

I. Advanced organizer

A. When I was a young child around four or five years old, my mother had to go to the hospital. It was not a serious issue, she needed to have her gallbladder removed, but in that time those procedures couldn't be done laparoscopically, so it required an open surgery and a few days of recovery.

1. I grew up in Southern California and the home my family lived in at the time had a swimming pool in the back yard. My father was on single-parent duty during my mom's hospital stay and decided to entertain me one afternoon by taking me for a swim. What dad did not take into account was **how to prepare his little girl for her pool time**.
2. It's not that dad hadn't swam with me before. But this was apparently the first time he did so without mom there to make sure I was ready to hop in the water: specifically that my hair was ready for the water.
3. You see at the time, I had very long, thin, brown hair which was one of my mother's favorite features of my cute little person. It went all the way down my back almost to my bottom. My mother took great care to brush and style my hair each day and keep it looking beautiful. My father, however - this was not a skill he had had to pick up. Nor did he realize that the swimming pool was a threat to my long, thin hair. Dad didn't realize that in order to keep my hair nice, it was best to braid it or at least put in some ponytails before I jumped in the water.
4. So as you may guess, Dad let me swim with my hair long and flowing in the water, and I'm sure I had a great time while we swam. The problem came afterwards. When it came time to get out of the pool, to get dressed, to get tidy, Dad came to realize that my hair was no longer so pristine. It had become a matted mess.
5. So Dad pulled out the hairbrush, and started to try to brush out the tangles from my long head of hair. Like most little girls, I was not huge fan of this. Dad didn't have the same knowing touch as mom. And there were so many tangles to fight. Tears began flowing down my cheeks, my naturally loud voice began vehemently protesting, and at some point, Dad, in a desperate desire to calm the situation and fix the problem decided to move on from the hairbrush and detangling spray to a bigger tool: **the kitchen scissors**.
6. Encountering a particularly nasty knot, Dad cut it out. But then there was another, and another. Each knot that wouldn't succumb to the hairbrush without cries of agony resulted in another snip. Before long, Dad began to realize the problem with his miscalculation. He thought he was just cleaning things up, and sparing me some pain, but no. **My first significant haircut had been performed by my dad on a tangly head in our kitchen and it was a total disaster**.
7. Dad couldn't bear for mom in her fragile post-surgery recovery state to see the damage he had wrought on her precious little girl's head, so when she came home from the hospital he actually sent me to a family friend's to stay for a couple of nights. Only once mom was home and resting and had recovered for a night or two, did I return for the situation to be revealed. Mom took it in stride: what else could she do? Though I'm sure she was disappointed, she was probably not too surprised. I was sent to the hairdresser and returned with my first short haircut, and once the sting of the whole thing had lessened and my hair started to grow out, the incident became a story that would live in our family lore for decades.

B. Well, I start with this family story because, though in many ways it's different, it actually **reminds me a bit of a story Jesus told a long, long time ago**. As you may know, we are now a number of weeks into a teaching series I've been leading us through called "A Story-Shaped Faith", where we're considering a number of Jesus' stories, and asking questions

around how those stories were meant to provoke and shape the life and the spirituality of the folks he was speaking them to. These *parables*, as they were called, were stories meant to surprise and challenge and ultimately bring understanding in deeper ways, and our hope as we study them together is that they may do the same for us.

II. So let's look at our story for today, found in Matthew, chapter 13.

A. **24 Jesus told them another parable: "The kingdom of heaven is like a man who sowed good seed in his field. 25 But while everyone was sleeping, his enemy came and sowed weeds among the wheat, and went away. 26 When the wheat sprouted and formed heads, then the weeds also appeared.**

27 "The owner's servants came to him and said, 'Sir, didn't you sow good seed in your field? Where then did the weeds come from?'

28 "An enemy did this,' he replied.

"The servants asked him, 'Do you want us to go and pull them up?'

