

**Wheat and Weeds**  
**#6 of Sermon Series**  
**Susan Flanders**

**Wisdom 12:13, 16-19, Mt. 13:24-30, 36-43**

**July 20, 2008**

I have been interested, all my life, in how to think about God, interested in what we can say or know or experience of God. I have never not believed in God, but I have certainly questioned, doubted and occasionally abandoned some conventional beliefs about God. My own faith in God has evolved in connection with my understanding of the themes of this sermon series: justification by grace, discipleship, and then, four avenues for seeking and knowing God: God's will, God's providence, God's word outside of the Bible, and today, the Bible as God's word.

For many today, the Bible, along with other sacred texts such as the Koran, is a big problem. Those who trash organized religion – authors such as Richard Dawkins, Christopher Hitchens, Sam Harris, and even those who value religion and Christianity but think it needs transformation, such as Bishop Spong, find much ammunition in the Bible for their attacks.

Often some of the readings we hear in church may give us pause – they can be such a mixture of helpful, uplifting words and troubling, even upsetting language. This morning is a good example. We began with words from the wisdom literature about God's strength tempered with forbearance, God's justice and care for all. So far, so good – that's how I like to think about God.

But then we move to the Gospel – another Jesus parable about sowing seeds. Last week the problem was with the soil and how only certain kinds yielded a good harvest. This week, the problem is weeds – something any of us with a garden or lawn can appreciate. First we hear the parable, then an allegorical explanation, probably added later by Matthew reflecting early church concerns about people who rejected Jesus' message.

But the allegory is offensive! It suggests a dualistic world where children of the devil combat children of the kingdom in a battle ending in an apocalypse of fire – the furnace, the weeping and gnashing of teeth for the evil-doers, and the righteous, shining like the sun in God's kingdom. What cruelty for the former, what smug self-satisfaction for the latter. What an obsolete world-view! I find it repugnant and simply can't buy this allegory as a helpful interpretation of Jesus' parable.

So let's back away from it. Let's look at the original parable of the wheat and the weeds. Let's use the parable itself as a metaphor for the Bible. Maybe the Bible, this ancient collection of writings we call the word of God, can be likened to Jesus'

wheat field. Maybe the Bible yields a rich crop of wisdom, food for the spirit, but also contains weeds – passages that are not only not helpful, but dangerous – poisonous to the spirit.

This is certainly the way I experience the Bible, and maybe many of you do too. There are passages in the Bible that make me wince, passages I can't imagine reading in church, passages which have bred and fostered horrible prejudice and violence in the name of God – what are they in there? They seem like weeds, or worse. If you were to read the whole Bible, you would be amazed. What we hear in church is only what is selected as most important, most helpful in the tradition. Weeded out already are verses such as this from Deuteronomy 25:11: "If men get into a fight with one another, and the wife of one intervenes to rescue her husband from the grip of his opponent by reaching out and seizing his genitals, you shall cut off her hand; show no mercy!" Ouch! And there is so much more that is objectionable, incomprehensible, or just plain boring – what we hear are the supposed good parts, but they too contain much that is unacceptable to modern ears or way too easily misunderstood.

I remember a morning several years ago. It was a 7 AM service during Lent, and a couple who didn't usually come during the week was sitting in the chapel. I knew the woman had just been diagnosed with an aggressive cancer and had probably come to this healing service seeking some comfort. The first reading was from Jeremiah, a passage about God's punishment of his own people for not being faithful. It was graphic, grim in its description of bloody revenge, rotting bodies, women, children, everyone tortured by God's anger. I felt myself growing angry as I listened – what must those people be thinking? What kind of God is this? When it was my turn to speak, I just felt I had to apologize, say that I didn't understand why this reading was appointed in the lectionary (a schedule of daily and Sunday readings in the Prayer Book). I was deeply disturbed that it gave such a wrathful image of God, one in such contrast to a God of steadfast love and mercy. I was sad that this couple, or anyone else, particularly someone new to the church, would come into a service and hear this read as the word of God – would hear the reader say, "The Word of the Lord" at the end. It's hard to say "Thanks be to God" when such a passage ends, except perhaps because it's over!

There are many other passages that seem to me like weeds, so puzzling or off-putting or plainly impossible to live by in our day that they threaten to choke out the real good news that so much of the Bible offers.

Such passages pretty much fall into three categories. The first are readings that promote or support prejudice – against other ethnic groups or races, especially Jews in parts of the New Testament, against women, against homosexuals. Especially when lifted out of context, these passages have done terrible harm over the centuries. Others just fly in the face of the way we live today, even if they accurately reflect the

culture of the time in which they were written. “Wives, be subject to your husbands,” still one of the recommended passages for marriages is, as you can imagine, seldom chosen. It can be explained, watered down, worked around, as I’ve been able to do when it’s come up on a Sunday – but why should I? Why should we listen to these words in church? Can we weed them out?

A second category of problem passages are those blessing violent punishment and slaughter in the name of God. Holy War has root in our Bible, and the Crusades are evidence. Blood revenge, all the imagery of God as a dread warrior, armed with fire and sword and plague – how many armies have gone into battle fighting for God? There are things worth fighting and dying for, if all else fails, but is war consistent with a god of love, or is war our failure to be true to a God of love and compassion?

