

Weeds in the Chocolate Factory

Sermon by James Brassard
from Text of Matthew 13:24-30, 36-43
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Charlie Bucket and Veruca Salt. A good seed, and a bad weed.
Charlie is honest, kind, brave and true.
Veruca is a spoiled rotten brat.
Both get a chance to enter the mysterious chocolate factory of Willy Wonka,
a place that has been sealed up tight and closed for a decade.

Charlie and Veruca have found golden tickets in their Wonka chocolate bars—and
because of this they get to go on a tour of the chocolate factory, along with three other
lucky children.

The tour guide is none other than the reclusive and eccentric Willy Wonka himself,
a part currently played by Johnny Depp in the movie “Charlie and the Chocolate
Factory.”

When the children walk through the factory doors, they enter an amazing world known
only to Willy and his staff, the Oompa-Loompas.
The tour is a dream come true for Charlie, a child born in poverty, but it turns into a
nightmare for the other members of the group.

I won't give away the story...except to say this: The children that disobey Willy's
orders—are herded into the bizarre environs and one by one are punished—meeting their
demise in strange and dramatic ways.

The good seed—Charlie - is spectacularly rewarded ..

You see what parents used to love about this story so beautifully written by Roald Dahl.
The good kids get rewarded, the spoiled and bad kids get what is coming to them.
It is a replay of the good vs. evil, light vs. dark dualism.
AND IN THE END, GOODNESS AND LIGHT TRIUMPH.

And **we love this because in real life**, it doesn't always work out this way.

Matthew 13 is the great parable chapter. Scholars call these the “Parables of Harvest”.
Last week we encountered the Parable of the Sower. The Sower casts out the seed and it
lands on a variety of soil—most either too shallow or rocky where it soon fails to thrive.
But that which lands on the good soil blessed with a divine "miracle grow" –produces
unheard-of yields. It is not the quantity that matters but the quality.

The mini parables that follow deal with the quality and power of faith.
Even a little faith, like that the size of a tiny mustard seed—can produce a large tree.
Faith is like the leaven in bread . . . a seemingly insignificant ingredient—without which
bread is flat and tasteless.

Jesus' purpose is to give clear instructions to followers.
The harvest is plentiful but you need to work it.
So go out and enthusiastically sow seeds among those who have not heard of Jesus.
Share the faith with everyone. But be realistic. Not everyone will be receptive.
Don't worry: What you lose initially in quantity ...you will later make up for in quality.
In the parable of the "Wheat and the Weeds," Jesus addresses the age-old question the church has always struggled with—often with disastrous results.
What do you do with the existence of evil among the people in the kingdom?

A landowner (clearly Christ) sowed seeds in the field. But while everyone was asleep the enemy (Satan) came along and sowed weeds among the good seed. As the plants came up, so did the weeds. At first the servants (Christ's followers) thought it was the fault of the landowner for sowing bad seed. But then they see that someone had sabotaged what the landowner had done. In a show of loyalty to the landowners, the servants wanted to immediately uproot the weeds. But the landowner wisely warned them of the devil's clever action. To uproot the weeds would also uproot the good wheat.
The landowner tells them to **let them grow together until harvest time** when the weeds would be separated and burned.

The weed mentioned here is a plant sometimes referred to as **bearded darnel**. In its early stages it **closely resembles wheat**, making it **almost impossible to identify**. Look at my visual aid in front of you. Two plants. One is a weed and one a young hibiscus. Can you tell them apart?
As the plants mature, the roots of the weeds and wheat intertwine, making it impossible to separate. Eventually separation is necessary because the darnel is both bitter and mildly toxic.
If the darnel is not removed prior to milling, the darnel ruins the flour.

So Jesus teaches that **wisdom, patience** and **faith** are required here. Wisdom to realize when to sit back and wait things out, patience to do just that and faith that the situation will be remedied in its own time.

Contemporary Christian listeners, like the disciples, see themselves as the wheat . These faithful believers look around and find themselves surrounded by unwelcome weeds in the field. Who among us has not struggled when you find yourself, sometimes unwittingly, entangled in these morally confusing days with destructive people and forces.

