jesus' parable of the wheat and the weeds features a lackluster farmer, seemingly lacking in zeal. An enemy comes and sows weeds in his wheat field, and when the weeds begin to sprout, the field hands storm up to the big house and report the matter.

Standing on the porch, surveying the fields of rolling grain before him, the landowner clenches his jaw. He nods pensively and says, "An enemy has done this."

Eager to right the wrong, the workers offer, "So you want us to rip up the weeds?"

“No,” says the boss man. “You’ll just uproot my wheat as well. Just leave ‘em both be till harvest. We’ll sort it out then.”

And so we are left with the uneasy feeling that God, like the landowner in the story, is a slacker. Fortunately, the New Testament is quick to reassure us, “The Lord is not slack in fulfilling the divine promise, as some suppose. Rather, the Lord is patient with you, not wanting any to perish, but all to come to repentance” (2 Peter 3:9).

Thankfully, the answer key that decodes this parable is provided a few paragraphs later (Matthew 13:36-43). Accordingly, we are told that the one sowing the good seed is Jesus and the one sowing the bad seed is the devil. The good seed grows up to become the children of God while the bad seed grows up to become children of the evil one. And the harvest is the end of time when God’s angels will separate the wheat from the weeds.

In the meantime, the parable argues, God’s people need to focus a lot more on seeding and growing good than on stamping out evil.

The other night, I was enjoying a wonderful dinner here at our church prepared and served by the first Syrian refugee family welcomed by Knollwood. With help from some members of our congregation, the mother has launched a Syrian catering business and the food is fantastic.

Anyway, as I’m sitting there enjoying my meal, someone brings a reporter who happened by to see me. “Have a seat,” I tell her. “Would you like something to eat?”

Of course, I assume the reporter is there to cover the remarkable event of international cuisine and Syrian/American entrepreneurship unfolding in that very room. But the reporter wants to talk about the so-called “brunch law” that allows sales of alcohol to start at 10 o’clock on Sunday mornings instead of at noon. Apparently, some in the local church community are outraged by this development and angrily oppose it.

“Look,” I tell her. “The time of the church’s privilege in this culture is over. Now is the time for service. So let’s talk about something that really matters like this dinner being prepared and served by Syrian refugees.”

“Well, my editor doesn’t want a story about that.”

“Well, call up your editor and tell him or her you’ve stumbled on a real story. And here, have some pita bread with this wonderful avocado sauce.”

“Are you willing to speak on camera about the change to the Sunday alcohol law?”

“No,” I tell her. “That’s not something I’m tracking or know much about. But I’ll be glad to speak on camera about this church’s work with refugees.”

She smiled, politely disengaged, and disappeared. And if she called her editor, which I doubt, apparently the editor wasn’t interested in the real story unfolding that night at Knollwood Baptist Church.

Jesus was soft on blue laws too. His detractors called him a glutton and a drunkard because he was more interested in breaking bread with all kinds of people than in defending religious rituals and rules. And even the friendlies, even his followers, grew exasperated with his patient, loving attitude toward those who didn’t measure up.

“Lord,” cried his disciples, when rebuffed by a Samaritan village. “Do you want us to rain down fire from heaven and consume them?”

Jesus turned and rebuked them before walking on toward his rendezvous with a cross in Jerusalem (Luke 9:54-56).

“Master!” cry the zealous field hands. “Shall we rip up the weeds?”

“No,” the master answers. “You’ll do more harm than good. Just leave the weeds be till the harvest “then we’ll be able to see more clearly which is which.”

Thus, Jesus teaches us to be cautious about our own inclination to lash out against evil. Because most such forays in making the world safe for democracy--or in making the world safe for

the church--end of doing a lot of unintended damage. Consider the Spanish Inquisition and the Salem witch trials. Or from our own place and time, what about all the ways the vilification of the immigrant, or the refugee, or the stranger, or the other political party is jeopardizing our democracy. Even a well-intentioned war on terror, which is probably a tragic necessity in the dangerous world we live, can wind up creating more terrorists than it destroys should it ever turn from a limited, focused action into a wholesale crusade against an entire region or religion. When we seek to obliterate our enemies, instead of settling for containing them, we can be hoodwinked into doing the devil's bidding even when we think we're doing the work of God.

Now before you get bent out of shape with Jesus--or with me!--let me hasten to add that Jesus is not counseling inaction in the face of evil. The field hands still have plenty of work to do: they have a vitally important field of wheat to tend and to water and to grow. They have wheat to raise and bread to make to feed themselves and their neighbors. But raising the wheat, not destroying the weeds, is to be their focus. They simply lack the skill to tell the weeds and wheat apart.

In fact, the word translated "weeds" in our modern translation is actually, *darnel*, a rye grass that looks a lot like wheat. Its bristles and stalks and grain can be hard to distinguish from wheat, especially in the early stages of growth. And if, as in the story, darnel were sown throughout the field and not limited to a few patches here and there, it would be nearly impossible to distinguish the two.

