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Matthew 13:1-2, 24-30, 36-43
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A Time to Plant and a Time to Uproot

I am a sucker for garden plants. My yard is full of heirloom plants that people have given me over the years.

I have Rose of Sharon bushes from my grandmother's yard back in Pennsylvania. Northwest ferns, Forget-Me-Nots, and Purple Irises from Bob McKusick. A Yellow Forsythia bush from Dorothy Grace, who got it from Bertha Olson. A Lilac bush from Renee Lacombe. Roses from Chester and Adair Wasciuk. Black currant bushes from Larry Anderson. Rose Campion flowers from my good friend Diana Gibson.

And when my neighbor was tearing out a beautiful Camellia bush from their backyard, you bet I found a place for it in mine.

So when a friend asked me the other day if I wanted a Dogwood tree from his yard, I was sick that I couldn't find a place for it in mine.

So we found a home for it in a friend's yard.

At this point, I don't think I have room for anything else. So please do not gift me more plants, but thank you for thinking of me!

My mother taught me that a weed is anything growing in a place where you don't want it. That's a pretty helpful definition. Because as beautiful as my backyard is, it still has evidence of the fall of humankind.

Weeds.

No matter how much I fertilize, put down mulch, or regularly go through and pull them up, they always come back. I pull one out on Monday, and by Wednesday its cousins have moved in. I'm beginning to think they have an underground communication system.

But week after week, throughout the summer, I still go to battle. Because, as the wisdom writer of Ecclesiastes reminds us, there is a time to plant and a time to uproot.

Jesus certainly had something like this in mind when he taught his followers the Parable of the Weeds. Except Jesus had a very different approach to the weeds. "Leave them alone." Let them grow. Let God take care of them.

That must have confused the disciples.

Later, they came to Jesus privately and basically said, "Jesus, we need to talk about the gardening story." "Can you explain that one to us?"

So join me as we read from Matthew 13:1–2, 24–30, and 36–43.

13 That same day Jesus went out of the house and sat beside the sea. **2** Such great crowds gathered around him that he got into a boat and sat there, while the whole crowd stood on the beach.

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 servants 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 servants 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!

Let us pray. Prayer of Illumination.

This morning I want us to look at the parable itself, consider what it means, and then listen for what God might be saying to us through it.

This story is only told by Jesus in Matthew's Gospel, and it comes at an interesting point in the story. Jesus had just been challenged by the religious leaders who followed the Jewish laws very carefully. They challenged Jesus because his disciples were picking heads of grain from the fields and eating them as they went along. The problem was that it was the Sabbath. And apparently, picking a little grain and eating it was enough to start a theological argument.

Then Jesus healed a demon-possessed man who was blind and mute. The Pharisees responded by claiming that Jesus himself was demon-possessed—that the only reason he could drive out demons was because he was working for the devil.

Then the Pharisees and teachers of the law asked Jesus to perform miracles as proof of his divine nature.

Then Jesus' family comes along to reign him in because they had heard the rumors that the religious folks were getting pretty upset with him and that his ministry was becoming increasingly more popular than theirs.

Right in the middle of all this tension, Jesus tells a string of stories and one in particular about a field. A farmer plants good seed. But while everyone is asleep, an enemy comes along and plants weeds among the wheat. The plants begin to grow, and eventually the workers notice that there is both wheat and weeds.

They go to the farmer and say, "Didn't you plant good seed?" "Yes." "Then where did the weeds come from?" "An enemy did this."

The workers are ready to start weeding. But then the farmer says, "No." "Let them grow together until the harvest." Why? Because in trying to remove the weeds, they might also uproot the good wheat. The workers were eager to solve the problem. The farmer knew they could create a bigger one.

There is an important lesson here. Sometimes our desire to fix things immediately causes more damage than the problem we were trying to solve.

Now for the Characters. There is a farmer who planted good seed. There is an enemy who intentionally sabotaged the farmer's work. There are farm workers who are loyal to the farmer and eager to do their job. There are harvesters who, apparently, are different from the farm workers. There is good seed. There are weeds. And there is the field.

Jesus later explains the symbolism to his disciples. The farmer is the Son of Man—Jesus himself. The field is the world. The good seed is the children of the kingdom. The weeds are the children of the evil one. The enemy is the devil. The harvest is the end of the age. And the harvesters are angels.

As I mentioned previously, this parable comes in the middle of a growing clash between Jesus and the religious leaders. The religious leaders thought they knew what faithfulness looked like. They knew who was in and who was out. They knew who was righteous and who was a sinner. Jesus came along and challenged that whole way of thinking.

Because Jesus was drawing crowds. People were listening. People were being healed. People were following him. And the religious establishment was more than a little threatened.

The crowd contained people on both sides. Progressives and traditionalists. Believers and non-believers. People who cared deeply about their positions and people who probably couldn't have cared less. In other words, pretty much like the world today.

We still have a remarkable ability to identify the weeds. And, interestingly enough, the weeds usually look a lot like the people who disagree with us.

Notice how the farm workers were ready to go to war against the weeds on behalf of the farmer. But the farmer says, "No." "Let them be." "Leave that to me." "It's my field." "And I will separate the good from the bad in my time and in my way."

Earlier in the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus taught, "Do not judge, or you too will be judged."[1] Then he talked about the speck in another person's eye and the plank in our own.

I don't know about you, but that is a huge relief to me. I don't want the responsibility of deciding who's in the kingdom and who's out. Who's good and who's bad. Who belongs and who doesn't. That's a job way above my pay grade. And frankly, I have enough trouble keeping my own spiritual garden tended.

