

**Isaiah 44:6-8**

44:6 Thus says the LORD, the King of Israel, and his Redeemer, the LORD of hosts: I am the first and I am the last; besides me there is no god.

44:7 Who is like me? Let them proclaim it, let them declare and set it forth before me. Who has announced from of old the things to come? Let them tell us what is yet to be.

44:8 Do not fear, or be afraid; have I not told you from of old and declared it? You are my witnesses! Is there any god besides me? There is no other rock; I know not one.

**Matthew 13:24-43**

13:24 He put before them another parable: "The kingdom of heaven may be compared to someone who sowed good seed in his field;

13:25 but while everybody was asleep, an enemy came and sowed weeds among the wheat, and then went away.

13:26 So when the plants came up and bore grain, then the weeds appeared as well.

13:27 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?'

13:28 He answered, 'An enemy has done this.' The slaves said to him, 'Then do you want us to go and gather them?'

13:29 But he replied, 'No; for in gathering the weeds you would uproot the wheat along with them.

13:30 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.'"

**The Parable of the Mustard Seed**

<sup>31</sup> He put before them another parable: "The kingdom of heaven is like a mustard seed that someone took and sowed in his field; <sup>32</sup> it is the smallest of all the seeds, but when it has grown it is the greatest of shrubs and becomes a tree, so that the birds of the air come and make nests in its branches."

**The Parable of the Yeast**

<sup>33</sup> He told them another parable: "The kingdom of heaven is like yeast that a woman took and mixed in with <sup>[d]</sup> three measures of flour until all of it was leavened."

**The Use of Parables**

<sup>34</sup> Jesus told the crowds all these things in parables; without a parable he told them nothing. <sup>35</sup> This was to fulfill what had been spoken through the prophet [Isaiah]: <sup>[e]</sup>

"I will open my mouth to speak in parables;

I will proclaim what has been hidden from the foundation of the world." <sup>[f]</sup>

13:36 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."

13:37 He answered, "The one who sows the good seed is the Son of Man;

13:38 the field is the world, and the good seed are the children of the kingdom; the weeds are the children of the evil one,

13:39 and the enemy who sowed them is the devil; the harvest is the end of the age, and the reapers are angels.

13:40 Just as the weeds are collected and burned up with fire, so will it be at the end of the age.

13:41 The Son of Man will send his angels, and they will collect out of his kingdom all causes of sin and all evildoers,

13:42 and they will throw them into the furnace of fire, where there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth.

13:43 Then the righteous will shine like the sun in the kingdom of their Father. Let anyone with ears listen!

### **Proclamation of the Word**

Christopher Burkett writes,

*Do you remember the story of Oskar Schindler, the German industrialist, who saved over a thousand Polish Jews from the concentration camps in World War II? One of the people he saved said of him, 'He was our father, our mother, our only hope. He never let us down.' Yet many who saw the film Schindler's List were surprised, if not quite put off, by his vices. He was a man prey to all the human vices.*

*Schindler was certainly no saint. In fact, he was riddled with contradictions. Unfaithful to his wife, he certainly knew how to enjoy the so-called good life—cigars, drink, women. He was a Roman Catholic, but only in name. He was also a member of the Nazi party, and his avowed aim was to end the war with two trunks full of money. He exploited the Jews as a source of cheap labour.*

*But there was another and better side to him, and in spite of his lapses he always returned to that better side. There was basic goodness about him. As the war went on he became appalled at the horrors of 'the final solution' and at considerable personal risk (he was arrested twice), he protected his workers from the death camps.*

*Schindler was no angel. He was a mere human being, goodness there was in him, but that goodness was seriously flawed. He was both wheat and weeds. The divided nature of Schindler, and the divided nature of each of us, is something this parable discloses. All of us are wheat and weeds—at one and the same time both sinner and righteous. The great psychologist, Carl Jung, talked about our personalities having a 'shadow' side which we must somehow learn to recognize and*

*befriend. However you want to express it, we cannot escape the truth that 'evil' isn't all about what's outside ourselves. The 'weeds' of this parable are part of us.<sup>i</sup>*

Evil, sin, it is all around us, but also within us. Paul writes in his letter to the Romans, "I do not do the things I want, but I do the very thing I hate." (Romans 7:15) Jesus tells this parable to a crowd who would know that within a good planting of wheat another kind of plant might be lurking among them. The bearded darnel, or "tares" as another translation uses, is a devil of a weed. It sucks up precious nutrients, has a lusty thirst for water, and takes over because its roots surround the roots of the other plants. It is damaging, evil. When it blooms it can be used as a hallucinogen or can even be deadly. Our first reaction might be just like those slaves. The slaves go to the Master and say, "Don't you want us to go pluck up the weeds so your good seeds can grow?"

We usually recognize the "bad seed" among us and want to root it out, too.

- The employee at work who does not follow through on responsibilities and causes discord among the staff.
- The teacher knows she is doing everything in her power to handle 25 children, the paper work, and teach something of value with creativity and energy, but there is the parent whose criticism and demands are exhausting.

