

LIVING THE FAITH WITH WHEAT AND WEEDS

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IT'S NOT EASY TO LIVE THE FAITH! THIS REFLECTIVE BIBLE STUDY (INTENDED FOR PERSONAL USE) ENCOURAGES YOU TO BEGIN BY RESTING IN GOD'S PRESENCE BEFORE CONTEMPLATING SOME OF THE DIFFICULTIES THAT CAN BE ENCOUNTERED IN THE CHURCH, THE WORLD AND THE HEART...

SETTLING IN GOD'S PRESENCE

Most gentle God
ever inviting us to silence,
and able to instil peace in troubled hearts,
soothe my soul, I pray.
Take from me the stress of my life,
turn down the chatter in my head,
relieve me of my burdens and worries.
Tune me in to your presence,
that I may rest in your still centre,
reset my priorities and my life,
and know the endless freedom and joy
of your eternal love.
Amen.

Read the passage slowly - pause and pray over any words or ideas that strike you: **MATTHEW 13:24-30**

Perhaps you think this is a strange passage to choose for a reflection on living the faith. For me, it's a parable that often speaks to my sense of frustration with ministry and with life. It has tones of the heart-felt cry of Romans 7:15: 'I do not understand my own actions. For I do not do what I want, but I do the very thing I hate'; and 7:19: 'for I do not do the good I want, but the evil I do not want is what I do.' This parable, the second of a set of seven agriculturally inspired parables grouped together in Matthew's gospel, seems to raise the question of why something intended to be so good (a field of wheat, for the feeding of the hungry) ends up full of weeds. In other words, where does this evil come from?

In the 'Word Biblical Commentary', Donald A Hagner (1993, 382) suggests that the passage seeks to address the problem of why there is evil in the world if the Kingdom of God is so near - the Christian community want to know why God's judgement is delayed. He

proposes that the people were waiting for a political deliverance from the Roman occupation, which would explain the urgency. When would God save the people? The explanation for the weeds is that 'an enemy has done this' - an opponent deliberately trying to spoil the good field. So why can't the weeds simply be pulled up? It's commonly accepted that the weeds in this passage are darnel. Hagner says that the problem is not identifying the wheat from the weeds, but that the roots of the darnel grow deeper and more strongly than the roots of the wheat, and so it is impossible to pull up the weeds without also damaging the good crop. The conclusion of the parable seems to be to wait until harvest time - in other words, 'leave it to God'. While in many ways that offers reassurance and relief, it's very difficult to wait when we can see the damage and havoc wreaked by the weeds.

Thinking about our world, it's sadly all too easy to call to mind many situations around the globe where we long for suffering and poverty and injustice to end NOW. Like the early Christians under Roman occupation, we want to know why the roots of oppression and evil can't just be torn up and eradicated forever. As Christians we are called to be proactive in the pursuit of justice - how does that fit in with 'leaving it to God'?

I have also witnessed faithful churches hamstrung by a minority of individuals with pervasive negative voices who mistakenly think that the church is theirs and not God's, and whose stranglehold on various activities asphyxiates any hope of mission development. Well-meant but unbending, graceless attitudes suck the joy and energy out of a congregation. How are we meant to cope with these apparent weeds? Surely, it's better to uproot them if they are damaging the church's mission. How does this fit with the theology of a church where the marred can find a home? Would it harm the church, the kingdom further if the weeds were removed to make way for the wheat?

We're probably all conscious, like Paul, that in our own hearts, the wheat and the weeds coexist. But if we could eliminate our own weeds, what would that do to our self-awareness and our compassion towards others? Perhaps it's knowing our imperfections and yet trying not to act on and from them, that makes us who we are. We are all honed from the struggle and we all have logs in our eyes! Living with wheat among the weeds in our world, in our churches, in our lives, is a painful and compromising reality for the faithful. In the gap between Jesus' present and complete kingdom (the 'now' and 'not yet'), how can we best serve God?

On retreat a few years ago, I was struggling with these issues and the difficulties I was encountering at church, when I read these words in Julian of Norwich's 'Revelations of Divine Love.' In her first chapter, she outlines her sixteen 'shewings' or 'revelations'. She writes:

'The Seventh is (our) often feeling of weal and woe; (the feeling of weal is gracious touching and lightening, with true assuredness of endless joy; the feeling of woe is temptation to heaviness and irksomeness of our fleshly living;) with ghostly understanding that we are kept all as securely in Love in woe as in the weal'.

Julian of Norwich, 'Revelations of Divine Love,' Kindle edition, first published 1901

I can't tell you how wonderful it was to read and ingest those words - that regardless of what is happening, we are still kept in God's love. When the weeds of woe seem to be choking the wheat, the knowledge that God somehow holds it all gave me a peace I rarely allow myself to own.

Perhaps that is the justification for waiting for harvest - an active rather than a passive waiting, doing one's best to further the wheat of the kingdom, but recognising that it is all somehow held by God, and that Love is greater. I am reminded of those astonishing words in Ephesians 3 - the great prayer that Christ may dwell in our hearts as we've been rooted and grounded in love. I pray that those roots, the roots of Christ's love, may be the deepest in our world, our church, our lives - deeper than the darnel - and that we'll know that

whatever happens, we are all encircled in God's great Love. (You might also like to read Ephesians 3:14-21.)

PRAYER

God of wheat and weed
weal and woe
crucifixion and resurrection,
as the roots of Christ's life deepen in my heart
help me to know
beyond doubt
that you hold this world,
your church,
my life,
within
the boundless grace
of your infinite Love.
Show me
how to walk in Jesus' footsteps
through complexity and confusion,
with patience, wisdom and grace,
that I might be counted
your faithful disciple.
Through times of joy,
and in fear and frustration,
may I live
to share your love.
Amen.

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QUESTIONS FOR REFLECTION / GROUP DISCUSSION

1. What is the wheat in the world, the church, your life?
2. What are the weeds?
3. How do you tell the difference?
4. When is there a case for personal action towards change (weed removal)?
5. When is there a case for leaving it to God?
6. On which / whose criteria do you judge? Should we even be judging?
7. How can we fulfil our calling to active engagement in the world and to become mission-shaped churches?