Someday, at his return, we believe that Jesus will be judge of all things. The angels will separate the good from the bad. Judgment belongs to God. Not us.

So what do we do with this parable? Jesus certainly isn't encouraging us to do nothing. We don't pretend evil isn't happening. When we see evil in the world, we call it out. We enact our agency today as best we can to stop it.

You have certainly heard me say before how British philosopher John Stuart Mill in an address at the University of St. Andrews in 1867 said, "Bad [people] need nothing more to compass their ends, than that good [people] should look on and do nothing."

So we do not use this parable as an excuse for apathy. But before we start pulling weeds, we need to check ourselves. There is a little bit of good wheat and a little bit of weeds in all of us. We are all capable of doing good and harm.

Legend says that the sixteenth-century Protestant reformer John Bradford saw a group of prisoners being led to their executions and said, "But by the grace of God, there go I."

That is humility. It recognizes that apart from the grace of God, we are not nearly as different from one another as we sometimes think.

So we do what we can. We speak when we need to speak. We act when we need to act. We resist evil when we encounter it. But we leave the final judgment in God's hands. Because it is God's field. Not ours.

Which brings us back to the dialectic tension mentioned in Ecclesiastes for us today. There is a time to plant and a time to uproot.

Just turn on the news. The world reminds us every day how messed up we are. It seems as soon as we wrap up one conflict, another one starts. We argue. We divide. We accuse. We draw lines. We decide who the weeds are. And once we've identified them, we become very enthusiastic about pulling them out.

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[1] Matthew 7:1-2

Sometimes I think if Jesus gave us a spiritual weed-puller, some of us would show up at church carrying one in each hand.

But Jesus calls us to something different.

The writer of Ecclesiastes says, "I know there is nothing better for humans than to be happy and do good while they live. That everyone may eat and drink, and find satisfaction in all their toil—this is the gift of God."

There is a time to plant. And there is a time to uproot.

We are each called to be co-creators with Jesus in the world's garden. We plant seeds that grow into righteousness. Seeds of kindness. Seeds of compassion. Seeds of justice. Seeds of forgiveness. Seeds of generosity. Seeds of hope.

We plant those seeds in our families. In our churches. In our communities. At our workplaces. And sometimes we plant them in places where we may never see the harvest. That's okay. Because we're not the farmer. We're faithful helpers.

Then there is the uprooting. The Hebrew word connected with uprooting is *aqar*. It carries the sense of digging down, getting to the root of something, and tearing it out. Not just trimming the leaves. Not just cutting off what we can see. Getting to the root. Because if you simply cut a weed off at the surface, guess what?

It comes back. I know this from personal experience. You can pull the leaves. Cut the stem. Put down the mulch. Even glare at it. And three days later, there it is.

Pastor and author John Ortberg in his latest book, *Steps, A Guide to Transforming Your Life When Willpower Isn't Enough* tells "the story of a man who's dream of a beautiful lawn was thwarted by dandelions. When they first appeared, he would pull them up, but they grew back. So he went to the hardware store and bought some fertilizer, applied it to his lawn, and they grew back. He was told that it must have been because his neighbor's yard was filled with dandelions. So he encouraged his neighbor to kill his dandelions. But they grew back.

After consulting every book and expert to no avail, he decided to write the US Department of Agriculture, who would surely know what to do. After months of waiting, their letter arrived. He excitedly tore it open and read the following:

Dear Sir. We have considered your problem and have consulted all of our experts. After careful considerations, we think we can give you very good advice. Sir, our advice is that you learn to love those dandelions."[2]

Apparently weeds are very committed to their vocation.

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[2] John Ortberg, *Steps, A Guide to Transforming Your Life When Willpower Isn't Enough* (Carol Stream, IL: Tyndale House Publishers, 2025), 31.

We laugh but sin can work the same way. We sometimes deal with the symptoms without dealing with the root. We get angry. We hold resentment. We judge. We become defensive. We divide people into categories.

But the work of God goes deeper and asks. What is underneath our anger? What is underneath our hatred or disdain for others? What is underneath our resentment? What is underneath our need to be right or our desire to control others? That is where the work of God begins.

Because Jesus has forgiven us. We have been made clean by his blood, shed on the cross. Grace means that God does not look at us and say, "You are nothing but weeds." Grace means God sees what we can become.

And so we plant. We nurture. We grow. And when we discover sin taking root in our own lives, we invite God to dig down deep and through the power of the Holy Spirit to uproot it. Not so that we can become perfect. But so that we can become more like Jesus Christ.

And when we encounter weeds in the world around us, we do what faithfulness requires. We resist evil. We stand up for those who are being harmed. We speak the truth. We seek justice. We love our neighbors. But we leave the final judgment to God. Because it is God's field. And God knows what God is doing.

Perhaps the most important thing we can take from this parable is not simply what weeds we see. It is what we plant. Every day we walk through the garden of this world, and every day we leave something behind.

We plant something. A kind word. A little forgiveness. A meal shared with someone who is lonely. A child who learns that church can be a place of love. A stranger who discovers that somebody cares. A person who was ready to give up but finds a little hope because we showed up.

We may never see the harvest. But God does.

So let's keep planting. Let's keep tending. Let's keep growing. And when the weeds show up—and they will—remember: We are not the farmer. We are not the judge.

We are simply a helper in the garden who has been called to plant good seeds, trust the Gardener, and leave the harvest to God. Amen.