

## **“Tending the Field”**

**The Reverend Allison Caudill**

**St. Luke’s Episcopal Church – Anchorage, Kentucky**

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The Gospel passage we hear this morning from Matthew, known as the parable of the Wheat and the Tares, or the Wheat and the Weeds, is one of a handful of moments when we are privy alongside the disciples to a private lesson on the parables, to a tutoring session with Jesus. The crowds received the parable, but the disciples who joined Jesus inside the house received the explanation, a key describing the meaning of each moving part within the story. Their personal relationships with Jesus, their proximity and faithfulness to wrestling together with his teachings, have granted them the opportunity to ask for an explanation, and Jesus obliges. But even with this detailed teaching, theologians and interpreters over the centuries have reached different conclusions about the true application of this parable. Augustine, a great early theologian of the church, interpreted this parable as a portrait of the church’s lived experience, to warn and to affirm for the disciples that the earthly church would always be an indecipherable mix of weeds and wheat, of good and evil people. Reinhold Niebuhr, a more modern American theologian, argued that this parable is meant to teach the church humility, to understand that any claim on perfection within a human institution is hubris, doomed. Stanley Hauerwas, a contemporary theologian, emphasizes the significance of patience within this parable, calling on the church to recognize in itself the hastiness of the servants to pull up the weeds and the roots of the good wheat with them.

All of these Christians, and more, have spent much time and prayer in wrestling with the ways the church might see herself in this seemingly simple but deeply complex parable. We, as

Christians, have a duty to continue that wrestling and questioning that was initiated by the first curious disciples and continued by faithful disciples throughout history. What does this parable mean? If the sower is Jesus, the field is the world, the good seeds are children of the kingdom and the bad seeds are the children of the evil one, how do we locate ourselves? Is it hubris to assume that we are the good seeds? Is it fatalistic to say that there will always be good and bad seeds sown together? And what about those angelic harvesters, and that fiery furnace? What does it mean to look for the kingdom to come, if with it comes weeping and gnashing of teeth? Upon further reflection, this explanation that Jesus has offered his disciples might actually make this parable even more of a challenge than it first appeared.

The one piece of the parable that I have not been able to stop thinking about is also the one aspect Jesus does not give us a definition for. The slaves who see the weeds and the wheat growing up together in the field. They run to the landowner and ask him where the bad seeds have come from, if he was not the one who sowed them. When told that an enemy is responsible for the sabotaged field, the slaves then ask if they should go out and remove the weeds from the field. Jesus tells us who the sower represents, and who the wheat and the weeds represent, even who the enemy really is. But the servants, slaves serving a master, are not named, their significance is not explained. Another opportunity to wrestle, to ask questions of Jesus in prayer and in conversation with one another. Who are these people who see the weeds in the field and offer to root them out?

This week I linger on these nameless people. They look out over a field, the world, and see a mix of good and bad, of potential for good fruit and potential for poisonous seeds. They see a potential for harm, and in their haste to protect the good they forget that valuable things are often fragile. The sower, Jesus the Christ, looks out over the same world and sees that it can all

be worked for the good, in the end. Jesus acknowledges in this parable that evil is very real, that sin exists and must ultimately be rooted out. But even the weeds that will be discarded at harvest time will be given a meaning, a purpose- they will become fuel for the fire, the source of light and warmth that feeds and shelters the family home. Even those things that are planted and which do not bear fruit have something to teach us. Even that which the enemy intends for evil, the Lord will work for good, in the hands of those who serve him. The sight that can only come of heaven allows Jesus to look out over the same world where we see chaos, and see the good fruit that will come at the harvest, and in this parable he invites us to wait with him patiently for that good end. From time to time, we may be granted such discernment as to know the weeds from the wheat, and to separate them before the good grains are choked by the tares. But by and large, the log in our own eye will prevent us from seeing clearly the difference between what must be harvested and what must be thrown away. It is not the roots that are our responsibility, but the fruit. Jesus tells us that we will know what has been sown by him and what the enemy has cast by the fruits of these labors, and that at harvest time these two will be easily separated. For now, warns the parable, we do not know yet what are weeds and what are wheat in this soil. So what are we to do?

We must do what the Lord asks of his servants. We must tend the field. We must water and feed the earth. We must protect the crops from scavenging animals, and pay close attention for signs of pestilence or sickness. We are not to ignore the weeds, or to relinquish our part in the work of the field. When the field begins to bear fruit, when the wheat begins to ripen and the weeds begin to tangle- then we will be shown what is good and what must be cleansed. When the fruits of our labor begin to show in this field that has been given to our care, when the reapers come, then we will understand what is the bread of life and what are the falsehoods planted by

the enemy. In the end, we will be fed, for the harvest is plentiful. For now, we are the laborers, tending the field in hopes of an abundant harvest. It is hard work, and often slow work. But this is the soul work, the work of the church. Let anyone with ears to hear listen. We still have work to do.