

Reflection on the Scripture: Matthew 13:24-30

[\[The video of the reflection.\]](#)

When you train to be a minister, you go to a lot of worship services in school. I suppose it's like going to culinary school and having to try a lot of your fellow students' cooking. Some of the services were really beautiful, really moving. Some you could see what they were going for, and it was cool, but the execution left something to be desired. And some... some were train wrecks. It would have been less messy and more interesting if they had just made vinegar and baking soda volcanoes, like everyone does the night before the fifth grade science fair.

There was one service I went to, where they spent a fair amount of time, 30 minutes maybe, getting you to write about something that held you back from God. They asked really good questions, sort of leading you on an interesting journey of reflection. It wasn't easy, but it was meaningful. There were prayers and music, candles, some scripture, although not today's reading about the wheat and the weeds.

So after that big an investment in time and energy, as the worship service was winding up, they asked us to crumple up the paper we had done all this writing on, and put it in a basket. I hope it didn't show on my face, but I was repelled by the idea. Just viscerally. I wanted to support my colleagues in whatever they were doing, but I had put so much of myself into my reflection. I would never have written what I wrote if I thought there was the remotest chance that someone else might see even a few of the words, let alone have that paper out of my custody. There was no way I was crumpling it up, let alone handing it over to someone else. I panicked for a moment and then God whispered in my head, the way God does sometimes. Clear as anything God said, "LIE". So I crumpled up my grocery list and put it in the basket.

With this basket of reflections of what was keeping us from God (and my grocery list), they said they were sending one member of the group outside to burn the papers, to free us from what was keeping us back from God.

And that is when the wheels fell off. I don't remember precisely what happened next. I think they had some kind of benediction, that included a blessing over the crumpled up paper. But before we even got to the point where we could give feedback on the worship service or whatever, people were on their feet, agitated and angry. They wanted their paper back, they didn't want anyone else to see it and how dare our colleagues presume that they could ask such questions and then treat them so lightly, treat them as if 30 minutes of writing and a match could change something in our relationship with God. I do remember that the professor had to get involved. It was epic.

And it was true. In gathering the weeds you do uproot the wheat along with them (Matthew 13:29). So much of this parable from Matthew is about clear divisions.¹ There is wheat and there are weeds. There is good seed and bad. There is the land owner and the enemy. There is the wheat harvested in the barn and the weeds bundled up for burning. We want to be the wheat, the good seed, the wise land owner, the barn full of harvest. And in this time of division, we want it to be clear how all of Those People (whoever those people are) are the weeds, the bad seeds, the enemy, the bundles ready for burning. And if it's going to be clear, let's have it be clear now, let's be like the slaves of the household (Matthew 13:27), and get out there and pull the weeds now and get the bundles burning.

And yet in this parable, Jesus is telling his followers to wait. Judgment is coming. Judgment will happen. But it is not up to us to do the judging. The good and the bad seed are too tightly entwined. Jesus is reassuring his followers that even though much of the rest of the world is opposed to or ignoring his teaching, the disciples need to keep doing the work for the coming of the Kingdom of God.

So why doesn't he just say that? Why not just lay it out plain and simple? Jesus doesn't talk about what the Kingdom of God will look like when it's finally here in its full and complete state. Jesus wants to talk about how the Kingdom is coming into being now, here, in the middle of this world where the weeds win out much of the time,² where evil people sow bad seeds at night for no other reason than to mess with good people trying to do the right thing.³ Jesus wants to share the secrets of the kingdom, but they can't be taught, they can only be revealed.⁴ There's no data, no analytical work, no if/then/else statement that's going to help us understand how the kingdom work.

So Jesus tells us a story about wheat and weeds. And hopefully, we hear that story and we begin to ask ourselves some questions.⁵

- What are the weeds in our life teaching us, that we cannot learn any other way?
- What are the weeds in our life protecting us from seeing?

¹ Douglas R. A. Hare, *Matthew*, in *Interpretation: A Bible Commentary for Teaching and Preaching* (Louisville, KY: John Knox Press, 1993), 147.

² Talitha J. Arnold, "Proper 11, Pastoral Perspective, Matthew 13:24-30, 36-43" in *Feasting on the Word: Preaching the Revised Common Lectionary, Year A, Volume 3*, ed. David L. Bartlett and Barbara Brown Taylor, (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2011), 260.

³ Mark L. Bailey, "The Kingdom in the Parables of Matthew 13 Part 3: The Parable of the Tares." *Bibliotheca Sacra* 155, no. 619 (1998): 270.

⁴ Hare, 149.

⁵ Anna Carter Florence, "Seventh Sunday after Pentecost," in *Preaching Year A with Anna Carter Florence: Reflections on the Gospel Readings (2016-2017) Revised Common Lectionary*. (St. Paul, MN: Luther Seminary, 2016), 94.

- Have we ever had the experience of learning that someone else saw us as the weeds in their wheat field? How did we respond, and what did we learn?
- Have we ever had the experience of discovering that the wheat we thought we were growing really amounted to nothing but weeds?
- When have we, as a people and a church, looked back on our history and seen that the wheat we thought we were harvesting was filled with more weeds than any of us were willing to admit at the time?
- Do you think it might be possible that this is happening again today? Where are we, as a church, in danger of mistaking our weeds for wheat?

Those questions take time to answer. Answer too quickly and we bundle up and burn the good stuff we need to live on. Make a judgment too hastily and something really important is lost. Be so impatient to get to the end that we make the wrong decision, and we'll miss the lesson. Our good harvest relies on God. When we let God make the call, we can keep growing, we can keep learning until the end. When we let God make the decision, the wheat and the weeds end up in the right place. And the kingdom comes a little nearer, because we acknowledge our utter reliance on God.

My colleagues in seminary thought they were supposed to be the ones who decided what got tossed into the holy fire. Jesus was trying to reassure us that the kingdom is indeed coming and that we have a role in its arrival. But it will be God that decides what gets burned up and what remains. Often, in the space created by such patience, it is not just others, but we ourselves, which are welcomed into a larger reality.⁶ So let us grow in that larger reality, wheat and weeds together.

⁶ Theodore J. Wardlaw, "Proper 11, Homiletical Perspective, Matthew 13:24-30, 36-43" in *Feasting on the Word: Preaching the Revised Common Lectionary, Year A, Volume 3*, ed. David L. Bartlett and Barbara Brown Taylor, (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2011), 263.