

## *Wheat and Weeds Together*

Time after Pentecost, Lectionary 16  
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Trinity Evangelical Lutheran Church

Isaiah 44:6-8; Romans 8:12-25; Matthew 13:24-30, 36-43

Grace and peace to you from God our Father and our Lord Jesus Christ. Amen.

Nearly 12 years have passed since young JonBenet Ramsey was murdered on Christmas night in 1996 in her Boulder, Colorado home. During much of those nearly 12 years, speculation and judgment surrounded the parents and brother of 6-year-old JonBenet. It seemed that every talk show and every tabloid pronounced guilt on John and Patsy Ramsey, her mother and father, or on her older brother Burke. Handwriting analysts accused Patsy of writing the ransom note. John's finding his daughter's body and then moving her, destroying some critical evidence, pointed further to their guilt. The phone call to 911, with young Burke crying in the background, led to suspicions of his involvement. Tried in the court of public opinion and television ratings, the Ramseys were judged as the probable murderers, accomplices in a cover-up, or at the very least unfit parents.

But last week, after reviewing more conclusive DNA findings, Colorado prosecutors officially cleared the family of JonBenet's murder, and issued a public apology to the family, stating the tests point to an unexplained third party.

Nearly 12 years of outright suspicion. Of course, Patsy Ramsey only endured 10 years, as she died two summers ago. Blessed relief from the hateful limelight.

The nation was riveted to the story. There was sympathy for the family, certainly. What loving parent wouldn't be horrified by the thought of losing a child, on Christmas night, no less, in such an awful manner? But didn't many of us also look askance at Patsy's penchant for dressing up JonBenet like a model, entering her in beauty pageants, parading her around as if she were 18, not 6? I figure countless folks across our nation, anxious about that hideous event, and anxious about our own children's safety, wondered silently or aloud about the Ramsey family, wondered if maybe one of them **did** murder JonBenet. Wondered when they might be arrested. How quick we were to uproot from the field what we thought were the weeds . . .

The parable Jesus told that Matthew puts before us in his Gospel today can makes us uncomfortable when we study it deeply and reflect upon it. Jesus is telling stories to people on the shore who've gathered to listen to him. This parable is about the kingdom of heaven, as are so many other of his parables. Here Jesus says the kingdom can be compared to someone who sows good seed in his field. But then an enemy steals in and sows weeds among the wheat. They grow up together—the good seed bearing grain, the weeds right alongside them. The slaves, discovering the enemy has done this, want to uproot the weeds, but the householder tells them to leave the weeds be, for attempting to rid the field of the weeds right now might mean accidentally uprooting the wheat as well. Instead, he says they are to wait until the harvest, and

then the reapers will be told to collect the weeds and bundle them up to be burned, while the wheat will be gathered to be stored in the barn.

As I said, Jesus tells this parable to the crowd on the shore. But when he is with just his disciples, the disciples say to him, “Explain to us this parable of the weeds in the field.” Note how the disciples hone in on the **weeds**. The disciples’ concern about the weeds in the field lead them to entitle the parable that way. For them, it is the parable about the weeds. Even though Jesus’ initial telling of the parable starts with and emphasizes the good seed sown. Even though, immediately following his first telling the crowds this parable, Jesus then tells (in the verses missing here—vss. 31-35, which we’ll hear next week) two very short parables about the growth of the kingdom of heaven—how God’s kingdom grows when we don’t even see it, how the growth comes from the smallest of seeds and increases exponentially, how the kingdom is like an immense tree in which all the birds can nest, how the kingdom is like leaven that makes bread rise full and large. Always the emphasis is on the kingdom of heaven growing, and growing well.

Yet the disciples go back to the weed story. Now, I’m not certain Jesus’ explanation satisfied them all that much. But what was clear from his words was that, in a world where good and evil rub shoulders, where glimpses of God’s kingdom and terrible events exist side-by-side in a way that frustrates and frightens you and me, Jesus proclaims this: The Son of Man (which was a name that referred back to Jesus himself) will, at the last, send his angels to collect the weeds—the evildoers—for burning, and gather the wheat—the children of God—into the kingdom of heaven. Until the Son of Man does that, the weeds and the wheat will grow up together. Another dose of reality in this present age from the mouth of our Lord Jesus. But . . . but . . . we say . . . And so it is that the disciples’ concern about the weeds in the parable reflects our concern about evil. We’d like to get rid of it. We’d like to see evil eradicated, wrongs righted, justice done. Now. We long for a world where all around us isn’t decay, but beauty and goodness and nobility. A day doesn’t go by that you and I don’t find some situation somewhere that we deplore, events that anger us or shock us or make us weep at the thought of another person’s pain in the wake of disaster, disease, destruction. And it does indeed stand side-by-side with the good! There we were, three weeks ago, on the south rim of the Grand Canyon, taking in all that lovely scenery, and my family and I could see the smoke on the horizon from the wildfires in California. There we were, last week, soaking in the sun and enjoying the waves at Ocean City, MD, and we heard about swimmers drowning in the riptides on the Jersey shore. And while we were on the boardwalk choosing our favorite flavors of salt water taffy to munch on, the Ocean City police were arresting two guys a few blocks over for possessing what appears may have been a bomb. Then here we are this week, reading the newspaper and laughing at the comics, and we flip to the front page only to learn that sin continues to rear its ugly head in acts of abuse and violence, in deeds of corruption and deceit. It becomes almost impossible to recall Jesus’ words about good seed being sown, bearing grain, the kingdom growing. Yet that is how Jesus’ parable begins. And that is how it ends—the grain gathered into the barn. But this middle part of the parable—wheat and weeds together—we don’t like it.