29 "No,' he answered, 'because while you are pulling the weeds, you may uproot the wheat with them. 30 Let both grow together until the harvest. At that time I will tell the harvesters: First collect the weeds and tie them in bundles to be burned; then gather the wheat and bring it into my barn.

1. So that's the parable. Matthew records an interpretation that he depicts as being given by Jesus to his disciples that we have to consider too, so we'll look at that in a bit, but first I want to start by considering this little parable itself.

B. Let's go over some of the fundamentals of the story.

1. **Here we have another agricultural story.** Jesus lived in an agricultural society so a number of the stories he told were about gardening or harvesting. This one about two kinds of seed sown alongside one another. One is wheat, the grain important for harvesting in order to make bread. The other seed the text says is a weed. What exactly is meant by this? What kind of weed?
2. Most scholars believe there's a specific plant that has historically grown in Jesus' corner of the world that he is referring to. It's likely he's describing a particularly tricky weed known as **bearded darnel**. **What's so tricky about darnel is that as it grows, it looks almost exactly like wheat.** The stalks are nearly identical, early on. It's not until they've grown up, until they've matured, that you can often tell the difference between a stalk of wheat and a stalk of darnel. The wheat stalks are heavy with the mature grain so they droop. The darnel stalks still stand straight up. The mature stalks may be different colors, but as they're growing, they look very much the same.
3. And it's not just that darnel is like fake-looking wheat. The weed is more pernicious than that. **It actually has seeds that are poisonous.** So if you make bread out of a mix of real wheat and darnel, whoever eats it could get pretty sick.
4. So this is the story Jesus is relating - a field that's infested with poisonous weeds that look pretty much identical to the crop that's trying to be grown. And Jesus makes clear in the story, **these weeds aren't there on accident.** They're not just a few naturally occurring amongst the crop. These have been intentionally planted by an enemy. There's active, intentional resistance to the landowner's harvest.

5. And so in Jesus' story, the workers ask the owner of the land if they should pull up the weeds. And likely to most of Jesus' audience, as well as to ourselves, **this seems like the logical thing to do**. But Jesus' householder advises something different, something that the workers would likely have found very frustrating.
 6. The owner encourages the workers **not to pull the weeds but to patiently tolerate the mess**. He was concerned that they wouldn't be able to pull the weeds alone. "While you're pulling up the weeds, you might uproot the wheat too." The boss was concerned that, his workers, though earnest in their desire to make things better, might like my dad with that pair of scissors actually make things worse, doing more harm than good. Better to let both plants grow and in the end at harvest time, the harvesters will sort the wheat from the weeds.
- C. So how did Jesus want his audience to understand this parable? Well, this is one of the few parables in the gospels in which a gospel writer records an explanation from Jesus. Here's what Matthew shares a few verses after our parable.
- D. **36 Then he left the crowd and went into the house. His disciples came to him and said, "Explain to us the parable of the weeds in the field."**

37 He answered, "The one who sowed the good seed is the Son of Man. 38 The field is the world, and the good seed stands for the people of the kingdom. The weeds are the people of the evil one, 39 and the enemy who sows them is the devil. The harvest is the end of the age, and the harvesters are angels.

40 "As the weeds are pulled up and burned in the fire, so it will be at the end of the age. 41 The Son of Man will send out his angels, and they will weed out of his kingdom everything that causes sin and all who do evil. 42 They will throw them into the blazing furnace, where there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth. 43 Then the righteous will shine like the sun in the kingdom of their Father. Whoever has ears, let them hear."

