

“...for in gathering the weeds you would uproot the wheat along with them.” (Matt. 13:29)

In May of 1981 a young couple was shot and murdered in a shelter in southwest Virginia on the Appalachian Trail moments after they fed a stranger a meal. Their bodies were buried in the woods. I remember this incident because I was hiking that whole year and actually spent the night in that same shelter only weeks before the crime occurred. When I heard the news, it spooked me—not only because I’d left a logbook (no doubt confiscated by the state police) in that very shelter, but also because the crime shook the normally peaceful hiking community all the way from Maine to Georgia. Crime is very rare on the Appalachian Trail. You’re much more likely to encounter crime in your own neighborhood here in Columbia.

They caught the guy in Myrtle Beach a few weeks later. Randall Lee Smith, an emotionally-troubled man who’d been abused as a child, was sentenced to a very long jail term through a plea bargain arranged with the families of the victims.

I haven’t thought about this a whole lot in the 27 years that have passed since that crime. But last week a friend pointed me to a series of articles<sup>1</sup> in *The Washington Post*. An attempted murder, a shooting, occurred this past May (two months ago) in that same mountainous area very close to that same shelter. This time, thankfully, the victims lived—two young men. Unbelievably, the assailant was Randall Lee Smith, the same man that killed the couple the year I was hiking the Appalachian Trail. A model prisoner, he’d been released from prison; paroled several years before. Randall then moved back home to Giles County, Virginia, to live with his mother.

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I hesitated to tell you this story this morning. I’m sure you get enough of this on the evening news. But a large and glaring challenge in living the Christian life is that we tend to separate the teachings of Jesus on Sundays from the life we lead and the news we hear about the rest of the week. Many people give up on the Bible (or demote it as quaint, which may be worse), subscribing instead to conventional wisdom for a real world. *Forgive your enemies?* Well, Jesus was special. *Pray for those who persecute you?* Please, they had it coming to them.

Our home cooling system went kaput this week. We called Midland Air and they sent out a delightful technician named Daniel, a young man with a great personality who made me laugh a lot, even though the inside of the house was beginning to feel like a sauna. When Daniel discovered I was a pastor, we started talking about the Bible and also church. Daniel said something interesting. “You know, Pastor Honeycutt,” he said, “I’ve tried to attend church and read the Bible. I really have. But I just don’t understand it. I read a little bit and read it again, but it just doesn’t make any sense to me.” I appreciated Daniel’s honesty. Invited him here to worship. Maybe we’ll get to share our own biblical befuddlement with Daniel one day. Because the Bible is indeed a strange book, right?

We come here on Sundays, listen to odd stories, and then walk into a world where all the rules seem different. Following Jesus in our world today is no walk in the park. It's a *challenging life* if you take seriously the words of the man we call "Lord." If discipleship does not seem difficult to you, I'd have to conclude you're reading a different Bible than the one I read each morning. Jesus told vexing parables that quite often leave us confused with their ethical implications. Did you pay close attention to today's story?

Everybody seems to go to bed happy. The farm hands are tired from the day's planting and they all dream of the wheat harvest—warm bread slathered with homemade apple butter. But during the night, a vandal sneaks onto the farm and sows weed seeds among the wheat. This is the worst kind of mischief: a *timed* mischief that will only become apparent later in the growing season.

When I was a counselor at Lutheridge many years ago, someone pulled a very creative prank in my "Pioneer A" cabin—a prank of timed mischief. About 15 alarm clocks were gathered and hidden throughout my cabin, set to go off at half-hour intervals throughout the night. I was up and down until morning searching for those blasted clocks. Even found one in the cabin commode. Accidentally *washed* a clock a week later in some hastily-done laundry. Our parable today describes *timed mayhem*. The victims are completely unsuspecting.

And, boy, are they ever agitated. They want to take immediate action—call in the crop dusters, break out the machetes, involve the Clemson extension agent. But the master has some strange advice. "No, enough of that," he says. "Let the weeds and the wheat grow together. You might damage the good grain with your angry aggression. Let them both flourish until the harvest and I'll sort it all out then."

Read this parable again later today. Heck, read it 50 times. Not only does it make little *agricultural* sense, it makes even less *practical* sense when placed down in a world filled with danger, violence, and people like Randall Lee Smith. What is Jesus really advising here? That we all become pacifists and abolish the military, the sheriff's department, and home alarm protection devices? Is he advising anarchy? Gosh, I love Jesus, but does he really want us to live in the world like that Amish community who forgave and prayed for the man who shot and killed those little school children?

"I've tried to read the Bible," said the friendly air conditioning technician. "I really have. But I just don't understand it. It just doesn't make any sense to me."

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Well, if you think I'm planning to clear up the challenge of this parable today, then you would be wrong. It's one of the most unusual and life-shaking parables that Jesus ever told. Let the parable stand in all of its oddness. Jesus did not come into our world, after all, to affirm and commend our biases. He often told stories to shake us up. Here are three points I want to make about this old story. Maybe you have others. I'd like to hear them later on.

1) God is judge and we are not. Ultimately, *only God* can make final and absolute judgments about people. We say this each week in the creed: “He will come again to judge the living and the dead.” Confessing God as final judge does not rule out common sense. It does acknowledge that deciding a person’s final and absolute destiny is God’s business and not our own. This parable before us today is ultimately why I am opposed to the death penalty. One might argue that executions rid the world of people like Randall Lee Smith and perhaps make the world a safer place. I hear that argument and clearly lament the nuttiness of early parole in this man’s case. But executions, if you think about it, also cut-off any possibility of repentance, restitution, or change in the offender. Weedy behavior makes us angry. It is tempting to give up on a weed. Jesus says let both weeds and wheat grow together. What does this mean? Whether we like his words or not, he is surely offering the weed *time*...time to change.

2) “For in gathering the weeds you would uproot the wheat along with them.” History is full of the truth inherent in that Bible verse. A nation can become so obsessed with global villains that we turn a blind eye to the collateral damage of innocents who die in the wake of our broad weed-whacking. Or, I personally can become so exorcised about a certain just cause that I fail to see the negative emotions of anger (and even hatred) that begin to consume me. Ironically, ridding the world (or a community) of evil can often reveal our own worst traits. There is an odd mixture of good and bad seed even in the best of us. A true “war on evil” in the world would wipe us all out, I’m afraid.

3) It is good to remember that Jesus’ power is most clearly revealed not in might or punishment, but in sacrificial love. He died, after all, not just for good people who never go to jail and not just for people who worship every Sunday. Like it or not, Jesus died for all—the good, the bad, the successful, the reprobate, the kind, the villainous, the gentle, the violent, the law-abiding and the criminal. That doesn’t mean he’s equally *pleased* with all behaviors. But, as the scripture says, “His rain falls on the just and the unjust.”<sup>2</sup> And so does his saving death. His cruciform grace is sown far and wide. A central purpose for the existence of any church is to sow seed into places the world has given up on—even dark, weedy places. Perhaps especially there.

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This sermon will not have a clear ending today. This is a tough parable. I want you to struggle with it. Think about and pray over this story. How shall we live in a world where wheat and weeds are allowed by God to grow together?

To the glory of God...

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<sup>1</sup> See an article by Wil Haygood, “Blood on the Mountain” in *The Washington Post* (July 8, 2008), p. C01.

<sup>2</sup> Matthew 5:45.