

Preacher: Pastor Twyla

Scripture: Matthew 13:24-30, 36-43

²⁴ He put before them another parable: "The kingdom of heaven may be compared to someone who sowed good seed in his field, ²⁵ but while everybody was asleep an enemy came and sowed weeds among the wheat and then went away. ²⁶ So when the plants came up and bore grain, then the weeds appeared as well. ²⁷ And the slaves of the householder came and said to him, 'Master, did you not sow good seed in your field? Where, then, did these weeds come from?' ²⁸ He answered, 'An enemy has done this.' The slaves said to him, 'Then do you want us to go and gather them?' ²⁹ But he replied, 'No, for in gathering the weeds you would uproot the wheat along with them. ³⁰ Let both of them grow together until the harvest, and at harvest time I will tell the reapers, Collect the weeds first and bind them in bundles to be burned, but gather the wheat into my barn.' "

³⁶ Then he left the crowds and went into the house. And his disciples approached him, saying, "Explain to us the parable of the weeds of the field." ³⁷ He answered, "The one who sows the good seed is the Son of Man; ³⁸ the field is the world, and the good seed are the children of the kingdom; the weeds are the children of the evil one, ³⁹ and the enemy who sowed them is the devil; the harvest is the end of the age, and the reapers are angels. ⁴⁰ Just as the weeds are collected and burned up with fire, so will it be at the end of the age. ⁴¹ The Son of Man will send his angels, and they will collect out of his kingdom all causes of sin and all evildoers, ⁴² and they will throw them into the furnace of fire, where there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth. ⁴³ Then the righteous will shine like the sun in the kingdom of their Father. Let anyone with ears listen!

As a kid, I remember going to the public library and signing out books I thought I would like to read. Many I did, indeed, read; and others I should have left on the shelf at the library because I didn't read them. One book that I took out and read several times was, "Charlie and the Chocolate Factory." I enjoyed that book. I was delighted then when the movie, based on the book, came out in 1971, starring Gene Wilder. I enjoy that movie even today tremendously.

In the story we meet Charlie Bucket and Veruca Salt. A good seed, and a bad weed. Charlie's honest, kind, brave and true. Veruca is a spoiled-rotten brat.

Both get a chance to enter the mysterious chocolate factory of Willy Wonka, a place that has been sealed up tight and closed to the public for a decade. Charlie and Veruca have found Golden Tickets in their Wonka chocolate bars — Charlie's ticket was in a Whipple-Scrumptious Fudgemallow Delight, to be exact — and because of this they get to go on a tour of the chocolate factory, along with three other lucky children.

Their tour guide is none other than the reclusive and eccentric Willy Wonka himself. When the children walk through the factory doors, they enter an amazing world known only to Willy and his staff of Oompa-Loompas.

The tour is a dream come true for Charlie, a child born into poverty, but it turns into a nightmare for the other members of the group. Willy Wonka is beset with problems: There's Augustus Gloop, whose hobby is eating; Violet Beauregarde, a dim-witted gum chewer; and Mike Teavee, a gangster-wannabe who is obsessed with television.

As for Veruca Salt, let's just say that Willy is not amused when she demands of her father, "Daddy, I want a boat like this! And I want lots of Oompa-Loompas to row me about, and I want a chocolate river and I want ... I want ..."

Now it wouldn't be right to give away the secrets of the chocolate factory, but suffice it to say that a number of the children get in trouble when they disobey Willy's orders. One by one, the nasty are punished and the good are rewarded, in some spectacular and disturbing ways. Charlie, in fact, in the end inherits the marvelous chocolate factory because of a good move on his part, the repentance of a wrong to Willy.

That's what we love about this book and movie: The good kids get rewarded, and the bad kids get what's coming to them. That's the way we like things to happen in this world; although we know things don't always work that way.

Today's scripture text is another one of Jesus's parables, an illustrative memorable story Jesus told to teach lessons. Most times, Jesus did not explain the meaning of the parables, he left it for the listener to ponder and discover the lessons. But occasionally when he was alone with his disciples, he explained the meaning of a parable, as he did in this parable of the weeds.

If we jump to the end of today's text, to the place where Jesus explains the parable, we hear Jesus say that at the final judgement, "all causes of sin and all evildoers, will be thrown into the furnace of fire, where there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth. And all of the righteous will shine like the sun in the kingdom of their Father." We may nod our heads in affirmation that this seems only fair and just. However, there is more to this parable than the warning about a day of reckoning and judgement, and we best pay attention to all of what Jesus said.

