

Wheat and Weeds

Jesus mostly doesn't explain his parables. When he does it's only to his closer followers, and not to the crowds. There is actually debate among scholars about this passage. Did Jesus really offer an explanation or did Matthew or someone in Matthew's church add the explanation later because they didn't want to leave it just hanging there.

Parables aren't really meant to be explained. The point of parables is for the listener to wrestle with them. What they will mean to individual hearers will vary. They won't even always hit the same person the same way at different times. And some will come up empty.

Which always then begs the question, why should preachers preach on them at all, and how?

How do we let the parables have their impact without tying them up all neat in a bow?

This morning, I'll try not to tie them up too neatly. What I'm hoping is that I'll leave you still sort of wondering and wrestling. The only way I really know how to do that is to take a couple of them and offer some different interpretative possibilities. Then you will have to take them and wrestle with them yourselves.

That often makes some of us uncomfortable. We may think there's a way of interpreting scripture that is not open to debate. But there are five parables here and only one gets an explanation. Even the one explanation doesn't settle all the questions we might be left with.

So, let's start with that one. First, remember most of the people who heard the parable didn't get the explanation. So how you heard it would depend on who you were and your place in the world. So, we're going to try to think about the parable as if we didn't get Jesus' explanation.

First, let's say you are a Jewish person. You've grown up hearing the words of the prophets in the synagogue. You might have connected the wheat to Israel. At this point, Israel is a scattered people living among the nations...the non-Jewish nations.

You might believe the parable then is about God drawing Israel together and into God's reign and judging the non-Jewish nations. But even so, the idea that God was letting the evil nations live alongside God's chosen people for so long would have been terribly troubling.

But then parables are meant to trouble.

If you were a Roman, or a religious ruler backing Roman rule, you might have viewed Jesus and his scruffy followers as the weeds and Rome and the Jewish establishment the wheat.

If you were an early Christian, you might have seen the church as the wheat and non-believers the weeds. This might have been especially appealing for Matthew's church who were living during a time of persecution by Nero's Rome. That might resonate for some of us as well, who worry about Christianity in our culture losing its influence.

The explanation Jesus gives broadens the scope beyond the Jews, and beyond even the church. Now it's the world and everyone in it.

For all of those possible interpretations, perhaps the most important thing in the whole parable is that it's not our job to get rid of the weeds. The good and the bad will grow alongside each other. And who knows? Maybe in some way our ability to grow as a community of faith is strengthened by the presence of the weeds. Maybe faith lived in some opposition becomes stronger faith.

Either way, the parable reminds us that ultimate judgment belongs only to God.

As you wrestle more with the parable, maybe another thought has occurred to you. One that will trouble you.

Am I wheat? Or am I a weed? I mean, have you ever had one of those days when you know you were a weed? A day where you did not bear good fruit?

Is it possible that we ourselves are both wheat and weeds? Or maybe we're the field in which they're planted. As people over the centuries, beginning with Paul, have wrestled with what Jesus was all about, I think that's indeed where we wind up.

We are both sinner and saint...both judged and redeemed...both wheat and weeds. We are to bear fruit in the world now and trust that God's judgment does indeed burn away our own weeds.

The parable is still hard to let sit. It means evil continues to exist right along with good until the end. It turns out that the kingdom of heaven is like an unsettling and unsettled story.

Let's look at the next two parables. We won't get to the last two, but maybe after we've talked a bit more you'll be curious and wrestle with those on your own.

On to the mustard seed. There are different kinds of mustard plants. Some are smaller plants that you can grow in a garden. But the ones in the parable do in fact grow into a taller tree-like plant. But because it's also got a wide leaf base and isn't super tall, it's classified as a shrub.

Jesus didn't explain this one at all. So, what do we make of it? The kingdom of heaven starts as a tiny seed...one of the tiniest. And grows into a great shrub. OK.

First thought. The kingdom of heaven starts with planting small seeds, and then it grows and becomes a place that nurtures life. Maybe you hear this parable as a reassurance that no matter how small our own contribution is to God's reign, you don't know all of what it might be able to do as it grows.

At first we might think that's pretty straightforward. Then maybe some questions creep in...because that's how parables are.

A shrub? Why not a cedar tree? In the bible, Cedar trees represent strength and power, especially divine power. Cedar wood is a sign of wealth. Cedar trees can grow to be massive.

And although cedar tree seeds aren't as small as mustard seeds, they're pretty small and probably proportionately even smaller than mustard seeds. Why wouldn't we want God's realm to be represented by a more stately and powerful tree?

Well, maybe that is one of the points of the parable. The cedar represents a kingdom of power and might. Christianity was never supposed to be that. It was never supposed to be the religion of empire. God's realm was instead supposed to be more like a shrub. Humble. A place to nurture life.

What does that interpretation say to Christianity in our time and place? If we think Christianity should be expressed as power and might, this parable might actually come to us as one of judgement.

And then there's the yeast. Yeast works its way through the dough and completely changes it. If you've ever made something that was supposed to raise but didn't, you know first hand how important yeast is.

A couple things to note about the yeast. It really does bring transformation of the whole batch, and it doesn't take very much to do it. But, there's always a period of time when it doesn't look like anything is happening. There's an element of trust that the yeast is actually doing something.

Then of course there's the fact that you don't actually get bread until you bake it. It takes some heat to actually produce bread. Again, maybe it's our struggle...the times when we're under heat...that help us become who God intends us to be.

Is there a thread that ties all these parables together? They all give us a variety of ways to think about the community Jesus calls the kingdom of heaven.

Spend some time with these parables in the coming week. What other meanings can you come up with? Does the parable say something to you I've not mentioned?

One thing they do seem to all have in common is that the kingdom of heaven is not separate from the world we're living in now. In all of the parables, Jesus uses very down to earth everyday life things. The parables invite us to look for signs of heaven in the very ordinary stuff of our everyday lives.

The hard thing about that is that a lot of what we see around us doesn't look the way we envision heaven. Instead, what we too often experience is pain...worry...grief...stress. We get distracted by weeds and worry that our bread won't turn out.

In the end, the parables each invite us to trust. To trust that the kingdom of heaven is working its way into our communities and families. That it is working to help us grow, and help our communities grow in faith, even among the weeds...and even when those weeds are in us.