Coping is not easy—you get easily frustrated. .
“How do you expect me to soar with eagles when I work with a bunch of turkeys?”

We all know weeders. If you spend time with them, it's easy to become like them. Weeders always have the **best intention**. TRUE BELIEVERS~! Ideologues!
They believe that rooting out bad behaviors and chasing out bad people is what God wants us to do. We must **preserve the purity** of the church. We must maintain the **ideological integrity** of the political party.
Some believe we must aggressively legislate against the weeds that are growing.
Pharisees in Jesus' day were weeders. . . they considered Jesus a weed.

Saul before he became Paul was a weeder—and Stephen and early Christians were weeds.

It is interesting to note that Jesus **didn't weed from those around him.**

Judas, who would betray him, was with him until the end.

Peter, who would deny him, was there all along too.

Jesus knew that all of his disciples would run away when Romans decided to kill him, yet he didn't weed them out for being bad followers. Jesus' patience was richly rewarded!

Those who work in the federal government know that each administration tries to design a system that rewards and motivates those who work productively and to find a way to weed out the deadbeats.

The problem is that **you can't always trust those doing the weeding.**

Will the weeding remove many good workers whose ideas challenge the agenda of the weeders?

Ask again: Is it a weed or a healthy plant?

Friends in **Zimbabwe** send e-mails about the terrible famine condition. It will get worse before it gets better. One cause of the famine is the conflict over farms that have been owned by white colonialists, sometimes for several generations. The government, a very corrupt one, is in the process of confiscating these farms and turning ownership over to black natives. But since that fight has been going on for years—crops have been neglected in the field if they even get planted at all. The result is devastating.

How do we handle the work of the devil in our midst?

Just ignore it? Or try to root it out.

I was fortunate to grow up in a family and a church community that grew strong and faithful because it emphasized **growing wheat instead of judging the weeds.**

Although I heard probably twenty sermons on Matthew's parables—I cannot remember any of them emphasizing the scary warnings Matthew attached: the weeds will be gathered and thrown into the fiery furnace.

These fiery judgment stories have been used to terrify children and youth. Matthew, like the book of Revelation, uses warnings to keep the faithful on the straight and narrow.

I found it intriguing that the concept of a particular **section of hell reserved for the punishment of sinners did not enter the Old Testament scriptures until after Israel** had experienced the trauma of being exiled in Babylon. Before that time the word “Sheol” had conveyed the **general dwelling place of all the dead.**

After the national trauma—returning exiles who endured torture and slavery, death -- took refuge in the thought that there would be punishment for their tormentors, **if not in this world --- then in the next.**

Taoist and Confucians have a well developed tradition of graphically depicting hell in order to preserve the social order. One of the major tourist attractions in Singapore is a kind of amusement park depicting the **10 courts of the Confucianism hell.**

Statues of demons stand at the gate, and visitors, mostly families with impressionable

small children, pass through the dark, spooky rooms filled with sculptures depicting liars having their tongues pulled out, prostitutes boiled in oil, drug dealers chained to hot pillars on which they slowly cooked, and stones grinding up people who have cheated on taxes or disobeyed their parents.

The *Worth* magazine reporter who wrote the story said,

“You don't want to know what happens to people who **neglect their duty** toward the elderly.” The park is enormously popular with parents to bring their kids to learn right and wrong.

Look at the **dramatic transformation in Singapore**—going from a corrupt and decaying swamp to a prosperous international city in 30 years. It's hard to argue with success.

Contrast that **stern “actions have consequences” message** with the way we indoctrinate children in our American culture.

When they're little: Sally, Do that again and you will have a timeout---and when she keeps at it--- counting to 3.

When they're teens: If you don't do your homework and clean your room---I won't let you watch the adult version of *Grand Theft Auto*—the San Andreas version. Beating up cops—live sex. Teen: NO—I'LL DO ANYTHING MOM!

But **when I read this parable**...nowhere in the text was there the slightest justification for our being judgmental of others. In fact, the parable was a powerful injunction against just that.

Christian history not pretty. The Inquisition —which went on for 250 years- was horrible beyond belief. Thousands were slaughtered in order to preserve a **strict orthodoxy** or to force conversion on non-believers.

