

STORIES THAT SHAPE US

PARABLES OF JESUS

“Wheat and Weeds”
Pastor Charlie Berthoud

Sunday, June 1, 2025

“Wheat and Weeds” | Matthew 13:24-30 | Pastor Charlie Berthoud

Today is our final Sunday of the series on the parables of Jesus. Parables rarely have easy answers or simplistic interpretations. Parables are meant to get us thinking.

“Parables are sometimes enigmatic, concealing even as they reveal. Parables are multivalent. When ‘explained’ they are sometimes reduced to allegories and lose some of their flexibility in the interest of clarity.” - Anna Case Winter

Jesus the teacher knows that life doesn’t usually have simple answers, so he teaches in parables, to help us think and ponder and wrestle, which over time helps us grow in faith, hope, and love.

Sometimes when we first look at a parable, we don’t immediately get a clear lesson as to “what it means”. Today might be one of those days.

STORIES THAT SHAPE US PARABLES OF JESUS	
Five Teaching Sections in Matthew	
The Sermon on the Mount	Mt. 5-7
Missionary Instructions	Mt. 10
Parables of the Kingdom	Mt. 13
Living in Community	Mt. 18
The End Time	Mt. 24-25

The gospel according to Matthew presents Jesus as a teacher, and there are five large teaching sections in Matthew.

Last week we reflected on the sheep and the goats in Matthew 25. Today we turn to chapter 13, the center of the gospel. The chapter has seven parables, more than any other chapter in the gospels. Most of them

are agricultural. And they all focus on the Kingdom of God, the Reign of God, the Realm of God.

Remember: Jesus began his ministry proclaiming the Kingdom, the Reign of God, inviting people to repent, to change, and to follow him and find new purpose.

Today’s parable, often called the wheat and weeds, presents a simple binary: the wheat is good, and the weeds are bad. There are several other binaries in Matthew: the wise builder and foolish builder, the good fish and the bad fish, and as we heard last week, the sheep and the goats.

My hunch is that Jesus didn’t think everyone, and everything could be strictly divided between

good and bad, blessed and cursed, in and out. I am pretty sure he realized the world and human nature are more nuanced than a simple binary.

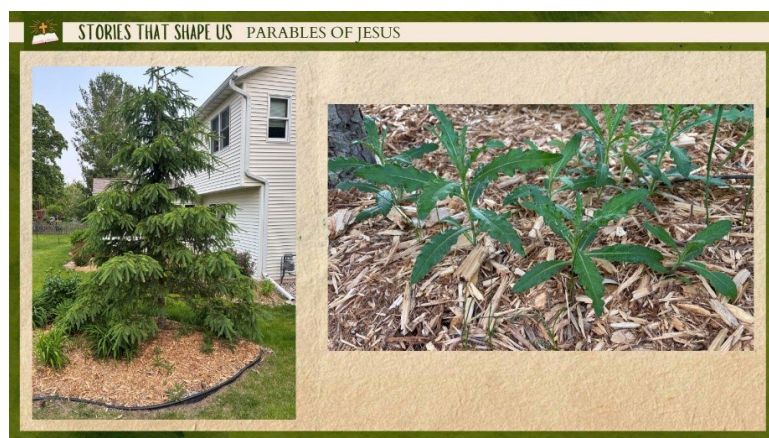
Instead, I think he used this language to surprise his followers, to jolt them into thinking.

It's also important to note that the parable of the wheat and weeds is one of those that has an allegorical explanation. Some scholars think the explanation was added on by the early church during a time of severe persecution. Given the brutality of that persecution, it's understandable that the we are good and you are bad allegorical reading was popular.

Our context today invites a more nuanced understanding. Listen for God's word from Matthew 13:

Jesus 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.'"

We have lots of flowers in our yard, and we have tomato and cucumber plants growing. My wife is the creative genius, and she does the majority of the work out there. I'm very grateful.



I've taken on responsibility for a patch of the garden which holds an evergreen tree, now about 15 feet high. Below that tree, we have placed a lot of mulch, and despite that, there are thistle weeds that grow very persistently and tenaciously.

So, when Jesus says to let the weeds and wheat grow together, I'm tempted to say that he is telling me I don't have to pull the weeds!