1. So first, I want to start by acknowledging that just reading this passage: it feels pretty harsh. For that reason, some preachers working with this parable skip this altogether. I understand the temptation, but personally I don't think hiding from content we find uncomfortable is the way to go. I also personally don't feel like we can't ask critical question of our ancient texts, even the gospels.
2. I think it's right and good when dealing with writings that come to us from multiple millennia ago, written in different languages by human beings in a vastly different culture who are just as imperfect as all of **to ask hard questions**. We should feel free to sift and sort and push back against things in the texts or in the way they've been interpreted to us, **especially when those readings don't fit the broader understanding we have of the person of Jesus or the Divine represents in the rest of our Scriptures and our tradition**. We can wonder how much the words we read are authentic to Jesus himself or might be flavored in some way by the person who wrote them down, in this case Matthew, just as each of us tends to embellish certain aspects or leave other things out in our storytelling. I won't make a call on that one way or another but I do think when we read this that it's a question worth at least considering.
3. And looking at this particularly harsh set of verses, I also recognize that **some of us come from traditions in which we were taught a very black and white cataclysmic version of a violent judgment day**, where we may have been warned to fear a literal hell that would be a fiery furnace to be condemned to unless we prayed a certain prayer or

practiced faith a certain way. I understand why some think texts like this might reinforce that kind of view, but personally I don't think that's what Jesus is trying to do with this parable or its explanation. I don't think it fits what we understand of who Jesus was or the loving, merciful God he claims to represent.

III. So what might this challenging story with its puzzling explanation actually be pointing to? I have three potential take-aways for us to consider.

A. First, I think Jesus is asking us to acknowledge that the field of life is messy.

1. Despite where the explanation points, Jesus' story itself isn't ultimately about the future, it's about the present. It's about the reality that we live in a field that feels like it's got a lot of weeds. And as Jesus' explanation points out, when we talk about weeds, we're not really talking plants, we're talking about the challenging mix of good and evil that surrounds us. This parable asks us to contend with the brutal, inescapable truth that we live in a messy world in which terrible and beautiful things happen at the same time, and sometimes it's hard early on to distinguish which is which. As much as we desire that not to be the case, as much as we long for things to be clean and only good, there is sorrow alongside joy. There is suffering in the midst of celebration. There are forces in our communities that are loving and life-giving and there are forces that are destructive and violent. Good and evil seem to both be growing in this messy field.
2. Now I mentioned before that I don't think this explanation text is meant to scare people about the future. Actually, I think it's there to offer hope that ultimately this state of affairs of mixed reality is not permanent. In Jesus' explanation as Matthew reports it, I don't see him describing a literal depiction of what will happen at some future end date. When the Bible speaks apocalyptically it's often dramatic and forward looking to communicate something that's bigger than our reality, something beyond us. I hear Jesus using here dramatic symbolic imagery to indicate that evil will not persist unabated forever. Eventually it will be confronted and dealt with in dramatic fashion. By pointing to an eventual harvest, whenever that happens, Jesus is promising that God is committed to putting things to right. He is assuring us that in the end, the Divine will bring justice and that means ultimately abolishing that which brings harm. That might be at a particular moment to come or it might be the work of harvesting that has been happening at certain moments throughout history, whenever there is a breakthrough and things which weren't possible before become reality.
3. However we're meant to understand that reality of things being made right in the future, in the present this parable is asking us to be clear-eyed about the moment we're in - a moment in which our world, our communities, our families, and if we're honest, our own selves are a mix of good and not-so-good. The field is a work-in-progress before the harvest, and that work-in-progress as things develop - is kind of a hot-mess.

B. And that's when we get to the next frustrating reality this parable points to: We are not qualified to be the weed-whackers.

1. In the story, **the head of the household resists the workers desire to pull up the weeds**. And it's a natural desire I think all of us have. If we know the weeds are there, can't we get rid of them already? But the owner says "no". He doesn't trust that the workers can do the job without damaging the field.
2. In the same way, Jesus seems to be saying that **we have not been given the role of weed-whackers**. However tempting it might be, that's not ultimately our job to do. Even though weeds trouble us, pulling them all up is above our pay grade.

