

Sunday, July 20, 2014: Matthew 13:24-30, 36-43

We all see weeds, but we shouldn't make it our business to separate them.

by [David Lower](#) in the [July 9, 2014](#) issue

A few years ago, while serving as a hospital chaplain, I received a call to a dying man's bedside. Upon entering the room where a beautiful old man was breathing his last breaths, his son introduced himself to me: "Hi. I'm the oldest son, John."

"Nice to meet you, John," I replied, "I'm someone else's oldest son, David. My heart goes out to you in this sad and holy moment."

John then introduced his dad. "Well, I'm pleased to report that Dad's been saved for 27 years now, thank God, so there's nothing to worry about here."

In my own life, I have only come to know God's saving work in the present tense, as something that happens continuously to me. But I celebrate anyone's faithful response to the truth made known in Jesus Christ, so I responded with a genuine "Hallelujah!"

My new friend John continued: "Pastor, we're all set here. The reason I sent for you is because you may want to pay a visit next door. That poor man, he's"—here his voice dropped to a whisper—"unsaved. Unchurched. You know what I mean?"

I was pretty sure I knew what he meant. This young man was encouraging me to reach the old guy next door with Jesus, so he could get a ticket to heaven before it was too late. John called him "unsaved" and "unchurched"; I had a hunch that he might have met some other description like "Muslim," "mainline Presbyterian," or even "went to church but never really liked it."

I did not discuss Christian doctrine with my new friend the salvation-whisperer. I did learn that his dad's neighbor was at peace, surrounded by loved ones after a laudable life of service to others. What I'll never forget is the revealing picture I caught as I walked away. The two rooms shared a doorway, with a thin partition

between. I stood in the doorway and saw two families, probably with very different worldviews, surrounding their departing loved ones in pure expressions of love. The beauty on either side of the wall was similarly striking and holy, and it was hard to imagine God feeling anything but glorified by it all.

I was reminded that there are different ways that God's saving work can be made manifest in people's lives.

John the eldest's idea of salvation may have been rooted in something like the parable of the weeds and the wheat, with its picture of the kingdom of heaven's outsiders and insiders. The parable depicts this kingdom as the work of a good sower of wheat who has been compromised by an enemy sower of weeds. The good sower's slaves notice the weeds in his field and ask if they should remove them, to which the householder replies, "No; for in gathering the weeds you would uproot the wheat along with them. Let both of them grow together until the harvest."

The two story lines playing out in a single field portray the coexistence of good and evil, with their outgrowths growing side by side, intertwining. If the slaves try to gather the weeds, they might struggle to tell the difference between plants. They might not get rid of the unwanted growth without uprooting the good growth, too. So the gathering and separating will not be done until the harvest time, when angels will reap and gather the good wheat into the barn and discard the rest for burning.

In the unfolding story of Jesus—wrought with challenges, threats, and impasses—this portrayal differentiates between the good work of the good sower and the negative work of the enemies to the good. Followers of Jesus, presumably characterized as slaves of the householder, are encouraged to be patient and trustful that good growth is still occurring and will prevail, even when the weeds seem rampant. It is not their job to separate good from evil, for in the end the causes of sin and the doers of evil will be cast out and burned. All that will remain is the good, shining like the sun.

The lessons about God's kingdom here reverberate throughout history and into our moment. We can all see weeds, but maybe we shouldn't make it our business to separate them from the wheat. As Jesus the Householder's workers in the world, we can help nurture, feed, and cultivate the good growth he has planted—by sharing the good word and doing our best to love and heal and seek the lost like he did.

The parable also has truth to speak to the field—to the church and all its churches, which are also tangles of wheat and weeds, good and bad wrapped up together. The imagery of the parable provides a helpful lens through which to look at the weeds and the wheat that grow within us, too. Both grow. Yet we might be patient with our shortfalls, as God is, while we nurture the kind of good that Jesus makes known.

There's plenty of work for us to do, just not picking or separating. Only loving all the way.