The point is the field hands and we must be tentative in our judgements because we often lack the perspective to see things clearly. In fact, it is usually when we are most convinced in the absolute rightness of our judgement that we are most prone to do harm to others, whether in our families, our friendships, in the church, or in the larger culture.

As that Baptist firebrand and one-time KBC brother, James Dunn, said in his critique of the religious right, "What they say is not totally false; it is falsely total."

Or as Barbara Jordan, another Baptist and a prominent African-American Congresswoman counseled those wanting to see Christian values in government, “You would do well to pursue your causes with vigor, while remembering that you are a *servant* of God, *not a spokesperson* for God, and remembering that God might well choose to bless an opposing point of view for reasons that have not been revealed to you.”

So it is that Jesus’ parable of the great judgement--appearing later in Matthew’s gospel (25:31-46)--is full of surprises. At the judgement, the great harvest to which the parable of wheat and the weeds points, things do not turn out as the so-called “righteous” expect. Instead, they are shocked to learn that God’s work in the world is being done *not by them*, but by those who quietly go about doing God’s work in the world, feeding the hungry, clothing the naked, and visiting the prisoners.

In my own life, I’ve been dead wrong about some things that I was absolutely convinced of at the time. Twenty years ago, I didn’t despise or attack gay people, but I never imagined that some of them were more genuine, Spirit-filled, full-bodied Christians than I could ever hope to be. But by God’s grace, I kept coming to know and to love gay people who showed me God was active and precious and present in their lives too. Until with Jacob at Bethel, I was forced to confess, “Surely, the Lord is in this *person* . . . and I did not know it” (Gen. 28:16).

No, we’re just not that good at telling the weeds from the wheat. That’s why all final judgements are best left to God.

So in the meantime--and often, the times in which we live really are *mean*--what is our life’s work as followers of Jesus? It is, as Jesus states, to “shine like the sun in the kingdom of your Father” (Matthew 13:43). Or as Jesus says in the Sermon on the Mountain, “Let your light shine before others, so that they may see your good works and give glory to your Father in heaven” (5:16). The church is called to offer a bright, brilliant contradiction to the reigning values of the culture, and even the religious culture, around us. We do this by working for reconciliation instead

of division; by seeking to challenge those with whom we disagree without being quick to condemn them; and by being the first to serve instead of expecting and demanding special privilege for ourselves.

Indeed, when in the parable, the landowner tells the field hands to “let the wheat and the weeds grow together,” the Greek work hidden beneath that seemingly harmless little word, “let,” is teeming with meaning. Because that Greek word for “let” can also be translated, “forgive,” as it is in the Lord’s Prayer. When we pray, “*Forgive* us our trespasses, as we *forgive* those who trespass against us,” we are using the same Greek word translated “let” in Jesus’ parable. Thus, “*Let* the weeds grow” can also mean, “*Forgive* the weeds as they grow.”

In other words, the church is not to sit passively by while the world goes to hell in a handbasket. Instead, she is called to be an oasis of God’s kingdom, embodying the grace and goodness that is the hope of the world.

That’s why I’m grateful to belong to a church that not only welcomes Syrian refugees, but partners with them to set up a catering business so they can become self-sufficient, contributing members of our society.

And I’m grateful to belong to a church that is one of the signature partners in Habitat’s upcoming Faith Build. This Saturday, you can stand shoulder to shoulder with fellow Christians and Jews and Muslims to raise the walls on a Habitat House that will turn a formerly impoverished family into home-owners.

And I’m grateful to belong to a church that built a Wellness and Community Center that really is open to anybody who cares to shoot some hoops or walk some laps, despite community members and even some church folk who can’t believe we are serious about extending such a radical, reckless, Jesus-style welcome.

Back before everyone had a smart phone and GPS, a little girl ventured too far on her bike ride and got lost. Eventually, desperation set in and she sat down on a curb and started to cry.

A patrolman happened by, comforted the child, and put her and her bicycle in his car. Then he drove up and down nearby streets, hoping she'd recognize something familiar. At last, she did: the steeple of her church.

The little girl's face, still wet with tears, turned radiant as she exclaimed, "That's my church. I can find my way home from here."

The church is not the kingdom. But when the church is being the church, you can see the kingdom from here.

In her emphasis on Grace Unbounded, Knollwood is not soft on sin. She is serious about her holy, healing vocation to learn and live the way of Jesus.

It's just that knowing how prone we are to error, we have resolved to err on the side of grace, trusting that in God's good time, God alone will destroy evil, once and for all.

"Shall we rip up the weeds?" cries the zealot in us all.

"No," says the master. "Leave the weeds to me."

"You grow the wheat of my life and love . . . and feed the world."

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*Eternal God, help us trust more and worry less, knowing that you guide the destiny of people and of nations. In your good time, every wrong shall be made right and every evil vanquished. In the meantime, as you patiently wait on us and all the world, help us follow the way of Jesus in seeking to overcome evil — with good. In his name we ask it. Amen.*

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