

‘On Being the Wheat, Not the Weedwhacker’ Based on Matthew 13:24-30, 36-43
Delivered on Sunday, July 19, 2020, Absecon Presbyterian Church by Drew Mangione, pastor

This reading from Matthew’s gospel should speak volumes to us in today’s culture. In families, society, politics and religion, it seems everyone is ready to judge one other – to decide who is “in” the group, and who is “out,” or as it is now said, “canceled.” Indeed, we live in an age where ideological purity is expected everywhere, because our willingness to trust each other has been cut to zero.

The irony of this is that we think it is something new, but it is not – the world loves to cancel. It’s simply that the ability to ‘cancel’ used to belong *only* to the rich and powerful, but now, with social media and the immediate rage of the internet, ordinary people have this power. Cancellation is no longer only a tool of governments, the rich & powerful, but now, it feels like anyone on social media can cancel someone. The obsession over who is in and who is out is frightening because it leaves no room for mercy, no room for love, no room for God.

But before I go much deeper into this, I want to give you an outline of today’s sermon. First, I’m going to tell you about a deceptive little weed named ‘darnel.’ You may be familiar with the parable, yet you might never have seen this word, but ‘darnel’ is the most literal translation and it carries a deep meaning, which is why I read the Revised English Version today. It’s as if Jesus had a reason why he used this word when he did.

Second, I will take you through the text to point out a glaring hole in Jesus’s explanation. Indeed, Jesus skips over something, which again, I’d have to assume, he meant to do. You see, the Word of God made flesh says a lot when he chooses not to say much. So, I think it’s important to consider what Jesus left out of this parable, in order to understand what we are expected to be, or not be.

And third, we are going to talk about something that absolutely no ordinary person, should ever consider doing with chickens. I won’t say any more on that right now, so that you will have to listen to the end, but all of this, I hope, will help us understand our calling to bear fruit, a calling that does not include doing the work that only God can do.

So, first things first, you probably want to know “What exactly is darnel?” As I said earlier, even if you are familiar with the parable, this word may be new to you. Other English translations render this specific plant to be a “cockle” or “tare,” or the translators, as is now most common, use the generic term “weeds.” But in the Greek of Matthew’s gospel the word is *zizania*, which is a specific kind of plant that in English we call ‘darnel.’ This plant is a mimic weed that looks just like wheat, that is, until it is fully grown and bears its grain, and you can see that it has strange fruit.

This matters because darnel is very hard to distinguish from wheat for most of its life. It matters because darnel’s mimicry of wheat has followed wheat’s genetic changes, so that as farmers bred wheat to grow taller and carry certain characteristics, darnel went right along with the wheat, copying it over time as well. Furthermore, darnel carries a fungus that when eaten by humans is intoxicating, meaning that even as the wheat farmer works to destroy it to keep the wheat crop pure, others have tried to cultivate the plant as a drug, making it nearly impossible to fully eliminate.

Tares and cockles, on the other hand, as with most other weeds, are easy to identify. Both tares, also known as 'vetch,' and cockles, also known as 'corn cockles,' grow to lower heights than wheat and each has its own purple flower. Tares and cockles are annoying to a farmer but pose no threat to the wheat. It would be easy for the most untrained gardener to pick them out.

But darnel has a grain head that looks very much like wheat, making it difficult to distinguish. A person might pull wheat, thinking it is darnel, and leave darnel thinking it is wheat. You can see why the farmer in the parable wants trained reapers to cull the field. I think the reason Jesus says *zizania*, or in Aramaic *ziznim*, is to warn us about good and evil, namely that they can be virtually indistinguishable, except by God and God's angels. Jesus is saying that it is dangerous for us to think we decide which is which.

We see this emphasized also in what is left out of Jesus's explanation of the parable. You see, in the parable, the Kingdom of Heaven is like a man who sowed good seed, and the explanation is that the One who sowed the good seed is the Son of Man. Indeed, Jesus points to his being the meeting place of heaven and earth, the One who is both fully human – a Son of Man – and divine. He is sowing the seeds of heaven into the field, which is the world.

The enemy is the one that sows the darnel in the field and then abandons that seed. This enemy is the devil or *diabolos* in Greek, a word which means 'the divider.' The intent of sowing the bad seed is to divide and corrupt the good seed. He wants a poor harvest, to see children of the Kingdom pulled up and destroyed with weeds. But the Son of Man said to leave the darnel to grow with the wheat, until the end so the angels can do all of the reaping.

But in the parable, Jesus mentions that there were servants who questioned the farmer, and the servants asked why there is darnel among the wheat, and even offer to pull it out. But in his explanation of the parable, Jesus does not mention these servants at all. We know from the parable that they are different from the reapers, but we are given no explanation as to who they represent.