The parable shows us that the challenges and ethical dilemma is more subtle though.

- There is the middle manager who is glad for the company's big profits, but questions the bookkeeping behind it.
- Or the lawyer who is asked to look the other way for the "good of the firm".

When the slaves go to the Master and offer to root out the problem, save the good wheat by getting rid of those nasty weeds. The Master is wise, "No, for in gathering the weeds you would uproot the wheat along with them. Let both of them grow together until the harvest." (vv. 28-29)

Most of us are not comfortable with such ambiguity. We want to separate the weeds from the wheat, the sheep from the goats, the good from the bad.

We want to wrap it up, be done with it, move on.

In the past we have tried to root out the evil of alcohol, and that had unintended consequences. In the 1920's we had a zero tolerance for alcohol as a church and society called Prohibition. The church divided and splintered over it. A black market business grew in the shadows which produced crime and death. It also forced people who had a drinking problem to suffer in silence for fear that they would be judged harshly as criminals. We tried to make it an "all or nothing" issue and it bore fruit that was not all good. In general, we are not comfortable with ambiguity. We seek a solution. We want an either/or not a both/and.

We, like the slaves, want to be done with the weeds. Let's pull them up, burn the chaff, so we can get on with growing our precious grain. We want to point out the weed in our midst and get rid of it, or him, or her, or them- whatever we deem the root of the problem.

God chooses a different way. God is a God of infinite wisdom and patience. Such patience frees us to get on with the critical business of loving, or at least living with, each other which is good news for all of us.

For one, we don't have to be God! God will judge and redeem. That is not our job.

Secondly, I for one am eternally grateful for the patience God has for me.

We are a blessed mix of weeds and wheat as a people, as a church, and in God's world.

We are all sown together.

Jesus knew something about being called a "weed" and being judged as wrong and evil. Right before this section of parables, the leaders of his own faith, the Pharisees, try to trick him and begin the plot to destroy him. The Pharisees look like the good wheat, but as far as Jesus is concerned they are as deadly as the bearded darnel, the weed. And eventually they decide to take care of Jesus, the problem, and they crucify him.

Oscar Schindler was a business man trying to make a profit off of cheap labor, but as he got to know the people who worked for him, he became their ally, their friend.

Oscar Schindler was a man of more vice than virtue, but when faced with moral injustice, the extermination of a whole ethnic group by the Nazi party of which he was a member, he stood up at his own personal risk.

He was arrested twice. He was not a sinner or a saint. He was both.

And in the end of all time, God will be his judge as Jesus teaches us. God will judge and redeem us, too.

In the end, the wheat and the weeds look a lot alike, but the difference is the fruit that they bear. On the one hand, the fruit of the wheat is life-giving and nourishing. Wheat can make bread for hungry bellies.

But the weeds produce a sickening fruit that can even kill.

The God who created the universe, all living things for flourishing, is into sustaining life.

The God who conquered death and the grave is a God who chooses new life.

The God whose Spirit breathes into us grace, peace, hope, joy, and love,  
intends fullness of life for all God creates.

And in the end, this same God will judge and redeem all that God has made.

God judges the wheat and the weeds on the question of its fruit,

"Does it grow and produce life or death?"

Lest we get bogged down in the weeds and forget that God has a big picture, long term plan, Jesus reminds us.

A preacher once said,

*Jesus did not say that the kingdom was like a rock, fixed and solid and firm and unchanging. Jesus did not say the kingdom was like a giant machine, that you put some things in and you get some things out and what you get depends on what you put in. He said it was like an enormous tree that grows out of a tiny (mustard) seed. A tree that grows so enormous that all the birds of the air can come and find shelter in its branches, even strange little ducks like you and me. He said that God was like a housewife who puts a smidgen of yeast in three measures of flours and that yeast yields its life into the whole batch of dough, That is the way of that the kingdom is, growing from the very beginning into all that God has intended...From the foundation of the world, the very first moment of creation, it is the kingdom that been on God's mind, and God is infinitely patient as it grows.<sup>ii</sup>*

The kingdom may not be like a rock, but we trust in a God who is our rock and redeemer. As we are told in Isaiah, God is the beginning and end.

God declares,

*Do not fear, or be afraid; have I not told you from of old and declared it? You are my witnesses! Is there any god besides me? There is no other rock; I know not one. (Isaiah 48:8)*

On Christ the solid rock we stand. And Christ will come to judge the quick and the dead.

Let us work and pray to be good grain and bear fruit that gives life in his name.

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<sup>i</sup> <http://www.preacherrhetorica.com/proper-11a.html>

<sup>ii</sup> Patrick J. Wilson, "God is Not Finished, " a sermon preached at Grace Presbyterian Church of Midland, Texas on August 9, 1981.

<sup>iii</sup> I am grateful for *Feasting on the Word, Year A, Volume 3*, whose content and commentary on these passages are reflected here.