3. Now I sat with this a lot this week and felt confused and troubled. Is Jesus really saying we're not supposed to resist problematic realities in our midst? Is he telling us to be complacent in the face of evil? No, I think that certainly can't be it.
4. **When we look at the total scope of the gospels, much of what Jesus teaches is all about confronting the things in ourselves and in our ways of relating to each other that bring harm and separation, and Jesus encourages his followers to transform, to heal, to do something different.** Throwing up our hands and saying, "whatever, sin can just run its course, God will deal with it later" cannot be the response Jesus is trying to provoke.
5. But perhaps we get closer to what he's teaching when we recognize that there's a difference between resisting harmful *ideas* - ideas that are toxic and evil - and resisting the people who hold those ideas. There's a difference between going after actions that are violent and destructive and going after human beings who at times make horribly destructive choices.
6. I believe it is right and necessary and in the spirit of God's redemptive work in the world, to call out the evil ideas in our midst. We should push back against the poison seeds that are lurking in those stalks of dandelion. But rooting out the seeds of poison, calling out the places that toxic ideologies are harming folks in our communities - that's different than yanking up the whole stalks and tossing them. **It's different than pulling people out of our lives and our communities in an attempt to make our little field pure.**
7. I think the challenge here is that it's so easy for us humans to make the leap. It's so easy to go from wanting to root out the horrible idea or practice to rooting out the person who's spoken it or done it. But the idea and the person are not one and the same.
8. Many of us have likely seen where this zealous kind of weeding can go awry; **we've been on the painful receiving end of it.**
 - a) Some of us have been the ones **weeded out of the churches we once called home:** subjected to painful church discipline, labeled either overtly or implicitly "heretics" or "unrepentant sinners" because we thought differently about spirituality, or because our marriage ended, or because we spoke the truth about our gender or sexuality or we affirmed others who did the same. We were weeded out by passionate field workers who were confident that removing us from leadership, terminating relationship, telling us we were no longer welcome was the necessary thing to do for the good of the field.
9. To us who are now trying to give life to a different kind of community - a safe, diverse, Jesus-centered community - I think this parable offers a particular challenge. **As we live into that vision we must be careful not to allow our zealotry to confront the evils in our age to lead us to simply become a mirror of the very communities we were harmed by.**
 - a) An important part of the shaping of this community has been an ongoing conversation about confronting the evils of our day, the constructs that have taken hold in our society and led to systems and structures of inequality. I have made the argument and will continue to do so that the centering of whiteness, the centering of masculinity, the centering of heteronormativity, the centering of traditions like Evangelicalism, or systems like capitalism - **these are our contemporary versions of what the Bible calls idols.** They are the ideas and ways of viewing the world that we invest in and call ultimate truth, though they are a distortion and keep us from seeing the fulness of the Divine in all of their immense color and beauty. **I believe it is the call of communities like Haven to do our part to smash these idols, not just for the sake of tearing**

everything down, but so that we can release that which is trapped within: the beauty, the fragrance, the sacred reality that the idols obscure.