Speaking as one who has accidentally uprooted her fair share of flowers along with weeds in her garden over the years, I think it’s important to note that young wheat and weeds can look remarkably alike. It is not always easy to distinguish between the two. For 12 years, the

Ramseys at any given moment were either the poster child for a totally dysfunctional family or lauded as paragons of virtue. Which were they? We didn't know. Look how much time it took to discover even a bit of the truth. Is attempting to remove the weeds from the field worth the risk of possibly removing the wheat? How far can a person or a society go in order to rid themselves of evil? Can it be accomplished without error in judgment, hurting innocent people, or becoming evil ourselves? While I haven't seen the latest Batman movie, *The Dark Knight*, one reviewer noted a similar theme—Batman struggling over just how far one should go to eradicate evil in Gotham City. Is there a threshold over which one ought not cross, even if it means leaving evil weeds growing in the field of the world? These are critical issues to reflect upon, but very complex. No wonder the disciples wanted an explanation from their teacher.

Jesus leaves us with waiting for the harvest, trusting the Son of Man at the end of our history to uphold justice, to root out evil, and gather into his kingdom the children of God where, under his care they will shine like the sun. Likewise, St. Paul in today's second lesson encourages our living hopefully, living patiently, while we and all creation wait—and yes, frankly, often wait with groaning—for the fulfillment of God's great design for his creation, where creation itself will be set free from decay, and bask in the same glory that the children of God will experience in life after this life.

But does waiting in patient hope for the final harvest mean we shouldn't bother to seek justice now? Absolutely not. It's just that seeking justice requires wisdom and discernment, not a rush to judgment, not profiling based on color or ethnicity or religion, not a lynching at the nearest tree, not revenge to satisfy our own turmoil and pain. The weeds and wheat grow together—in groups of people, in institutions like the church, in governmental bodies, in whole societies. The weeds and wheat grow together, even within individual persons like you and me, who are simultaneously saint and sinner—and that is a rather perplexing and distressing truth about our own selves.

If indeed we are both saint and sinner (our internal reality), then I am grateful for the householder's patience, allowing weeds and wheat to grow together for a time. Because we need that time. The old red hymnal of the Lutheran Church—not our present cranberry-colored one used on Saturday evenings here, or in the Nave on Sunday mornings, but the old red one—had in its order for confession and forgiveness a statement of forgiveness spoken by the pastor that was especially meaningful to me. After our corporate confession of our sins, the pastor would say these words: *The Almighty and merciful God grant unto you, being penitent, pardon and remission of all your sins, **time for amendment of life**, and the grace and comfort of his Holy Spirit.*

That phrase—time for amendment of life—meant God was gracing me with all the days of my life to turn around and follow him. Time. God gives me time; he waits hopefully for me all the time.

Such a phrase doesn't suggest I spend my years doing anything I darn well please, and then, at the last moment's breath, repent. Rather, it suggests my entire life is gift from God, with opportunity upon opportunity to live the life God desires me to live.

And what opportunities might there be? Well, let's look at that **external** reality again—that we live in a world where good and bad exist side-by-side in groups and institutions and governments. What might we do in our patient, hopeful waiting, in this time given us by God, that reflects something of God's goodness in our daily lives? What can we be about that is, in fact, participation in the growth of God's kingdom in this world? That's simple enough to answer, though often hard to do—be like Christ, act in his ways. He makes quite clear his path for us. Here's one example of how that path is trod: Lieutenant Commander William C. Kuebler, who is a Navy lawyer, currently represents a detainee of the U.S. military prison at Guantanamo Bay. He spoke of his vocation in offering legal counsel and care to this detainee by saying this: "It is a powerful way to be a witness for Christ by demonstrating your capacity **not** to judge the way everybody else is judging and to serve unconditionally." See how he lives his days? Not carelessly uprooting the weeds, and possibly destroying wheat as well, but carefully, patiently, tending the field, seeking the truth, serving his God. Can you and I find similar ways to live **our** days? **AMEN.**