The third category of readings that seem like weeds to me are those saying or implying that there is only one way to God. This was probably the biggest stumbling block for me in returning to Christianity after the decade of my twenties – my impression that Christians believe Jesus Christ is the only way to God. Two years of living in Laos, in southeast Asia, made it impossible for me to accept that, but there sure are places in the Bible where that is the message. “I am the way, the truth and the life; no one comes to the Father except through me.” So goes the familiar passage in John’s gospel, so often selected for funerals – but we do omit that last part here. It is offensive and exclusive, especially for a congregation including people of a variety of faith traditions or none at all.

So what are we to do with this Bible of ours – this rich, fertile field, yielding up so many epic stories, such beautiful poetry, so much goodness and grace that shape us from childhood on, but also infected, as if with deadly weeds?

Let’s try to stick with the metaphor of the wheat field. I don’t want to throw out the whole Bible. The farmer isn’t going to walk away from his field, abandon it because of weeds – he needs it for nourishment. Should he try to dig all the weeds up – sometimes uprooting the good wheat in the process? Should we take a red line to the whole Bible editing it for today’s world or to suit ourselves? If any kind of church committee got going on this, it would be never-ending, and who would have the final say? There are so many voices in the Bible; the layers of oral tradition are too deep and rich to be all dug up and thinned out.

In the parable, the sower says to let the field alone, allow the weeds to grow; they can be sorted out at harvest time. Perhaps that is a good approach to scripture. Let it be; it is what it is, wheat and weeds co-existing. Don’t give it all equal validity; certainly don’t try to take it all literally. Maybe we can focus on and use what is nourishing and ignore what is not. Don’t kill it, just leave it out of worship. There is danger here to be sure. Such seemingly horrific stories as the binding of Isaac, can

yield up powerful insights about relationship with God, as that story did a few weeks ago when I forced myself to deal with it instead of not read it. And sometimes we need scripture as a corrective. We need it to disrupt our comfortable, self-satisfied lives. We can't just leave out anything that we don't want to hear – particularly Jesus' radical teachings on forgiveness and care of the poor. We need to hear these over and over and over.

But I hope that in honoring scripture and looking for its treasures, we will give ourselves permission to disregard what seems poisonous. As much as possible, I avoid reading passages in church that speak of a wrathful God of judgment, a literal last day of division between the saved and the damned. I think the allegory at the end of today's gospel is not helpful. I don't think we should read passages glorifying war and violence, and I don't think we should read passages that condemn certain groups as being excluded from God's saving love.

In the very long run, think harvest time – either the Bible will be changed, or Christianity may wither, choked by Biblical weeds, but that harvest is not our concern. I'd like to think that the Lord of the harvest will indeed bring the harvest home, that the seeds of God's word will be plentiful in our hearts and grow – somehow, no matter what.

I want to end on a positive note about the Bible with a story about how God's word, expressed in scripture can have enormous, unexpected power:

It is a story about a young woman brought up by atheists. She suffered terribly when she would visit her very Christian cousins in the summer – so Christian that at meals they would go around the table with each person reciting a verse of the Bible by heart, making her feel like a total outsider. One summer, forced to go to Vacation Bible School, she decided to show them up. Someone there had given her a copy of the 23<sup>rd</sup> Psalm, and right away, she noticed something in the first line. There is a semi-colon between “The Lord is my shepherd” and “I shall not want”. Hearing it before, she'd thought it kind of rude, a rejection – the shepherd I shall not want, but here she saw a different meaning – a shepherd who would protect from want. Encouraged, by this, she decided to memorize the whole psalm and blow her pious cousins away at the next family meal.

Here is her account of what happened: “We all gathered around the table with our heads bowed. Although most prayed with their eyes closed, I opened mine, wanting to see their expressions as I let loose with my psalm. ‘The Lord is my shepherd; I shall not want.’ Working my way through the first stanza, carefully pronouncing the ‘th’ on ‘maketh’, I felt something real. I pictured myself lying down in green pastures. In my mind's eye, I saw myself eating at the table prepared by the Lord. I'll never forget the moment of connection between myself and the glorious

words; the comfort they described was the warmth of well-being that I felt. By the time I got to the good part, I'd whipped myself into a fine crescendo: 'Yea, though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death...' At this instant, [the cousin sitting next to me hissed] 'Shut up – the food is getting cold, you boring, annoying little freak'."

Our young psalmist continues: "chastened, I closed my eyes, but I continued my recitation, oblivious to the reaction of the others at the table, and the food cooling on the platters, riding the buoyancy of the words, filling my mind and heart with the lyrics of this strange and powerful song."

The young woman grew up and became a writer, and she remembers that day as the one in which the full power and potential of language was revealed to her, when she saw the glory of God in the beauty of a poem in the Bible.

The Bible is God's word – a rich field, and yes, there are weeds. May we cultivate – hear, read, mark, learn and inwardly digest (as the Prayer Book has it) all that is good for us, and try not to let the rest get in the way. Amen.