So, let's go back to the beginning. Jesus begins the parable directing our attention to thoughts about the kingdom of heaven. The kingdom of heaven is a term that appears only in Matthew's Gospel. The other three gospels use the term, kingdom of God, but the two terms are the same thing. The kingdom of heaven is not a geographic location, but a spiritual realm where God rules and where we share in his eternal life in the present and the future. We join the kingdom when we trust in Christ as our Savior.

It's in this kingdom that someone, The Son of Man, as Jesus explains later, sows good seed, who are the children of God, in the field which is the world. But in that same field, weeds begin to grow. The weeds are children of evil, planted by the evil one. A problem arises because the grain and the weeds are very similar in appearance, so much so that it's impossible to tell them apart.

The imagery in this parable would have been very familiar to the people Jesus spoke to on that day. The weeds, known as tares in some translations of the Bible were a curse for any farmer who found them growing in their field. They were a weed called bearded darnel. In their early stages of growth, they so closely resembled wheat that it was impossible to distinguish one from the other. When they both grew heads of grain, it was easier to tell the difference but by that time the roots were so intertwined that attempting to pull out the weeds would also surely mean pulling out the grain.

It wasn't until after the grain was harvested that the two could be separated. The darnel was gray in color; and it was poisonous. It had a narcotic effect on people. After the threshing step, the grain was spread out on a large tray and set before women to do the painstaking exercise of picking out the darnel, and burning it.

It's in this field then that we're told the wheat and the darnel grow together, threatening the full crop. It would seem that a natural reaction would be to attack the problem and begin

some weed control, but Jesus warns against this. He in essence says to us: "Leave the weeds to me. You just worry about growing up as wheat.

Leaving the weeds grow with the wheat seems like a radical approach to weed control; but this isn't the first time we hear Jesus give this teaching. We heard the same thing earlier in the Gospel of Matthew in the Sermon on the Mount." Listen again: "Do not resist an evildoer. But if anyone strikes you on the right cheek, turn the other also; and if anyone wants to sue you and take your coat, give your cloak as well; and if anyone forces you to go one mile, go also the second mile" (Matthew 5:39-41) Jesus teaches us here that more gospel grows on a turned cheek than a clenched fist. Always has, always will.

It's inevitable that evil is going to slip into our lives, both personally and in the life of the church. It waits for the right moment to strike out to tear us down. So, indeed, we must be on our guard, prayerfully discerning truth and righteousness, and staying on the right path. We have been given teachings from Jesus so that we recognize the right path and can stay on it.

However, it is not always easy to differentiate between who really is a part of the Kingdom and who is not. Sometimes what appears to be good, is really evil; and what appears to be evil is really good. Sometimes we make quick judgements and find out too late that we have messed up. Our quick judgements may be wrong, we may not be seeing everything to make a good judgement, and someone innocent could get hurt and led astray.

Here's an example: A seminar leader recently showed a class of government workers a series of pictures. The pictures began with a view of a person's face, and then broadened the view to reveal the person's entire body. It was only when the entire picture was seen that the class could make anything approaching an accurate judgment.

The first picture showed the face of a grizzled man, scowling and straining. He looked to be a member of a motorcycle gang, perhaps gripping the handlebar of a chopper. But when the entire picture was revealed, it became clear that he was a maker of customized wheelchairs for the handicapped, and he was pushing one of his creations.

Picture two showed the face of a lovely woman with a beautiful friendly smile. She appeared to be a flight attendant or a hostess at an upscale restaurant. But when the view was expanded, what the class saw was a drug dealer helping someone shoot-up.

Our judgements about someone could be wrong. Jesus sees the whole picture, we often times don't. Our quick judgements, even if we are right, could misguide us to responding in a manner less than loving, leading to consequences that are more detrimental to our own lives and faith; or to the church body. Jesus teaches us to love our enemies, because love just might change things. However, again, let me remind you, this does not mean we should put down our guard and risk joining the weeds crowd, but instead we should remain firm with the wheat group. Jesus teaches that if we are too quick to tear out the darnel, we could tear out the wheat too.

The parable teaches us that we are to let the work of weed control to God. God has a plan for dealing with the weeds. It's not to be our worry. The wheat — the children of the kingdom — need only be wheat, good wheat, growing under the care and nurturing of God. Reaping, judgment and burning will come later for those who are evil. We, as children of the kingdom, do not need to get into the reaping, judging and burning business. God's got this. Amen.