

“Called to Cultivate”

Matthew 13:24-30

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Every gardener knows the feeling. You walk into the garden or yard and see something growing where you didn't expect it. You wonder: Is that supposed to be there? Did I plant that? Is it a flower or vegetable? Is it a weed? Should I pull it?

One place I see this play out more publicly is on the Iowa City Gardeners Facebook group. (For those who don't know, it's a local gardening group where people share pictures and ask for advice.) Anyhow, on this group, people post pictures of their gardens, and especially in the early spring ask their fellow gardeners: What is this? Friend or foe? Should I pull it?

The responses are rarely consistent. One person says, “Pull it out immediately,” another says, “Leave it—it's valuable for pollinators,” and yet a third person identifies the plant as something edible, and they want some for their kitchen. What looks like a weed to one gardener is a treasured plant to another.

Several years ago, I was visiting a homestead farm owned by a retired pastor. It was May and as we were walking the property, it was easy to see where seeds had been planted in neat rows. When I pointed to a large weed and asked if I could pull it, the pastor asked me to leave it, replying that, “A weed is simply a plant growing where it is not wanted.” So, I left the weed or misplaced plant alone. That was my first experience with the idea that identifying a weed can be surprisingly subjective.

We human beings have a bit of an obsession with sorting things into binaries. Good or bad. Right or wrong. Belongs or doesn't belong. But we also must acknowledge reality is often much messier than that.

Our scripture today comes from a section of Matthew's Gospel where Jesus uses agricultural images to teach about God's kin-dom. New Testament scholar Warren Carter explains that these parables interpret increasingly divisive responses to Jesus, as well as inviting the audience to see that God's work is already unfolding, even when it is not always immediately recognized (“the now and not yet nature of the kingdom of heaven”).¹

Today's story begins with a familiar problem. A field has been planted with a desirable seed, but when the plants begin to grow, weeds appear among them. Those tending the field immediately ask the question many gardeners ask today: “Should we pull them up?”

It seems like a reasonable question. But in the parable, the landowner tells the servants tending to the field, no, don't pull up the weeds. He tells them to wait.

¹ Warren Carter, “Matthew,” in *The New Testament Fortress Commentary on the Bible*, eds. Margaret Aymer, Cynthia Briggs Kittredge, David A. Sanchez (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2014), 148.

New Testament scholar AJ Levine reminds us that parables are meant to challenge our assumptions. If a parable only confirms what we already believe, we have probably missed its point.² The surprise in this story is not that weeds appear in the field (or how they got there). The surprise is that the landowner refuses to remove them.

The weed in this parable was likely darnel, a plant that looks remarkably similar to wheat in its early stages. Its roots also become tangled with wheat, meaning that pulling it, especially early on, could damage the very crop the landowner hopes to protect.³

The servants want a quick answer and a clear solution. The landowner sees something more complicated. He knows that acting too quickly could damage the wheat. Caring for the wheat matters more than sorting out the field. As New Testament professor Arland Hultgren notes, the heart of Matthew's Gospel is the command to love. In the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus declares to his disciples that the love ethic is to be extended to every person, even one's enemies.⁴ In other words, God's kin-dom is not built on judging and separating people, but on nurturing communities where life can flourish. That perspective helps us understand the landowner's response: as his primary concern is not identifying every weed, but on protecting the conditions that allow the wheat to thrive.

Farmers and gardeners understand this too. They cannot force growth, nor can they spend all their time searching for imperfections in the field. Their task is to create conditions where the crop can thrive. And that work requires patience, attention, and trust that growth is happening even when it is not immediately visible.

The same is true when it comes to people. Our stories, experiences, and relationships are far more complicated than simple labels allow, yet we often approach people the same way we approach a mystery plant in the garden. We want clear answers about who is right and who is wrong, who should be welcomed and who should be kept at a distance. Like the servants in the parable, we want to sort the field.

Throughout history, both society and the church have often assumed they could clearly identify who belongs and who does not. Many people, including people of color, immigrants, women, persons who identify as LGBTQ+, those from other faith traditions, people who ask difficult questions have experienced systems that question their dignity, deny their belonging, and push them to the margins.

Let's think about what a gardener spends their time doing. Yes, they weed. But experienced gardeners know that gardening is about far more than removing what does not belong. They

² Amy-Jill Levine, *Short Stories by Jesus: The Enigmatic Parables of a Controversial Rabbi* (New York: HarperOne, 2014), 4-5.

³ Elisabeth Johnson, "Commentary on Matthew 13:24-30, 36-43," Working Preacher, July 17, 2011, <https://www.workingpreacher.org/commentaries/revised-common-lectionary/ordinary-16/commentary-on-matthew-1324-30-36-43-2>.

⁴ Arland Hultgren, "Preaching from Matthew's Gospel: Major Themes and Forms of Teaching," Working Preacher, December 3, 2007, <https://www.workingpreacher.org/theology-and-interpretation/preaching-from-matthews-gospel-major-themes-and-forms-of-teaching>.

spend most of their time creating conditions where life can flourish—planting, watering, pruning, and tending what they hope will grow. A garden is not defined by what is removed. A garden is defined by what is cultivated.

Maybe that's the invitation to us in this parable. Maybe Jesus invites us to spend less energy sorting people into categories and more energy creating communities where people can experience God's presence and where life can flourish. That's not weeding. That's cultivating. And cultivating is slower work than sorting. It requires patience, attention, and a willingness to keep showing up.

We can begin by recognizing God's image in every person. Before we decide what category someone belongs in, scripture tells us that they already carry sacred worth. Our task is not to grant dignity to others but to affirm and honor the dignity God has already given them.

We can tend to our relationships. Relationships don't grow overnight, but rather require attention and intention, patience and care.

It looks like practicing curiosity. Because people are always more complex than our assumptions about them. We can resist the urge to reduce someone to a single story and instead make room to hear the stories that have shaped them.

And it looks like practicing compassion, because both gardens and people need grace as they grow.

None of this comes easy. Life is messy. Gardens are messy too. Plants get misidentified. Things appear where we do not expect them. Real gardens have imperfections, surprises, and seasons when growth is difficult to see.

And perhaps that is why agricultural parables are such a fitting image for God's kin-dom. God is at work in the unexpected places, among imperfect people, and through relationships that require patience and attention. God has a way of bringing life from places we would have overlooked, dismissed, or discarded.

Don't mistake this parable for promoting indifference in the face of injustice. The landowner is not unaware of the weeds. **He simply refuses to let the work of sorting the field become more important than the work of tending it.** While the servants wait, they are still charged with caring for the wheat, nurture its growth, and help the field flourish.

The question is not simply, "What needs to be pulled out?" The deeper question is, "What needs to be tended so that life can grow?" Our calling is to participate in God's work of cultivation—to recognize God's image in one another, to nurture growth, to tend relationships, and to create communities where life can flourish.

I invite us to be challenged by this parable, even in the places where we think we get it right. In the moments when we're tempted to rush toward certainty, perhaps we need to ask a different question:

Not, "Who belongs and who doesn't?" But, "What can I do to help life flourish?"

May it be so.