

**A Sermon preached by the Rev. Anne Slakey
July 19, 2026**

**The Eighth Sunday after Pentecost
St. Paul's Episcopal Church, Sacramento, California**

“Weeds”

In today's parable Jesus presents us with an interesting combination of things. On the one hand, the main image of the parable, as I know from experience, is absolutely grounded in physical reality. Also, the advice to believers about what to do and what not to do in their current situation is simple and practical. On the other hand, the parable exists in a thought world where I'm not completely comfortable, a world of good and evil, a world where the end of days is coming and the evil ones will be thrown into the fire. Can we take some parts of the parable and reject others? Or must we buy into the whole?

Let me start with the part of the parable that is most grounded in physical reality. For about five years, I lived in Eastern Oregon and Idaho, in the Snake River Valley. It was interesting because it was farming country, and crops were grown right up to the edges of town. As in Israel, there were two harvests, spring and fall. In both places in spring, the winter wheat was harvested. In Israel, in fall, it was grapes and figs and olives, but in Oregon it was Onions.

The harvests have festivals attached to them, which shape Jesus' journeys. He also has many parables about grapes and figs and wheat,. In John, he tells the disciples “the fields are white for the harvest”, so pray urgently for laborers. And that is exactly what happens to winter wheat. It's green all through the winter, but when spring comes and it starts to get hot, the wheat dries out. It has to be dry to be harvested. The fields turn this beautiful pale gold, almost white. So much to my surprise, as I was driving between towns, I saw a wheatfield, and in the middle of it, sticking out like a sore thumb, a giant, prickly, dark green weed. Jesus was right! It was impossible to miss, and at this point, it would be an easy task to go through the field uprooting the weeds before harvesting the wheat. So that is the physical grounding of the parable. It would be a very familiar sight to Jesus' listeners. Not having grown up with it, it was unforgettable to me once I saw it.

The parable also has simple, practical advice for believers. In Jesus' first telling of the parable, it is slaves or servants who approach the Master Farmer. They are disturbed to see weeds growing among the wheat. When they ask the master how it happened, he says that the weeds were sown by the Enemy. Now

the servants think they know what to do, and they ask the Master “Do you want us to go and gather the weeds?” And don’t we always think we know what to do in the presence of evil, or imagined evil. Let’s root it out! Only the good belong in this field.

The Master has a different strategy. And that is to leave the evil and the good growing side by side. Why? In tearing out the evil, you might damage the roots and tender growth of the good. I also think, because I’ve certainly done this, you might mistake wheat for weeds while they are both green. No, the Master says, leave it until the time is right and its obvious what is what, and then go in to separate the two.

I think the parable is right, that in trying to get rid of evil, root and branch, as humans, we do more harm than good. As an example of the kind of foolishness crusaders can get up to, did you know that a highly placed official plans to measure the testosterone levels of American soldiers? Annually? His idea is that he’ll be able to weed out those who aren’t fierce and manly enough to be ideal soldiers. Never mind that there’s no accurate measure, because levels fluctuate throughout the day. Never mind that there is no evidence more testosterone makes for a better soldier. Like so many have, he is ready to head out with a warped idea and a magnifying glass, and root up the good and bad together.

Here’s another example from a Church in Orange, maybe New Jersey, maybe Southern california. I found it on Buzzfeed’s Sign of the Week. The sign reads “Surfers, Skateboarders, Musicians, Artists, Vegetarians, Occupiers, Activists, Addicts and Fornicators are all going to Hell! Repent Now! “ That’s quite a mixed list, and whoever made it seems very confident about it.

The thing is, Jesus, here and elsewhere, tells us not to be confident about it. Here, he says you might do more harm than good. Elsewhere, he warns us that when we occupy ourselves with the wrongdoings of others, we tend to overlook our own faults. Judge not, lest you be brought to judgement. Alongside a concrete image, the parable gives concrete advice.

Its when I look at the whole thought world of the parable that I start to get uneasy. There’s the problem of the enemy, just who is he? There’s the problem that the weeds and the wheat seem to have fixed natures. They are either good or bad, and the bad are headed for the fires of hell.

In my own experience, I and others are more of a mix of good and bad. As Paul says, we are a mix of flesh and spirit. I do ok most days, but then I’m put on hold by customer service, and by the time someone answers the phone I’m frothing at the mouth.

If you push too hard at the images in any parable, you'll come to something like this. And that's because parables are not theological treatises, they are stories, fables, told to make a particular point.

But I don't want to let my discomfort blind me to the fact that the parable points to a reality, the existence of evil. Greed and obfuscation are preventing us from doing anything about global warming. In the Sudan, in Myanmar, in Russia, elites are inflicting terrible suffering on their own people in the name of power. Unbelievable suffering and destruction goes on in Palestine in the name of rooting out terrorists. Evil is real, it does exist, and it is present here as well.

A couple of times, I've been asked if I could forgive Hitler. After thinking about it, my answer is that I can barely imagine evil on that scale, I cannot understand the mind and heart that would carry it out. Forgiveness on that scale is a decision which, in all humility, I leave up to God. The same is true of the evils I've named above. The point is that evil is real. Staying in the world of the parable, I am glad it is the angels' job to weed it out.

Jesus invites us to look to a world where not only evildoers but all the causes of evil will be rooted out. Paul tells us that creation will be set free from its bondage to decay and will obtain the freedom of the glory of the children of God. In the meantime, we pray as Jesus taught us. We look for the coming of the kingdom, we pray for the grace to forgive and be forgiven, and we ask to be delivered from evil. Amen.