

21 July 2002
Pentecost 9

St. Athanasius Lutheran Church
Alexandria, VA

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“Weed-Free: Not Now, but Forever!”

Text: Matthew 13:24-30, 36-43 (Romans 8:26-27)

Grace, mercy, and peace to you from God our Father, and from our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ. Amen.

Last week we began looking at the parables of Jesus in Matthew chapter 13. And as you remember, these parables were told by Jesus in the face of much persecution and rejection, to help His disciples understand why He was being so challenged and conspired against and maligned. And last week we began with the Parable of the Sower, and considered the truth told by Jesus that as long as the Church is in the world, that God’s Word will come under attack. For the Word is the power of God for salvation, a fact which not only we know, but which Satan also knows. And so that which is so treasured by us is unendingly attacked by him. But we saw that in spite of all the attacks and assaults of Satan, the Word does accomplish its work and produce a harvest. And it is to that promise that we cling. . . . But it is not only God’s Word that comes under the attacks and assaults of Satan – for today, in the Parable of the Wheat and the Weeds, Jesus reveals to us that as long as the Church is in the world, God’s people will also come under attack.

Now this is a pretty easy parable to understand. A man plants a field full of wheat. But in the middle of the night, while everyone is sleeping, an enemy comes and sows weeds in the same field, in an effort to destroy the crop. After a time the workers discover the weeds, and at first assume that their master planted some bad seed. But after finding out that it was not the fault of the master, but that an enemy had done this, the workers then want to immediately go in and pull out all the weeds – restoring the field and the crop to its initial purity. But no, the master says. Let both grow together until the harvest, and then we will separate the wheat from the weeds. To try to separate them too early would risk doing damage to the good crop – the very goal the Enemy has in mind.

Now this parable answers for us two questions that people love to ask: (1.) Why are there bad people in the world? And (2.) Why doesn’t God get rid of them so that our lives would be better and easier? For, as Jesus explains, the weeds are the sons of the evil one. Those who are not sons of God. And the reason why they are in the field, in the world, is not because God has planted bad seed, but because Satan is also working in the world, working stealthily, as under the cover of night, working against God and His people, working to grow those who do not fear, love, and trust in the one true God above all things. The enemy did

this. The enemy who not only attacks God and His Word, but also attacks the people of God in the world, striving to attain victory at any cost. And this is a threat that we need to take more seriously than I think we normally do. For Satan is quite serious about it! But that's the easier question to answer – why are there evil people in the world. Harder to explain is the second – or, why does God leave them there? It seems that by doing so, God is letting Satan win! That God is letting Satan's work continue! Because wouldn't this world be a better place if the weeds did get pulled? Wouldn't we all be better off without people like Osama Bin Laden, and the man who abducted little Samantha Runnion, and other really bad and notorious sinners like them? . . . Well, Jesus gives us an answer, but it is an answer that we need to explore a little bit. For He says not to pull the weeds, lest by doing so we also harm the wheat. God wants *not even one little piece* of His harvest lost, and so if that means that He must, for a while, let the weeds grow, then so be it.

Now, why is this? Well, the parable gives us an indication in the word that is used for the weeds – it is the word for not just any weed, but the weed called *darnel*. And what is darnel? It is a weed that looks exactly like wheat, and for much of its growing cycle, it is pretty much indistinguishable from wheat. And so, you see, the enemy knew what he was doing! He doesn't sow weeds that would be easy to spot and identify and get rid of before they turned troublesome! He plants weeds that look like wheat, and act like wheat, and are hard to tell from wheat. He uses deception to do his damage. . . . And so what does that mean? It means that we cannot always tell the difference between the sons of God and the sons of the enemy. It means that when the devil wants to lead you astray, he's not going to show up at your door in a red suit with a pointy tail and a pitchfork! He uses deception. He uses those who look harmless, who look like good guys, who look like wheat. And so false doctrine, allurements to sin, doubts against God and His love . . . all come from people we might not expect. People who look like wheat, who *look* good and trustworthy and harmless, who even live next door to us. And so who should get pulled and who should get left? Its not always so easy to tell.

But it also works the other way as well! Not only do the weeds in this field look like wheat, but the wheat look like weeds. And you know this from your own lives, because sin isn't just in other people, it is also in us. And if we were going to do some weeding out right now, and hold each of us up against the Ten Commandments and see where we fall . . . And what about those we think are weeds? Who look and act like weeds most of their lives, but who turn to Jesus at the end and are saved? What would happen to them if we decided to do some weeding right now? What would happen to you? . . . And you are beginning to see . . . the boundary lines aren't so simple. And it isn't even as simple as identifying people as either wheat or weeds because each of us are both saints and sinners, at one and the same time. Evil is so much a part and parcel of our lives and sin is so deeply entangled in our lives, that to eliminate sin and evil completely now would also mean our own destruction. We too would be cut down and uprooted. . . . And so there is great wisdom here in this

parable. Great wisdom in God allowing both to grow until the harvest. For you cannot pull up sinners without also uprooting saints.