I believe this lack of an analogy comes because Jesus is speaking to the Apostles alone away from the crowd. He is speaking to his servants then and there, whom he is training to send out to be the church. Their natural assumption might be to believe that they are the servants, that they might offer to take charge of weeding the Kingdom. But Jesus doesn't assign anyone the role of these servants, and he does give any human authority to be a weedwhacker.

The African theologian Augustine of Hippo said it is the angels' job because they will not make mistakes. The early church leader said to his congregation, "I tell you the truth my beloved, even in these high seats [of church leadership] there is both wheat and darnel, and among the laypeople, there is wheat and darnel." He said the good should tolerate the bad and let the bad imitate the good. This is from arguably the church's greatest and most influential theologian of all time, who was one of the most heralded defenders of the faith against heresies. Augustine said that only God and the angels can rightly distinguish between good and evil, or at least, they are the only ones who can do so reliably and with certainty.

Which brings me at last to the poultry, and why very few people should ever attempt to sex chickens. No, it's not what it sounds like. No one should do that. This is a sermon people. No,

sexing chickens is the art of determining whether a hatchling is male or female. Roosters are bad for business, but hens are the moneymakers. But it is not until a chicken is maturing that you can tell the difference. Unlike mammals, the sex organs of male and female birds look the same, or at least look the same on the outside to the untrained eye. So, to maximize profits and limit wasted resources, the poultry industry has long had a secret weapon, the highly trained chicken sexer.

Japanese poultry farmers perfected this art and even a method for teaching it 100 years ago. The master chicken sexer takes on apprentices and trains them on the job. There is little to teach by formal instruction, so the apprentice learns by doing. The apprentice learns first how to “vent” the chicken, gently squeezing the chicks to expose their extremely small insides. Squeeze too tight and a baby bird will be crushed, too soft and you cannot get even the slightest glimpse. Yet, even after venting, the differences are small and hard to notice.

The apprentice goes through hundreds of birds, putting them in bins for male and female. The master then follows the apprentice double checking the work. They repeat this process until the apprentice becomes so proficient, that the master does not need to make any corrections. The best chicken sexers can go through 1,500 chicks per hour with 98 percent accuracy.

This matters because every egg that hatches has the potential for profit or loss. So, if the sexer does not weed out the young roosters from the egg laying hens, then the farmer is paying to feed and care for chickens that cannot be sold. You see, like the darnel in Jesus’s parable, roosters are destroyed, discarded as trash. So also, if the sexer discards the hens along with the roosters, then there will be fewer chicken to provide revenue, either by laying eggs or being sold for meat. The handful of roosters that do survive, are only needed keep the species going.

Because this skill is rare and difficult to teach, chicken sexers are paid very well, tet there is a shortage of people capable or willing to do the job, since it also bears an emotional toll of sending many cute little baby birds to die, not as food, but merely as trash. So, the poultry industry is always trying to find new ways to sex chickens, including raising chicken breeds whose baby hens have long feathers, and technology that scans birds like a human chicken sexer. But still, a top-notch chicken sexer is like an angel in the poultry industry. They are only ones capable of making this life or death decision accurately.

Yet despite the moral conundrums people have about condemning roosters to die as trash, there is unfortunately no shortage of people in the church and in our society at large ready to condemn others. No shortage of people who claim the specialized skills of a spiritual, political or societal chicken sexer. When it comes to determining the value, or lack thereof, of certain people, deciding who belongs among us and condemning those who don’t, seems to be something many of us love to do.

We have no shortage of people to pull weeds in the church and outcast people. We believe we have the discernment of angels But as Jesus warned, in the church this has dire consequences for God’s Kingdom. How much wheat is lost with the darnel? And how much darnel is left behind? This is not to say we cannot know right from wrong in our action or behaviors, which we do have the ability to discern. But that we cannot judge the hearts of people as good or evil in God’s eyes. Whether they belong in God’s Kingdom.

The fact of the matter is that despite this parable and Jesus's prohibition against judgement, the church has been front and center in the cancel culture for centuries, certainly, for as long as it has held a position of power and influence in culture, often and unfortunately, expelling or condemning people to death. This is our history in the Protestant church too, lest we think this is just something done by the Roman Catholic Church in the middle ages.

But the truth is that Jesus was the victim of the cancel culture 2000 years ago, condemned and crucified to silence his critique of the religious establishment, and hanged on a cross as a revolutionary threat to Rome and the Judean leaders. After his resurrection, those same leaders targeted his followers, trying to cancel the good news by persecuting and killing Christians.

Since Christianity became legal in Rome, culture has infiltrated the church to do this, and even today, in every branch, we find people pushing people out for merely teaching as Jesus did, because the truth Jesus teaches – the hard truth that convicts us – that makes it really hard to cling to this world and be part of God's Kingdom. These teachings almost always go against political power and political agendas.