- b) I am committed to continuing to call out those evil ideas and actions as we see them in our time, and also to confront those who are espousing those ideas. To say “No. Supporting your trans kid with life affirming care and treatment is not child abuse, it’s deep parental love.”
 - c) **But as I respond with sincerity and passion to these toxic ideas and the people who speak them, I must seek not to demonize those who are invested in the idols. Instead I must hold the humility and honesty to admit that all of us have been impacted by these ideas, even those of us who feel called to speak against them.**
 - d) Resist them as we may, they are still tangled up in our own selves. I can recognize the idol I’ve been invested in, I can name it as such, I can speak the truth that I don’t want to worship it any longer, but that alone does not purify my own field. It doesn’t address the way I have been shaped in my very being by the idol - my ways of thinking, my habits, my unconscious assumptions have all been shaped by my history with the idol. **Transforming those places in me, that is a life-long work that I need to commit to and submit to on an ongoing basis, and it is a work I alone am not qualified to do.** I can’t be trusted to weed the garden of my heart well alone. I need a harvester who is above and beyond me and can patiently lead me forward as I seek to extract the poisonous seeds. I need a diverse, gracious, loving community who can help me see the weeds I am missing. **And I need to be a part of offering that grace and patience and care to others who are also in the journey of transformation, a journey of change that I believe our tradition points to when it talks about the work of confession and repentance and new creation.**
 - e) Perhaps this is why Jesus doesn’t want us to move into weed whacking mode, so we can welcome that journey of transformation for those we encounter as well as for ourselves.
 - f) Of course there may be moments in our communal life in which we’ll need to say to someone, “I’m sorry, you can’t be here right now. Your presence is causing harm.” Even in a community that seeks to hold as much diversity as we do, **at some point we need to have a limit to what we can accommodate in order to protect the safety we also value.** But as we do so, I think it’s really important to keep our eyes focused on **confronting the destructive words and actions that might require a challenging response, over the people themselves.** We must remember that all of us at the core are messy human beings, capable of love and care and also cruelty and violence. And when we lose that capacity to see one another as complex human beings and reduce each other to labels that separate, into “us”es and “them”s, dangerous things can happen.
10. Some of you may have heard the **chilling speech that was given in Russia this week by Vladimir Putin.** In it, Putin was seeking to speak to his people about the threat of those in Russia he calls the “5th Column” - those within he understands to have pro-Western views. These are Russians who oppose the violence Russia is inflicting on Ukraine as unwarranted and unjust. Putin praised his Russian supporters as “true patriots” and called upon them to see their fellow citizens opposing his campaign in Ukraine as “scum and traitors’. He urged those “patriots” to “spit them out like a midge that accidentally flew into their mouths.” This is the very human desire to pull all the weeds on full display. And as

history has shown us sadly again and again, when this hyper-vigilant weeding is empowered with violent authority it can have devastating consequences.

11. Jesus himself preached restraint. He preached compassion. He preached accountability for words and actions without dehumanizing the ones we call to account. But poignantly **he preached all those things as one who himself would be zealously identified as a traitor, as a weed.** Jesus himself would be violently plucked and brutally killed; weeded out as the groups in power sought to make an example of him and intimidate other would-be-traitors into submission.
 12. Yet as our tradition teaches, the over-zealous domineering weed-whackers did not have the final word. Instead, on that first Easter, the Divine enacted a harvest moment. God stood on the side of the wheat unjustly weeded and let that wheat shine like the sun in their Divine kin-dom.
- C. And that brings me to I think our final takeaway from this passage. That rather than being weed-whackers, **We are called to thrive in the messy field by become nourishing, life-giving wheat.**
1. Interestingly, the little interpretation doesn't say it's the right ideas or theology or politics or certain practices that are the good seed that becomes wheat. No, it says it is the people of the kingdom of God that have been planted and are growing into wheat. It's people who are committed to the upside-down anti-empire values of the Divine way that are the hope of the field.
 2. I believe whatever mix of is in each of us of poisonous seeds and life-giving grain, **God is inviting us to be made more and more in the Divine image; to become the bread of life.** Perhaps this is why the Divine is patient in letting the field stay a hot mess, because maybe **God wants all of us to be transformed from that which poisons and tears down to that which sustains and builds up.** So even as we see the grievous weeds in our midst, and we lament the damage they have wrought on our field, we must not despair. We must not let those weeds choke out the wheat growing within us. We must nourish the beauty that has been planted in ourselves and our communities and trust that it has a life-giving power that cannot be overcome by weeds or those who would whack them. We must honor that the Divine is present with us, nurturing in us all that sustains and in the moments of harvest allowing these grains to shine. May we be a part of that important work, that the harvest may be rich and bountiful. Amen.

Questions for Reflection and Discussion

1. What about this story and the interpretation Matthew shares feels challenging to you? What feels helpful?
2. Do you have a hard time distinguishing between problematic ideas and the people who hold them? How has that impacted your relationships?
3. What might it mean to be "wheat" in "the messy field"? How might that look for you personally? How might it look for Haven as a community?