And this is the way it will be, Jesus says, as long as the Church is in the world. We're never going to live in a completely Christian world or society. We're never going to live sin-free lives in a sin-free world. We will always be in and amongst those who are the sons of the evil one. Satan is never going to stop in his work of attacking God's people. You can count on that!

But all of this, all of what we've considered so far, is not really the point of this parable! Because so far we have been focusing on what? On the weeds. Oh, we've mentioned the wheat, but our focus has been on the weeds, and why they're there, and what to do about them. Right? The disciples did this too – did you notice? They ask Jesus to explain to them ***“the parable of the weeds in the field”*** and that's very often what we call this parable – the Parable of the Weeds. That's what sticks in our ears. But what happens when we focus on the weeds? When we fix our attention on the sin and evil that is around us in this world, we begin to doubt God and His goodness. We begin to ask why and question God's mercy and power and His ways . . . and then Christ has also been left out of this parable!

But you know what? This parable is not about the weeds at all, but about the wheat! The weeds are a reality, but it is the wheat that the farmer is focused on. And it is the wheat that God is focused on. And because He wants what is best for His wheat, because He wants not even *one little piece* of His harvest lost, God allows both weeds and wheat to grow together . . . for a time. And you see, that's the ultimate point of this parable. Although in the here and now both wheat and weeds grow together, in the end is the harvest. The harvest where the final separation does take place. The harvest where Christ is vindicated. In the end, we hear that the weeds have not been able to destroy the wheat and that they have done no permanent damage to the Lord's harvest. The Enemy has failed. Christ is Lord of the harvest field.

And so our focus – the focus of the Church in the world – is not to be on the weeds! The focus of the Church is not to eliminate sin from the world – that is something that cannot be done! Our focus is rather to apply the death and resurrection of Jesus to the lives of sinners. The death of Jesus whose blood covers your sin, and His resurrection to life which guarantees your resurrection to eternal life! And this is the good news that Jesus announces at the end of His explanation of this parable: ***“Then the righteous will shine like the sun in the kingdom of their Father.”*** And we are the righteous ones, the sons of the kingdom – not because of who we are, but because we have been joined to Christ. And joined with Christ in His Church, our focus is not to yank the weeds – as if we could tell the difference! – but to cultivate the field. And so the water of Holy Baptism is applied to sinners, and in those waters faith is given and grown. The Holy Scriptures are truthfully taught and

faithfully proclaimed, and the Word that enters our ears and hearts grows roots strong and deep. Holy Absolution is pronounced on sinners bent under the burdens of our nature and the world, so that forgiven and restored we grow strong and produce fruit. The Holy body and blood of our Lord is given into our hungry bodies and souls to strengthen and preserve us in the struggles of this world.

And none of that makes the weeds go away! They will be with us as long as we are in this world. But we do have hope. Hope as we look to the future. Hope as we wait for the harvest, when we will finally be gathered together, separated from the weeds, and taken into the kingdom of our Father. And as we kneel at this altar, at the table of our Lord's Supper, we look to that future. We are given here a foretaste of the feast to come, which not only feeds us, but keeps our eyes focused not on the weeds! – but on the end. On the harvest and life to come. Our Father and Saviour know that we are here. We will not get lost among the weeds. And the Spirit is helping us also, as St. Paul says, praying in groans too deep for words. Praying where our prayers fail. Praying according to the good and perfect will of God. . . . And when the harvest comes, at the end, when God sends His angels to gather His own into His kingdom, not one of His own will be lost. Because the One directing the harvest is the Lord of the harvest, the One who died on the cross for you, who baptized you, who absolves you, who gives you His own body and blood to eat and to drink, and who knows you. You are His own, and precious to Him.

And so now, for a little while, we have to put up with the weeds. As long as the Church is in the world, God's people will be attacked. And while no farmer likes weeds in his garden, Christ is willing to put up with them for a little while, for your sake. For He is not willing to let *even one little piece* of His harvest be lost. Because He wants you to live weed-free not just for a little while here on this earth, but in His kingdom *forever*.

He who has ears, let him hear.

In the Name of the Father, and of the (+) Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

Now the peace of God which passes all understanding, keep your hearts and minds through faith in Christ Jesus, our Lord. Amen.