When we read this text we have to think about what position we are reading it from. When we read this text from a position of power, I think we focus on who gets destroyed, likely because we all have concerns and nagging doubts about whether we measure up. But for the persecuted and suffering in the early church reading this text, it was likely a big comfort to them as they sought Christ with all they had, and yet suffered still under the thumb of the strong and powerful, both in the culture around them and sadly, within the church. Knowing that they were doing all they could to be Christ like and change the world, they trusted that God would protect them eternally and make it all right in the end.

After this service is over, I want you to read this gospel passage again by yourself. As you read it, I want you to honestly gauge your reaction to the parable & explanation. If you are like me, you may have a sense of fear come over you – *am I the darnel?* This is a valid fear and I hope it leads to repentance in a desire to be wheat.

Or maybe you're like me again, in other times when I've read this text, and you think about who is really a darnel? Wanting to look away from personal shortcomings, it's easier to just judge others. I'm guilty of this reaction too, so I hope you will let the text convict you, and help you focus on being wheat, not a weedwhacker or some spiritual chicken sexer.

Third, as you read the text you may feel bad for the darnel and wonder about its purpose. You may, as I have in working through this text, wonder if you are both darnel and wheat. Certainly, in my early years there were plenty of people who would have gladly dismissed me as darnel, even as I was sure that I was wheat, and that had just got wrapped up in weeds in a rebellious phase.

There is a great deal from my life that I might have good reason to confess right now, if I hadn't already confessed it many, many times before to God. I still need to confess it and be truthful about who I am. I would do that right now with you, but I would need dozens of pages just to scratch the surface. Indeed, I do confess I'm no different from any of you in that I too am tempted to chase false gods, like wealth and comfort, power and popularity. I am here to remind you

that grace is not earned – it is unmerited favor God shows us.

Remember that forgiveness is not a license to sin, but it exposes sin and convicts us. Forgiveness doesn't accept our excuses but offers mercy in lieu of punishment. The desire to 'cancel' others for what we view as their sins, is a desire to be God's weedwhackers or spiritual chicken sexers.

But I think Jesus wants us to look at the fact that he is God and that he shared in our humanity. Indeed, that the One who created all things was humble enough to be part of creation, to live as we live, to die on the cross, to be canceled by the powers of this world.

But this only showed us that he could not be canceled, by his rising again to new life. It shows us that when we trust in his mercy, his judgement, then we too will not be canceled, but instead have life eternal.

Friends, if we are to find ourselves in this parable, let us look at the wheat, and seek to bear fruit in this world as the Son of Man, our Lord Jesus did, through mercy and love, and through forgiveness and grace – humility – to hear the challenges of those on the outside looking in, and welcoming them as Jesus did, working with them for justice.

We live in a world that teaches us that might makes right, and too often uses power to silence those who are hurting. But it is in the hurting, where we find Christ, our Savior.

And friends, if you are concerned that you may be the darnel, afraid of condemnation, turn to Christ right now and remember that he died *for us*, and for our salvation too. Indeed, even if you fear that you have fallen short, remember that we all have. Not a one of us attains the glory of God on our own.

The truth is that there is no wheat, apart from the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, and ultimately, the harvest is his righteousness that is put in us. Indeed, as Augustine said, let the darnel imitate the wheat. Let us bear fruit for Christ's Kingdom, but not by weeding out and canceling those who hurt, but by lifting up the oppressed and marginalized, the poor and the struggling, to give up power, as Christ did on the cross, in order that all might have life.

Let us refrain from our impulse to feel like we are good based on our judgement of others to be evil. Instead, let us focus on doing what is right, by repenting of our own sin first, and striving to be creators of justice and joy, compassion and peace – Love. Let us share Christ's reconciliation, indeed, reconciling all things, by lifting each other up to God in Jesus's name. For then we will be known by our fruit, by our love, because it will be Christ's fruit, Christ's love, that we share. Amen.

Word Search Puzzle

from Pinawa.Church/puzzles (use for free distribution only)
words in a straight line left to right or top to bottom

W P A R A B L E F I R E T D R A B C
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Words in the puzzle are printed in *bold italics*.

(*Matthew 13:36-43 NRSV*) *Then he left the crowds and went into the house. And his disciples approached him, saying, "Explain to us the parable of the weeds of the field." He answered, "The one who sows the good seed is the Son of Man; the field is the world, and the good seed are the children of the kingdom; the weeds are the children of the evil one, and the enemy who sowed them is the devil; the harvest is the end of the age, and the reapers are angels. Just as the weeds are collected and burned up with fire, so will it be at the end of the age. The Son of Man will send his angels, and they will collect out of his kingdom all causes of sin and all evildoers, and they will throw them into the furnace of fire, where there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth. Then the righteous will shine like the sun in the kingdom of their Father. Let anyone with ears listen!*