But Jesus isn't giving gardening advice.

From what I've read, in the parable Jesus was likely referring to darnel, a weed that looks a lot like wheat, so much so that it's also called false wheat. And the darnel's roots wrap around the roots of the wheat. Thus, it would be dangerous to the wheat if someone pulled out the weeds.

Jesus says that the weeds and the wheat can co-exist until harvest time.



That makes sense in light of this darnel weed. But what does it mean for us?

One thing this parable seems to suggest is that good and bad are interwoven in our world, in our communities, and probably in ourselves.

When we look honestly at ourselves, it's pretty clear that each of us has some "wheat" and some "weeds" within us. We're part saint, part sinner.

In Romans 7, the apostle Paul recognizes the mix of good and evil within him, giving thanks to God who in Jesus Christ is leading us away from evil.

When I want to do what is good, evil is right there with me... It wages a war against the law of my mind and takes me prisoner with the law of sin that is in my body. I'm a miserable human being. Who will deliver me from this dead corpse? Thank God through Jesus Christ our Lord!

This is why we pray "deliver us from evil" and this is why one of our membership and baptism vows is about turning away from sin and evil. The weeds of sin get in our hearts and our heads, and we see them in our words and our deeds.

This is why we have a prayer of confession every week. It's like doing some gardening, to help keep the weeds under control, and to remember that ultimately God is the gardener who will separate the wheat and the weeds within us.

The wheat and the weeds aren't just in us; they are around us.

Over the years, the church has understood Jesus' words to mean that the church and the world are full of wheat and weeds, full of good and bad, and that they are so intertwined that we can't fully extract one from the other.

Yes, we do our best to confront evil and make our communities as healthy as possible, but we recognize our limitations, since we all have some wheat and weed. So, while we leave the final

judgment, the separation work to God, who promises to separate the good and the bad, we can do our best to stay free from the weeds of sin.

One aspect of the parable that is lost to those of us who aren't growing wheat is apparently how similar the wheat and the weed appear.

This suggests to me that Jesus is saying the saints and the sinners look very similar, and we need to be careful about labeling and pointing fingers and judging each other.

The Christian church has a long and sad history of labeling entire groups of people as sinners, as "weeds" as bad, as evil. We're especially mindful of that today at PRIDE month begins.

In our current context, it's worth noting that Democrats and Republicans essentially look the same on the outside. Immigrants and US-born citizens look alike.

Despite knowing better, we're still very quick to label all of "those" people as bad, as evil, as sinners.

Bruce Springsteen has been in the news lately and his current tour is called the Land of Hope and Dreams, which is the title of a song he wrote over 25 years ago, which he has sung at various special events. Some versions include a gospel choir.

The song talks about a journey, leading to a new future. He sings:

This train
Carries saints and sinners
Carries losers and winners
Carries whores and gamblers
Carries lost souls
This Train
Dreams will not be thwarted
Faith will be rewarded
Hear the steel wheels singin'
Bells of freedom ringin'



Here at Covenant, we talk about the journey of faith, which feels like a train to the land of hopes and dreams. We're on that train with each other, each of us a little bit of a sinner and a little bit of a saint. The hope is that we're growing and changing and helping each other to do the same.

To close, I want to share a story about a young adult who went to church one Sunday with his grandmother. She was a regular at church, and she was very happy that her grandson was joining her. The grandson knew that grandma was sort of “old fashioned” and among other things did not approve of alcohol.

They sat in the pews, and the grandson noticed the disheveled man in front of them, who occasionally jerked his head back, as if he had a muscle twitch. Then the son noticed that the man had a flask, and the smell of alcohol was strong.

He was worried his grandmother was going to make a scene and ask the ushers to remove the man. But she didn't. She later told her son that the man with the flask was right where he needed to be. And during the service, when the time came for the passing of the peace, grandma looked the man in the eye, smiled, and said “May the peace of Christ be with you.”

Let us pray:

Holy God we thank you for life death and resurrection of Jesus, the one who came proclaiming your new kingdom, your realm, your reign. Help us to do all we can to free our hearts and our world from the weeds of selfishness, foolishness, greed, indifference. Help us to keep growing in faith, hope, and love. Amen.