

**NO WAY TO RUN A FARM**  
**Genesis 28:10-19a**  
**Psalm 139:1-12, 23-24**  
**Romans 8:12-15**  
**Matthew 13:24-30, 36-43**

I have a friend who is a master gardener. During the growing season, she can generally be found in her yard, spending up to eight hours a day working there. And her gardens reflect all that attention and labor she puts into them; they are beautiful. I think of her when these appropriate-to-summer parables of Jesus involving the sowing of seeds and growth of plants come around in the lectionary. Last week we heard of the sower who scattered his seeds with pure abandon, so that some fell on the good soil where they could take root and thrive, but some fell on the path, some among weeds, and some in rocky soil—that is what tells us the parable must have been set in Connecticut! Next week, we will hear about the mustard seed that produces a huge shrub from a tiny seed. And then there is today's short story about wheat and weeds. I suspect that my friend, the gardener, would be horrified by the farmer's decision to let the weeds continue to grow up alongside the good grain. Even I, a totally amateur gardener, am offended when I discover Virginia creeper taking over the pachysandra and am quick to rip it out. Most of us are likely to agree that this plan to allow wheat and weeds to grow together is no way to run a farm.

Given his flouting of the truths of agronomy, it is very likely that Jesus has some other agenda than passing on good gardening hints. Professor Richard Lischer calls parables signal flares that are designed to call our attention to dangerous opportunities presented by the reign of God breaking into our world.<sup>i</sup> So let's see if we can find the dangerous opportunity in this parable.

First, an agricultural glimpse into the story. The weed, or in some translations, the tare, is a specific plant, the darnel. It is a grass that grows in the same zones where wheat grows and is a nasty wheat look-alike with poisonous seeds and tenacious roots. By the time it reveals itself fully, its roots have intertwined with those of the wheat, so that when it is pulled up, the wheat will come, too. Though if it is not separated from the wheat at some point, its seeds can get ground up into the flour and make a loaf of bread that can cause a painful bellyache. This is the dilemma in the parable—what to do about the destructive weeds?

This is a contemporary problem that is being played out all around us in the culture wars. In the political realm, toxic divisions are grinding governance to a halt. One side sees the other as wicked and a threat to moral correctness; the second side sees the first as obtrusive and a threat to the common good. On both sides there is a powerful sense of threat to the country's well-being as both claim to represent the real America.

And what is true in politics is also played out in the church. The enemy, the bad seed, is that person or that group that threatens my understanding of the church and its mission. Columnist David French describes this as “the belief that “we” are good, [which] leads to the conviction that the churches will suffer...unless “we” run things.”<sup>ii</sup> Sometimes, the desire for purity results in open division, even separation, within a congregation or a denomination, the pulling out the weeds, if you will.

So, what to do about those bad weeds? In the parable, the darnel has grown to the point of being recognizable, so the servants ask the landowner, “Do you want us to go and gather them?” That is the commonsense solution, the one that we humans are quick to jump to. Pull them up, purify the field. It is what we do wherever we try to get rid of the enemy, the bad guy, by hostile means. However, the landowner says, “No. This is not the way we are going to do things. We are going to tolerate those weeds. Let them grow side by side with the good wheat for now. Eventually, when the time is right, they will be dealt with.”

This might seem like a pretty passive response; but the frantic pulling out of weeds results in the tearing up of the wheat as well. And not only do good and evil inhabit the same field, good and evil also inhabit the same human beings. Remember what Paul said about our human condition? We do not do the good we want to do but do the evil we don’t want to do.<sup>iii</sup> Evil and good struggle within us all. Episcopal priest Robert Capon observes, “There are no unqualified good guys any more than there are any unqualified bad guys—the only result of a truly dedicated campaign to get rid of evil will be the abolition of literally everybody.”<sup>iv</sup>

Does that mean that we just sit by and twiddle our thumbs while horrible things go on around us? Not at all. We need to remember who we are in this parable. In Jesus’ explanation, the wheat are the children of the kingdom. We are not the servants, the angels whose job it is to separate the wheat from the weeds. Our job is to grow where we are planted, to resist turning into weeds ourselves, and to produce the very best grain we can.

So, what does that mean? Growing where we are planted means that whatever our circumstance, God has a purpose for our lives. It is tempting to look at some wonderful, influential person like Mother Teresa or Martin Luther King, Jr., and wish we could accomplish what they did. But that may not be what God has called us to do. I remember an elderly church member who was no longer able to get out to church or to do the visitation that she had once been able to do. For a long time, she was discouraged and felt useless. Then one day she was reading the newspaper and spotted an article that reminded her of one of the people she knew. So, she cut it out and sent it to that person with a little note. It wasn’t long before the other person called to say how appreciative she was and

how helpful the information from the news article was. And thus began a whole new ministry for the elderly shut-in. She grew where she was planted.

