

“Reclassifying the Tares” – July 19, 2020 – Matthew 13:24-30, 36-43

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This week we have another agricultural parable from Jesus, not surprising considering the society in which he lived. Last week we talked about the sower who spread seed on all different types of soil. The different types of soil had a direct effect on whether or not the seed would produce a hearty plant. This week we have a parable about wheat and weeds, or as some of you may have heard this parable as the wheat and the tares.

This particular weed is called darnel, and it can be a real problem because it looks very much like the wheat in which it likes to hide. From my online studies of darnel, it has had quite a long history growing up alongside wheat, due to its similarity to wheat. It's only been fairly recent in the long history of agriculture, that the darnel has been mostly removed as a pest in wheat fields. When ingested, darnel can act as a hallucinogenic, an intoxicant, or even as a poison. Not something you want in your daily bread.

Getting rid of the pesky weed was not so easy – partly because of how similar it looks to wheat, but also because the root systems could become intertwined – pull out the weed and you risk pulling out some the wheat along with it. So the master farmer in the parable told his workers to wait until the harvest, when the infiltrating menace would be easier to identify. In its context, the wheat and the weeds represented two types of people – good and bad – and the harvest referred to the end times.

The basic and most typical interpretation of this parable, is that Jesus was saying that we can't always tell the good people from the bad, that we all live together in this world, and it's not our place to judge someone else and their standing in God's kingdom. God is the ultimate judge, and we just need to keep plucking along doing the best we can, in the hope that we will be classified as the good wheat as opposed to the evil tare. There's a simple distinction between two opposite points, but nothing in between. You're either in or out.

I am not a farmer, nor am I gardener. My house is surrounded by perennials, planted by the previous owner, and when something sprouts up from the ground, I have no idea if it truly belongs or if it's a weed. Fortunately, Facebook allows me to post photos of any unknown plant that might pop up in my yard, and it doesn't take long for one of my green-thumbed friends to identify it as weed or flower or something somewhere in between those classifications. It might be considered a weed, but it's native to this area, and so it is worth keeping as necessary part of the overall habitat, such as milkweed and its import to the monarch butterfly.

On the other hand, the plant may look nice or have beautiful flowers, but it is considered invasive because it disrupts the habitat, choking out the beneficial plants. Or it may function as an integral part of the garden, but it needs periodic pruning to keep it from pushing

everything else aside and taking over. For example, raspberry plants are nice, producing tasty berries, but I'm learning that it doesn't take long for it to spread across one's yard.

So, if we look at the analogy of using plants – wheat and tares are similar but distinct in their dichotomous division – at least once they have grown to the harvest stage, and it's easier to tell them apart. But otherwise they look very much the same, at least at surface level. But in the end, one is clearly good, the other is clearly not good.

Were it that simple in real life and with real people! But just as even the so-called weeds or flowers that grow in our backyards, their worth depends upon the criteria of the one making the judgement, so too with people.

It is in our nature to categorize others based upon our own units of measurement. Often those who appear the most similar to us, we assign a higher amount of worth than those whose differences are many. Yet in the end we find our assessment is inaccurate because we don't have all the information. And those we thought to be worthless have qualities that we miss because we're focusing on the differences rather than the ultimate fruit that they produce. We misjudge their worth because we lack the ability to see the whole picture of one's being.

On this fertile world that we call home, we find ourselves rooted in an amazingly diverse garden, planted alongside others who may or may not be on a similar journey. Jesus shared this parable of the wheat and the tares to caution us from making judgements of others. We simply do not have the capacity to judge others because our criteria are flawed and we see only from the limited point of view of our small patch of earth. Our job isn't to worry about the worth of others, or to worry about the quality of fruit they produce. Our job is to simply grow and flourish wherever we are planted.