

“All Tangled Up Together”
Matthew 13:24-30
7th Sunday after Pentecost

July 19, 2020
Westminster, Greenville
Ben Dorr

James Ryan is the President at the University of Virginia. Prior to his appointment to that position two years ago, Dr. Ryan served as the Dean of the School of Education at Harvard University. While he was at Harvard, Ryan gave a commencement address that ended up going viral.

Perhaps some of you saw it.

Ryan’s address was entitled “Good Questions,” and he explored the value of asking the right questions throughout one’s life. In one example, Ryan recalled a story from his law school days at UVA when he went to the school dance.

“I had finally mustered the courage to introduce myself to Katie Homer, a fellow law student on whom I had a crush. But I made two mistakes. First, I decided to introduce myself while Katie was dancing with someone else...The second and more important mistake is that I lost my nerve at the last minute, and instead of introducing myself to Katie, I introduced myself to her dance partner, whom I’ll call Norman:

“I asked, quite loudly so I could be heard over the music:
‘Are you Norman Huckelby, by any chance?’

‘I ask because I think we’re in civil procedure class together
and I’ve really admired your contributions
to class discussion.’

To which Norman, while dancing with Katie, cheerfully answered:
“I sure am, and thanks!”

Dr. Ryan goes on:

“...given the question I asked, that was a perfectly appropriate answer. But it was still the wrong answer. The right answer was ‘I’m Katie Homer, it’s so nice to meet you, and yes, I actually would like to marry you.’”

“Luckily for me,” Ryan concludes, “Katie understood the real question I was trying to ask, which may explain why we are married today.”¹

I thought of Dr. Ryan when I read our parable for today.

Because I think it is vital, when approaching this parable, to understand what question was being asked.

What question is Jesus really answering when he tells this story, especially when there is no question that prompts the story?

You know the story.

Weeds and wheat.

Someone sowed good seed, Jesus says, but at night, while everyone was asleep, an enemy came and “sowed weeds among the wheat.”

Morning comes. The weeds are noticed.

“May we get rid of the weeds?”

And the landowner says no, you’d pull up the wheat along with the weeds.

¹ Dr. Ryan’s commencement address at Harvard can be found online. This story is also told in a book he wrote following the popularity of the address: “Wait, What? And Life’s Other Essential Questions,” by James E. Ryan, New York: HarperCollins, 2017.

Better to wait.
Better to leave the weeds alone.

The problem with the landowner's response is obvious, right?
Leave the weeds alone?
Who leaves weeds alone?

It really pains me that I cannot ask for a show of hands these days.
Because once again, I would ask for a show of hands at this
moment.

How many of you have ever had a lawn with your home?
How many of you take care of your lawn?
Water it? Cut it?
How many of you, when you take care of your lawn, just let weeds
grow and grow and grow?

Of course not.
Who leaves the weeds alone?

Especially when we know that Jesus isn't talking about lawns in
this parable.

He's talking about weeds.
He's talking about the sin and evil that permeated his society, and
the sin and evil that permeate our society.

As one scholar puts it:

“Child abuse? Domestic violence? Economic exploitation?
Racism?”

[Are we supposed to say, “Let it go...the boss said no weeding”??]

No. Of course not.

Jesus is not advocating a faith that's "morally indifferent."²

In other words, the question that Jesus answers with this parable is NOT:

"Should we or shouldn't we work against evil in this world?"

Jesus has already answered THAT question...by casting out demons, by healing the sick, by calling attention to the poor and the marginalized and the oppressed, and by working AGAINST the cruelty that existed in his day.

Followers of Jesus are called to do the same in OUR day.

So...what question is Jesus answering when he tells this parable?

I actually think there's more than one GOOD answer to the question of what question Jesus is answering.

Maybe the question that Jesus is answering is this:
Did God cause these evil things to happen in our world?

And the answer in the parable is no...someone else planted the weeds. God never intended things to be this way!

Or maybe the question that Jesus is answering is this:
Will it always be this way?³

² Thomas G. Long, *What Shall We Say? Evil, Suffering, and the Crisis of Faith*, Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans, 2011.

³ I am indebted to Long's book for these two potential questions that are being addressed by this parable.

And the answer is no...there will be a day, according to the parable, when God sorts out weeds from wheat. When God creates, as Isaiah put it, “new heavens and a new earth.”

Those are good possibilities for the question that Jesus was answering.

But there’s a third possibility, I think...a third question that Jesus may be answering when he tells this story. You see, I wonder if the real rub with this parable doesn’t come at the end, when the boss says, NO WEEDING, but arrives at the very beginning.

The beginning of the parable reads like this:

“The kingdom of heaven may be compared to someone who sowed good seed in his field...”

It sounds pretty straightforward.

But let me ask you something.

How many fields does Jesus say this landowner has?

One field.

And that makes all the difference.

Jesus wants us to see God’s world as one field.

One neighborhood.

One family.

Which means whatever weeds and wheat are in that field...they are all TANGLED UP TOGETHER!

Perhaps Jesus never intended for the weeds to stand for this person, and the wheat for that person, certainly not for groups of people. Perhaps Jesus meant that there are weeds and wheat in every human

heart...and we do not get to separate people one from another, claiming that their heart has weeds, while my heart has wheat!

You see, I wonder if the question that Jesus is answering with the parable is this:

“May we create our own field?

May we live in a world in which we separate people,
one from another, and put the weeds over there,
and put the wheat over here?

“Even if we don’t do it in conscious ways, Jesus, and even if we don’t call some folks ‘wheat’ and other folks ‘weeds,’ are we still responsible for a society in which some people are separate, one from another?”

