

“Wheat and Weeds”
Mark D. Armstrong, Certified Lay Speaker
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Text: Matthew 13:24:30, 36-43 and Acts 9:1-19

Let us pray.

May the words of our mouths and the meditations of our hearts be pleasing in your sight, O LORD, our rock and our redeemer. Amen.

Erik Swenson once told me a story that I want to share with you this morning. As you may know, Erik is the band director at Haines Middle School here in St. Charles, where he has taught for nearly two decades. Before that, shortly after graduating from Illinois Wesleyan University, Erik was a band director at Fieldcrest, a rural school district located about 40 miles north of Bloomington, and also about 20 miles southwest of Streator, where I grew up.

One hot summer day when summer band was practicing, one of Erik’s students showed up late. When Erik asked boy to explain his tardiness (after all, a band practices best when it is all together), the boy said he had to “walk beans.” Now Erik, who was born and raised in Skokie, had never ever run across this term. Perhaps you haven’t either. How many of you know what it is to “walk beans”? And if you know what it is, how many of you have actually done it?

I both laughed and cringed when Erik told me this story, because I know what it means to “walk beans.” To “walk beans” means to walk through a soybean field and cut the weeds out of the rows of beans. These days, walking beans is largely a thing of the past, because better herbicides have been

developed that can kill weeds without harming the beans or the soil. But when I was growing up back in the 1970s, it was all done by hand. And yes, I walked beans. My mother came from a farm family, and my uncles farmed thousands of acres of land in central Illinois. In the summer of 1977 alone, I walked about 300 acres of beans on my uncle's farm on the banks of the Mississippi about 50 miles south of Quincy. (And by the way, 300 acres is about 272 football fields' worth of soybeans.)

I suppose walking beans was the first real job I ever had. My uncle would get me up at dawn, which came at about 5:15 a.m., and we'd get our tools out of the barn. The tools looked like three-irons, if you filed the club heads down so they were razor sharp on both sides. We'd then get in the truck and drive to whatever field we were working that day. We'd then wade into the bean field (the soybean plants came up to my waist), and walk down the rows, cutting out the milkweeds, buttonweeds, and anything else that wasn't a soybean plant. We'd work until about noon, then break for lunch. We'd pick up again at about 2 p.m., and then work until about 6, when we'd quit for the day. And the next morning at dawn, we'd start all over again.

Walking beans was hot, sweaty, tedious work; and make no mistake about it, I hated doing it. But as I read the parable of the wheat and the weeds in preparation for this sermon, the memories of walking beans came flooding back to me.

I remember asking my uncle, "Why do we walk beans in the hottest part of the year, when the soybeans are up to my waist and growing even higher?" You see, I was thinking that it would be better to walk beans in May, because the

temperature was cooler, the plants were shorter, and best of all I was in school and would not be available to do the job.

But he told me that in May, the plants were small, and the difference between a button weed (the most common weed we found) and a soybean plant was not very clear; one needed to wait until it was closer to harvest time to do the work, when the difference between the beans and the weeds was more obvious. And so, like in verse 30 of the parable, we worked in the summer when the plants were tall, first removing the weeds by cutting them down and letting them wither in the heat, to be followed later on by a harvest of soybeans, so that none of the soybeans would be damaged as the weeds were removed.

When Jesus used parables, he used common reference points as examples to make the uncommon better understood. In his day, everyone within earshot would have been familiar with farming practices, even if they were not farmers themselves. Today, not so much—an agricultural example about walking beans might not do the job for someone who grew up in, say Skokie. Knowing this, Jesus provides an explanation of the parable in verses 36-43. There is much for us to learn from both the parable and the explanation.

First, we learn that we are in a world with both “good” and “evil.” In verse 38, Jesus confirms that the good seeds are the “children of the kingdom,” while the weeds are the “children of the evil one.” We must always remember that Satan has no creative power of his own; God alone creates. The only thing Satan can do is to pervert God’s good creation. Therefore, any weeds in this garden must have originally been wheat.

When I was walking beans, I would often come across a cornstalk. It would be in the middle of the bean field, standing straight and tall, with a tassel on top, and ears at the side. It had, no doubt, sprouted from where corn was sown in the previous year—due to crop rotation, every bean field I walked had previously been a cornfield.

The first time I came across a corn stalk in a bean field, I stopped. Surely this wasn't a weed, was it? Didn't we grow as many acres of corn as we did soybeans? But my Uncle instructed me to cut it down. You see, even a cornstalk was a weed in the middle of a soybean field.

Now back to the parable. Jesus talks about the good seed, and then the "weeds", which are the "children of the evil one." Something that is good, and right, and wonderful in one location might be bad, and wrong, and terrible in another. Just as a cornstalk is good in a cornfield, it is a weed in a bean field. And any good thing can be twisted until it becomes a bad thing. And sometimes, from our vantage point in the field, the bad thing doesn't always look so bad—it even might look like a perfectly good thing. For instance, eating for nutrition is good; but eating past that point for its own sake can become the sin of gluttony (a sin, I confess, with which I am all too familiar).

And so we see that things that look like wheat *can actually be weeds*. Just as the small buttonweed plants can resemble soybeans, so something that looks right turns out to be wrong. If you have been following the Grand Sweep readings this past week, you can see an example of this. In Acts 5, we see the story of Ananias and Sapphira. Ananias and Sapphira were a couple who had joined the church either on the day of Pentecost or soon afterwards. They were apparently

a couple of some means, because they were landowners. And they sold a piece of property that they owned, promising to give all of the money to the church. After the sale, Ananias came to Peter, and laid the money at his feet. Sounds like wheat, right? It turns out that he was more like a weed. While claiming to give the entire amount to the church, he held some of the money back, with the full knowledge and consent of his wife.

