

The Eighth Sunday after Pentecost

July 19, 2026

The Rev. Sam Teitel

Oh, my friends. It is so wonderful to be here with you all this morning. For those of you who don't know me, my name is Rev. Sam Teitel and I am a Unitarian Universalist minister and hospital chaplain here in the beautiful city of Memphis. I want to extend my heartfelt gratitude this morning to my beloved friend, the Rev. Wesley Rowell, for leading worship with me this morning, and to my beloved friend, the Rev. Scott Walters for trusting me with this pulpit. And, most of all, to the Calvary community for welcoming me and my family into this space when we found ourselves without a church home.

So, we're going to spend a little time this morning talking about a parable. This is one of these stories that Jesus tells that teaches a symbolic lesson of some kind. This one is out of the book of Matthew, and it's commonly referred to as The Parable of the Weeds. Interestingly, it comes right after the much more famous parable of the sower. It's sort of the parable of the sower's less popular and more problematic sibling. And it begins in much the same way: with a farmer sowing seeds into his field. The farmer, we are told, walks along the path through his field holding a sack of wheat seeds. And he is tossing the seeds to his left and to his right, in the hopes that they will grow into stalks of wheat. But after the farmer sows his seeds, an enemy turns up in the night and sows seeds of weeds amongst the wheat. And so, as the wheat grows the weeds also grow, and the farmer's field is a mess! It's a striking image - this field that is half wheat and half...not wheat. Half organized, uniform plants and half kaleidoscope of who-knows-what. Immediately the servants who work for the farmer try to take matters into their own hands. They ask the farmer if he wants them to weed the garden, to remove all that was unwanted and unplanned for from this space that was only intended for one specific thing. But the farmer says no, leave it all for now. So the wheat grows and the weeds grow up around it, and the plants end up all mixed together. And so, when it's time to harvest the plants from the field, the servants have to harvest the wheat and the weeds and the wheat gets saved and bundled up so that it can eventually be turned into bread and the weeds get burned. Later on, Jesus' disciples ask him to explain this parable to them, and Jesus tells them that he is the farmer who sows the wheat seeds, and the enemy who sows the weeds is the devil and that, eventually, when the age is over, angels will remove all that is evil from the world, all of the evil people and entities and ideas will be stripped away, just like the servants removing the weeds from the wheat, and the angels will throw all the evil stuff into a great furnace where there will be much weeping and gnashing of teeth.

So, I struggle with this parable. I wrestle with this parable. Not because I don't relate to it, but perhaps because I relate to it a little too much. I see parts of myself here that I wish I didn't see. And that's the point of a parable, of course. The whole intention behind any parable is to hold up a mirror to difficult parts of ourselves that we would prefer to ignore. And part of what makes this parable so powerful is that it's hard not to read it and ask yourself, what am I? Am I a stalk of wheat, or am I a weed? If this day of judgement that the parable speaks of were to happen in my lifetime, what would happen to me?

What would happen to the people I love? Would we all be lifted up by angels and carried to a beautiful place of heavenly rest? Or would we be thrown away into the great fiery furnace to weep and gnash our teeth forever? And there doesn't seem to be any wiggle room or middle ground here. Other places in the Bible talk about God's forgiveness. They talk about how if you say or do or believe the right things that you will be delivered from your own sinful ways; this parable has none of that. This parable simply says that those who do well will be accepted and those who do evil will be mercilessly disposed of. So, what do we do with this text that seems to contradict so much of what the Bible says in other places? The first place I would point us is that I would ask the question: What is a weed? When we look at all of the plants that exist or have ever existed on this planet of ours, how do we figure out which ones are weeds and which ones are not? Because there is no universally accepted answer. A weed is just a plant that the gardener did not intend to be there. A weed is a plant that is unwanted. A plant that doesn't fit in with the orderly well-manicured world of a garden or a field of crops. That's it. A weed is not bad in and of itself, a weed is just something that is unexpected or unintended. And that means that, of course, at some point in our lives we are all weeds. The Bible talks about this all the time and human experience bears this out. Nobody gets to spend their entire life as a perfectly orderly and desired stalk of wheat. Nobody.