“In which some people are more likely to receive justice than others?”

“What if other people made rules and laws and habits and customs that allowed separate fields to form? Is it our responsibility to change those rules and laws and customs and get rid of the different fields?”

What do you think Jesus would say?
I think he would say: ONE FIELD.

That’s the way that his followers need to see the world.

- You and I don’t get to use our preferred political party as our primary lens through which to view the world.
- You and I don’t get to segregate ourselves by our tribe.

- We don't get to create two fields by only associating with those who live in our immediate neighborhood.
- And we don't get to separate ourselves by the color of our skin.
- And we don't get to separate ourselves by income.

We only get to see this world as God sees it:
One field, interdependent, all tangled up together.

Now that's easy enough to preach.
But much harder to practice.

Because there are times in each of our lives when there just might be a COST to acting as if God truly wants one field.

In the book *Beautiful Souls*, the story is told of a man named Paul Gruninger.

Paul Gruninger was an ordinary person living in Switzerland.

He was a mid-level police officer, working for his country, on the eve of WWII. He filled out reports and arranged security details for visiting dignitaries. In other words, he shuffled papers.

But in April of '39, "Gruninger found his way to work blocked by a uniformed officer who told him, 'Sir, you no longer have the right to enter these premises.'"

It turned out that in all of Gruninger's paper shuffling, he had been up to something sneaky.

Was it embezzlement?

Was he helping criminals escape the country for a bribe?

No...

Gruninger was secretly altering the documents of refugees—Jews who were fleeing Austria for the safety of Switzerland, trying to escape the Nazi regime. Jews were not allowed to cross Austria’s border after August 19, 1938, but for someone in Gruninger’s position, “all it took was a few strokes of [a] pen to predate a passport and perhaps save a life.”⁴

When Gruninger’s actions were discovered by other authorities, he lost his job, he was shunned by his neighbors—his standing, his career, and in some ways his life never recovered.

He paid a price for seeing the world as ONE FIELD.

Was it worth it?

Was that vision of God’s world worth it?

I don’t know how Gruninger would have answered that question.

I do know this.

It’s a question that you and I need to answer.

Is one field worth it?

How committed are we to one field?

Christians of good faith may disagree about the wisest policies to address problems of inequity in our society. But inequities of justice, inequities of hope, inequities that create separate playing fields, separate neighborhoods—we do not get to say...eh, I’m good, so all that is not my problem!

⁴ I first became aware of this story after reading Tom Long’s article about Gruninger, “Small Acts of Courage,” in *The Christian Century*, April 25, 2012. The story is told in the book “Beautiful Souls: The Courage and Conscience of Ordinary People in Extraordinary Times,” by Eyal Press, New York: Farrar, Straus, and Giroux, 2012.

Because if Jesus is clear about anything, it's that our neighbor's problems are, by definition, our problem too.

Do you remember the parables that Jesus told about neighbors?
Take the rich man and Lazarus.

What did the rich man fail to do, when Lazarus, his neighbor, lived right outside his door?

He failed to treat Lazarus as a neighbor.
He failed to see Lazarus's problems as his problems too.

What did the Samaritan do when he saw the wounded man on the road?

He treated him as a neighbor.
He saw that stranger's problem as his problem too.

I think today's parable of weeds and wheat is a story not just about evil and sin, but about neighbors. And how we live with neighbors. How we talk about our neighbors. How we do not get to separate ourselves from our neighbors...

I heard a parable a while back.
The teller of the story was the Rev. Grace Imathiu.

Grace Imathiu is a United Methodist minister who has served churches both in Kenya and America. The story she told comes from Africa, an African fable.

It goes like this.

Once there was a rat living in a farmer's house.

As he was going about his ratty business, through a hole in the wall he spied the farmer and his wife opening a package.

Inside the package was a rat-trap!

The rat was terrified, filled with fear, and called together all the farm animals. He told them over and over:

“Rat-trap in the house. Rat-trap in the house!”

The cow listened, the goat listened, the chicken listened.

Then the chicken scratched around a little bit, and finally said, “Well, brother rat, I’m thinking to myself, ‘Rat-trap in the house...so what? I’ve never heard of a chicken caught in a rat-trap. I don’t see what this has to do with me.’”

And the chicken walked off.

And the goat echoed the chicken’s words, but expressed some sympathy and pity toward the rat, saying, “Brother rat, you take care now. Remember, we’ll be praying for you.”

And the goat walked off.

Then the cow said to the rat, “Well, I’m thinking, and the thing is I need to think some more about this, and after that I’ll get back to you, but give me a couple days to ponder just what my opinion on the matter is while I think about it...”

Well, late, late that night—POP went the rat trap, and a scream came from the farmer’s house. The rat trap had caught a snake, and when the farmer’s wife reached down to get the snake, the snake bit her, and the farmer rushed her to the hospital but—

sad, sad story—

the farmer's wife died.

And the farmer was in shock and grief.

And people in shock and grief need to be fed.

- So the farmer's neighbor grabbed the chicken from the farmer's yard, and fed the farmer chicken soup.
- And the following day, more neighbors and relatives appeared to console the farmer, and he wanted to feed them, so the goat was slaughtered.
- And on the day of the funeral, so many people showed up that the farmer said, "We need to have BEEF STEW!"⁵

All because of a rat-trap.

Let anyone with ears, listen...

Amen.

⁵ As told by the Rev. Grace Imathiu at The Festival of Homiletics preaching conference many years ago.