Secondly, the wheat runs the risk of turning into weeds. Because the weeds can present themselves so attractively and because there is in us the ability to do what is wrong, even when we don't want to, we can start acting like weeds instead of wheat. Good guys can turn into bad guys by trying to put the bad buys out of business. Clarence Jones was former personal counsel, advisor, draft speechwriter and close friend of Martin Luther King's. When Dr. King was assassinated, he, like so many others, was devastated. He writes that his grief made him selfish and self-destructive. He considered joining the Black Panthers and getting involved in domestic terrorism. He felt that the murder of his friend and mentor meant that the work for justice by non-violent means was impossible. The weeds looked so tempting. But finally he realized that turning away from non-violence meant turning his back on Dr. King himself.<sup>v</sup> Dr. Jones went on to co-found the University of San Francisco's Institute for Nonviolence and Social Justice to disseminate the teachings of King and Mahatma Gandhi.

The job of the wheat is to produce good grain, in other words, to carry on the business of the One who planted us in the first place. We are to be about the reconciliation of the world to God through the practice of unguarded and lavish love. We who know ourselves to be imperfect and needy, but who also have received the gracious gift of God's forgiveness, have the gifts we need to live well in God's mixed field. You see, in the parable, when the landowner told his servants to let the wheat and weeds grow together he might have been saying something more than permit them to grow or allow them to grow or leave them to grow. That verb translated here as "let" has the same root as "forgive." It is the same word we use in the Lord's Prayer when we say "forgive us our debts as we forgive our debtors." So, in our interactions with the weeds, maybe our job is to remember that we are forgiven people—not perfect, not faultless, certainly not sin-free, but people living by the grace of God, forgiven people. With that in mind, we might be more patient with others' shortfalls, as God is with ours, even forgiving as we have been forgiven. Maybe, the weeds can be loved into being wheat. After all, forgiveness is what allows us to repent, to turn around, to be transformed. Maybe it will work on weeds, too. If you need an example, just remember Jesus on the cross forgiving those who put him there.

But, of course, that is up to God and we can trust God to take care of it all, the weeds, the wheat, the harvest, the reapers, the fire. Our job is to be wheat, contributing to the flourishing of the world that God loves, bearing witness to the One who planted us and tends us with a mighty love. And to trust that, by grace, we are received as children of the kingdom and that it might just also be so for all those we see as weeds. It might not be a way to run a farm, but, thanks be, what a way to run God's kingdom!

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<sup>i</sup> Richard Lischer, *Reading the Parables*, Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2014, p. 27.

<sup>ii</sup> David French, “Who Truly Threatens the Church?” *The New York Times*, July 10, 2023, p. A16.

<sup>iii</sup> Romans 7:14-20.

<sup>iv</sup> Robert Farrar Capon, *Kingdom, Grace, Judgment: Paradox, Outrage, and Vindication in the Parables of Jesus*, Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2002, p. 87.

<sup>v</sup> Clarence B. Jones and Stuart Connelly, “My Life in the Aftermath of Martin Luther King’s Assassination,” *The New Yorker*, July 18, 2023, [https://www.newyorker.com/culture/personal-history/my-life-in-the-aftermath-of-martin-luther-kings-assassination?utm\\_source=nl&utm\\_brand=tny&utm\\_mailing=TNY\\_Daily\\_071823&utm\\_campaign=aud-dev&utm\\_medium=email&utm\\_term=tny\\_daily\\_digest&bxid=60576a8bceea7c4aff72a763cndid=64261111&hasha=307a83ffe17e0010053aa4cce255920&hashb=1728b57c2ad4d9a15c321a439068278f2a0c2705&hashc=8bc7c7d01d31e74bb9196f5db07e8c45e8ac2094fcd5366812bbedfb135&esrc=register-page&mbid=CRMNYR012019](https://www.newyorker.com/culture/personal-history/my-life-in-the-aftermath-of-martin-luther-kings-assassination?utm_source=nl&utm_brand=tny&utm_mailing=TNY_Daily_071823&utm_campaign=aud-dev&utm_medium=email&utm_term=tny_daily_digest&bxid=60576a8bceea7c4aff72a763cndid=64261111&hasha=307a83ffe17e0010053aa4cce255920&hashb=1728b57c2ad4d9a15c321a439068278f2a0c2705&hashc=8bc7c7d01d31e74bb9196f5db07e8c45e8ac2094fcd5366812bbedfb135&esrc=register-page&mbid=CRMNYR012019)