That is not to say that there is not a divine- human co-operation in building the kingdom of God . . .

Beware of arrogance that causes us to self-righteously judge and ruthlessly weed out those that don't conform to our standards...because the difference between the wheat and the tares is not immediately obvious.

Instead this parable sends a strong message to focus on nurturing the faith of everyone so we might truly be good "seed producing" fruit for the glory of Jesus Christ. The problem is that most Christians have shallow roots and are not fertilized and watered. **Adult education is lacking.**

We need a solid foundation in the Bible and basic beliefs. Then we need skills to interpret life in a morally confusing world.

We need a clear identity---Follow Christ instead of the seductive and subtle forces of the culture.

YEARS AGO a sociology professor at Johns Hopkins assigned his class to interview 200 boys in a city slum in Baltimore. “On the basis of your findings, predict their future,”

were the instructions given to the class.

Shocked at what they saw in these slums, the students estimated that 90 % of those interviewed would someday serve time in prison...if they made it that far.

Twenty years later the same professor asked another class to locate the survivors of the 200 boys and compare what happened. Of the 180 they could find, only 4 had ever been in prison.

Why had the prediction been so far off? It didn't make sense considering the poverty and violence and broken families and other social ills in that neighborhood.

After interviewing the boys (now grown) they discovered a **common denominator**. One hundred of them remembered having had the same high school teacher, Miss O'Rourke, who had a tremendous influence on them at that time.

After a long search they found **Miss Sheila O'Rourke** in a Memphis nursing home.

When asked for an explanation of how she had so greatly influenced these boys she looked puzzled. "ALL IF EVER DID WAS LOVE EVERY ONE OF THEM."

The over arching concern of Jesus is for the health of the wheat, not the destruction of the weeds.

In Thomas Friedman's, "**The World is Flat**," he describes interviewing young people in Ramallah on the West Bank who were members of Yassar Arafat's paramilitary organization.

He was struck by the fact that although injustices exist in the Israeli-Arab dispute and some dubious American foreign policy initiatives feed the helplessness, the real root of the problem is that most Arabs live under authoritarian regimes that deprive tens of millions of young people of opportunities to achieve their full potential through good jobs and modern schools.

In his discussions, Thomas was struck by the **mood swings** of the young men—they swung from **suicidal despair** to **dreamy euphoria**. When talking to one of the youths, the only one in college, studying engineering—he noticed two pictures in the young man's wallet. He asked him who were the people in the pictures.

One was Arafat's—if the Israelis were to kill him, he would join the "Martyrs in waiting." He would help turn the region into a living hell. He was willing to die for Arafat.

The other picture was of his girlfriend. When asked about what he wanted to do with his life, he waxed eloquent about going to the University of Memphis, where his uncle lived, to become a computer scientist and he was excited about getting married to his girlfriend so they could build a life together.

The possibilities of a career in computer technology fascinated him—he was very motivated.

Here is a **good seed**—living in place where only the only focus is on weeding out evil.

In killing the weeds, they were killing the good seed as well.

John Maxwell relates an experiment by two art teachers who did a grading experiment

for two groups of students.

The ceramics teacher announced on the opening day of class that he was dividing the class into two groups. All those on the left side of the studio would be graded solely on the QUANTITY OF WORK THEY PRODUCED. All those on the right—solely on QUALITY.

His procedure was simple: on the final day of class he would bring in his bathroom scales and weigh the work of the quantity group.

50lbs.- A ; 40lbs -B and so on.

Those being graded on quality however, needed to only produce one pot—albeit a perfect one—to get an A.

Well, grading time came and a curious fact emerged: the works of highest quality were all produced by the group being graded for quantity. It seems that while the quantity group was busily churning out piles of work—and learning from their mistakes and perfecting their methods—the quality group sat around theorizing about perfection, and in the end had little more to show for their efforts than grandiose theories and a pile of dead clay.

Friends, let us focus seriously on growing ourselves and nurturing others to be good wheat. Let us acknowledge that we will make mistakes. Accept that we live in a corrupt world---evil often surrounds us in subtle and seductive packages.

God is not through with us yet---be patient. Grow strong.
Amen.