But Peter somehow knew what had happened. We aren't told how Peter found out they had lied about the sale price of the property. (I suppose it would be ironic just checked the local tax assessor's office, wouldn't it?) But in any event, Peter knew what had happened and confronted Ananias, and then Sapphira.

"Ananias," Peter asked, "why has Satan filled your heart to lie to the Holy Spirit and to keep back part of the proceeds of the land? While it remained unsold, did it not remain your own? And after it was sold, were not the proceeds at your disposal? How is it that you have contrived this deed in your heart? You did not lie to us but to God!" And with that, Ananias fell down and died. Later that day, after a similar encounter with Peter, Sapphira fell down and died, as well.

So what corrupted this seeming Godly couple? Many commentators suggest they were corrupted by greed. My best guess is that it was not greed, but *pride* that did them in. You see just before this happened, Barnabas (the same Barnabas who traveled with Paul) sold a field that he owned, and gave all of the money to the church. We don't know why Barnabas did what he did—he may have been liquidating his holdings before he began his missionary work—but he

was no doubt lauded for his donation. And Ananias and Sapphira watched, perhaps jealously, wishing that they were thought of as well as Barnabas. And they could have been, had not they lied about the events of the property sale. For Peter was clear that their sin was not in keeping some of the money, but in lying to God. And so by choosing to embrace the *Weed of Pride* that Satan had sown in the field, they became like weeds themselves.

A second lesson of this parable is seen in the harvest. Just as the field was planted, it will be harvested at the end of the season. Jesus identifies the sower of the good seed as himself: the “Son of Man”. But at the end of the growing season, the harvesters will be angels under his command. The angels will gather the weeds to be burned in the fire, but gather the wheat so that they might “shine like the sun in the kingdom of their Father.” This confirms what Jesus has told us many, many, many times in the gospels: there will be a final judgment.

Now some churches and denominations let the final judgment dominate their theology. Earlier this year, a preacher named Harold Camping made what is now a rather well-known prediction that the rapture would take place this year on May 21—which, by the way, was Gina’s birthday. (I decided to get Gina a present anyway, just in case it didn’t happen; smart move, it turned out.) Mr. Camping has since revised his calculations, and he now proclaims October 21, 2011 as the day of judgment. I guess we’ll all find together this fall if he’s right.

But just as some churches emphasize the final judgment seemingly to the exclusion of all other things, other churches and denominations say little or nothing about it. I’m afraid we don’t talk about the final judgment very much in our church or denomination. The concept of a final judgment is a little upsetting

to some, and understandably so: if the plain words of Jesus are true, then there will come a time when some are excluded from heaven because of choices made here on earth.

But Jesus didn't shy away from the topic at all. Many of his parables address the last judgment head-on, and he very specifically instructs us to "keep awake", because we "do not know when the master of the house will come." Remember how Erik Swenson had never heard of walking beans? That didn't mean that such a thing didn't happen. And if we have been neglectful of "keeping awake" because we don't talk about Christ's return, that will not keep judgment day from coming either.

But finally, we have a third lesson from this parable: the weeds in this parable can, over the growing season, actually be turned to wheat.

In the second half of our Grand Sweep readings this past week, we have been introduced to a man who will dominate much of our remaining time in the program. But when we first meet him, he is decidedly weed-like. He was a young man who was both a Pharisee and Roman citizen—and fiercely proud of each. He hated the followers of Christ; and when he watched a young Christian named Stephen being executed for his faith, he was inspired to make the persecution of Christians his life's work. The scriptures tell us he broke into houses of Christians living in and around Jerusalem, dragging the occupants off to be held in prison until they could be tried like Stephen.

Once he had completed that task, he went to the high priest. Could he have blanket arrest warrants so that any Christians that he might find anywhere else be bound and sent back to Jerusalem for trial? The high priest must have

been impressed with the young Pharisee's work because he issued the warrants, and sent him to Damascus to continue what he was doing.

But on the road to Damascus, the young man met the risen Christ himself. And Saul of Tarsus, the Pharisee and Roman citizen, would be transformed into the Paul who would bring the Gospel of Jesus Christ to the gentiles.

Now make no mistake about it: this can't have been an easy transformation for Paul, even if it appears to be one. Reading Acts 9, it seems like he went from enforcer to apostle in a few days. But when we read the corresponding first-hand account in Galatians, we see that Paul took three years before finally going to Jerusalem to meet with Peter and the other leaders of the early church. No doubt, Paul was just as susceptible to pride as Ananias and Sapphira were. It took time to fully make the transition. But when the Master Farmer tends to his field, such things are possible: the One who changes water into wine can certainly change a weed into wheat.

And that is how it with us today. Each of us had been planted in God's field. But an evil one has sown weeds among us. Some of those weeds can even look very tempting to us, so much so that we are embracing them to the point of becoming weed-like ourselves.

And with today's lesson, we find that our field is also a crossroads. Each of us must decide whether to embrace the worldly weeds that can be so tempting, or to accept the care of the Master Gardener. Which one will you choose?

Heavenly Father, have mercy on us. Tend to us, the wheat of your field. Help us to grow with the waters of our baptism, nourish us with the soil of the Eucharist, and illuminate us with the light of your Son, so that on the last day we

may be safely gathered in with all the saints forevermore. In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit, Amen!