

God so loves the wheat: *Matthew 13:24-30, 36-43*

by [Garret Keizer](#) in the [June 30, 1999](#) issue

Anyone who's ever grown peas, at least in my neck of the woods, can appreciate the parable of the wheat and the weeds. There's this plant—I believe it's called "pigweed"—that invariably comes up between the pea plants and even looks a bit like them at first. Once the shallow-rooted peas start sending out their tendrils, it's very difficult to pull up the pigweed without yanking out a few plants with it. The peas are what count, of course, so the wise gardener leaves well enough alone.

What's central to the parable of the wheat and the weeds is the preciousness of the wheat. The landowner refuses to lose any of it in order to get rid of the weeds. Readers of the Gospels will recognize a familiar theme, the same one that informs the parables of the lost sheep and the lost coin--and even the gathering up of those 12 baskets of leftover fragments after the feeding of the 5,000. In God's economy nothing is wasted; nothing good is counted as expendable.

This is important to bear in mind when we grow impatient with God's role in history. Where is that vindication so often promised? How long must the creation groan in its labor?

Often in these moods our attention is fixed more intently on the stubborn persistence of evil than on the slow emergence of good. When the servants in the parable ask, "Do you want us to go and gather [the weeds]?" we hear an echo of the question posed by James and John, "Do you want us to bid fire come down from heaven and consume them? Jesus' reply to the Sons of Thunder is also pertinent: "You do not know what manner of spirit you are of."

In a better spirit we perceive that the realization of human potential is more important to God than the eradication of human faults. God loves goodness more than God hates evil. In the Greek tragedy that bears her name, Medea kills both of her sons in revenge against her faithless husband. When he asks how she could have done such a thing, she replies, "Because I hated you more than I loved them." For God, apparently, hate can never be a stronger emotion than love.

Lenin once said it is better to execute a hundred innocent persons than to have one guilty person go free. You cannot appreciate the wonder of God's love without first appreciating the "reasonableness" of Lenin's position. Assuming that the innocent vastly outnumber the guilty, assuming that society exists only as a collective, and assuming that the only worthwhile goal is to build a better society, it makes all the sense in the world to root out that one weed, even at the cost of a hundred stalks of wheat.

But God is a different kind of farmer. God is like a teacher who does not care so much about who cheats as he cares about who learns. She bides her time with a classful of smug stinkers just so one struggling underachiever can pass his test.

We can also grow impatient with God when our prayers to uproot some personal weed seem to go unanswered. More than once someone in my parish has asked me, "Why am I unable to overcome my rage against someone who has used and abused me, even though I ask God for the grace to do so?" Perhaps because God knows that at this time in your life it is only with the help of rage that you can avoid being used and abused again. God will not uproot the wheat of your survival to get at the weed of your fury.

And perhaps the weed itself is merely another strain of wheat. Up until their crucifixion, the two thieves who died beside Jesus probably appeared as no more than two bad peas in the same bad pod. Up until the day when some of the convicts at Attica threw themselves as human shields over their hostages, "acting on impulse" was probably the greatest shortcoming of their lives. Time told another story.

In all this we should not forget that parables are merely parables. Even as literal narratives they invite us to consider the exceptions.

Right now my wife and I are taking apart one her perennial gardens, a task especially arduous in that this is also a rock garden with some very large rocks. No matter, it must all come apart, the ground must be covered with sheets of black plastic, and only after every sign of vegetation has been obliterated from the spot can we plant again.

The reason for these measures is the appearance and, in spite of our best efforts, the reappearance of a noxious growth known as "bishop's weed." (Members of churches with episcopal polity are invited to stop smirking.) Bishop's weed

eventually "takes over" any place where it gets a good start; it's capable of ruining an entire hay field. Since we live in a farming community, and since our yard actually adjoins a hay field, there's a motive of responsibility behind our ruthlessness.

It would be a misguided application of the parable of the wheat and the weeds to say that we ought to wait and see what happens with the bishop's weed. We could spare our garden only to have our neighbor lose his farm. (And how often doesn't "liberality" work just like that? We extend the magnanimous gesture and leave somebody else to pick up the tab.)

It would be even more misguided to apply the parable to a weed like racism, for example, and to maintain that since it grows so close to so many of our cherished institutions we ought to wait until the Final Harvest to root it out. We should never forget that the same Lord who told the parable of the wheat and the weeds also said, "If your right hand offends you, cut it off."