Last weekend my family took a little jaunt to the Memphis botanical gardens, and just as we were getting out of the car, before he had even gotten all the way out of the car, my five-year-old son, Gideon, got stung by a wasp. Right on the inside of his wrist. It was terrible. He cried and screamed and we did our best to comfort him, my wife, Sandra, picked an ice cube out of her water bottle and held it over the sting and that helped a little but it didn't fix the problem and Gideon, in his wailing, asked a really interesting theological question. He asked, WHY DID GOD MAKE ANIMALS THAT STING? And I said you know, that's a good question. Why don't we ask Rev Wesley tomorrow? But my wife was ready with an answer, which was, animals sting when they are scared. They attack when they're frightened or angry just like we do. And the next day when we did ask Wesley, he said the same thing. But the thing is, all of us get scared and angry and all of us lash out sometimes when we're scared and angry. So really, God made all of us animals that sting. God made nothing else but animals that sting. Even plants sting sometimes, with allergic reactions and thorns and the like, which is to say, God made nothing but animals that cause harm sometimes, which is to say, to borrow some language from the parable, God really only made weeds. God didn't make anybody or anything who is one hundred percent wheat one hundred percent of the time. Most of us, when we reach the end of our lives, look back and see that we have had many moments when we have felt like proud stalks of wheat, and many other moments when we have felt like weeds. Stinging weeds, if you will.

For the past few months, I have been working as a hospital chaplain here in Memphis. And so, I regularly sit with people in the last days and hours of their lives, and they tell me their stories. And some of what they tell me is the things that they are proud of and the accomplishments that they feel really good about, and some of what they tell me are their regrets. They tell me about their actions and decisions that still haunt them shortly before their death. The moments when they have been a weed or an animal that stings. And so, I tell them, because it is my job to tell them this and also because it is what I truly believe, that God loves and forgives them, and that wherever they are going in the coming days or hours,

there is love and acceptance waiting for them there, and that the people in their lives love them and don't want to condemn them.

And that is the secret to this parable: the people who we human beings see as weeds are all wheat to somebody. Even the very weediest, most stinging people are, in a certain light, handsome wheat. All of us, throughout our lives, are many different people who are viewed by others in many different ways. So, I wonder about this image of entire people getting thrown away into the fire at the end of the parable. I wonder if this couldn't be more about different parts of us being cast away. I wonder if it could really mean That when all is said and done, when this life is finally over, God will see the parts of us that are good and loving; God will see the parts of us that we want to believe are there, and the rest will simply burn away. I think about these servants asking the farmer if they should try and pull up the weeds to make room for more wheat. And the farmer says no, that would ruin everything. In other words, were we human beings to attempt to pull up and put away everything or everyone who we determine to be a weed, we'd end up destroying the entire world. We humans are notoriously bad at determining who or what is or isn't a weed.

And that brings us to our psalm of the morning, Psalm 139. Before I get into the Psalm, I have to tell you all that when Scott took me out for coffee to discuss how this morning would go, he told me, before I even sat down, that I had to preach from one of the pre-assigned, diocese-approved texts this morning, and that if I was smart, I would pick one and stick to it. So please, nobody tell Scott that I used two of the texts. But this is a really interesting psalm to pair with this parable. In many ways, the Psalm serves as an answer to the parable. Because this psalm says, with total clarity, that there is nothing we can do, nowhere we can go, where God's love is not accessible to us. The psalm tells us that if we ascend to Heaven or if we make our bed in Hell, God will still be with us and will still love us. Even those of us who are accused of being weeds. Even those of us who have convinced ourselves that we are, in fact, weeds. Even those of us who have already been called weeds and have already been burned for it, God's love is more powerful than fire. God's love is more powerful than hatred. God's love is more powerful than anything humans could conceive of.

Beloveds, I want to say just one more thing in the time that I have up here. And that is that we are living in an era of intense polarization. We are living in an era when we are being asked by seemingly every human authority to put people into groups. To separate people into right and wrong, into good and bad into left and right, into wheat and weeds. And almost all of us are stressed out and scared, and, thus, are stinging each other. And so, I would just ask you, when the temptation to do that arises, to think of this story. And to think of Psalm 139, and this notion that it is not our place, it is, in fact, beyond our capability to weed this human garden ourselves. That there may come a day when forces beyond human knowing will burn away those parts of us which are undesirable, but until then, our work is not to judge and sting and destroy each other. Our work as a community of beloveds is to plant, and to water, and to grow.

Amen