

Patience

Jessie McCoy was my grandmother. A photograph of her sits on the piano in the parsonage. Jessie was born in eighteen eighty-three. When she was a young girl growing up in Iowa, if she wanted corn for dinner, she had to wait for the stalk to grow and for the ear to develop. If she wanted bread, she had to make the dough, knead it, and wait for it to rise. If she wanted fruit, she had to wait for it to ripen and then pick it. If she wanted cake for dessert, she had to gather eggs, beat them with flour and sugar, put the batter in the pan and the pan in the wood-burning stove. And then wait during the baking.

And if her family didn't have the cash to pay for what they wanted, they went without and waited until they did. Patiently.

Up until a few decades ago, people were used to having to *wait* for good things. But in the years since most of us were kids, we've seen dramatic changes in our culture and in our lifestyles. Now we can order online and have the merchandise overnighted right to our doorstep. Or just hop in our cars, drive to the store,

and swipe our debit or credit cards. And get what we want. Right then and there.

We're not as accustomed as our ancestors were to having to wait. Somewhere along the way, we shifted into instant gratification mode. As a society, we've become less patient. We want what we want when we want it. And we want it now! Maybe that makes this parable of Jesus more difficult for us to hear than it was for people who heard it in an earlier time.

You've heard this tale of wheat and weeds before. If you grew up with the King James Version of the Bible, you've heard it called "the wheat and the tares"—this familiar parable that we find only in Matthew's Gospel.

Again, Jesus is teaching a multitude that's gathered around him. Teaching about the kingdom of God, which is already present, but not yet fully accomplished. Again, he's telling a story about seeds. But this one is different from the one we heard last week. This one's about a landowner—a farmer—who sows good wheat seed in his field, only to have an adversary come sneaking around in the dark of night, scattering weed seed in among the wheat. And when the field hands see the weeds

coming up, they go to the landowner and ask, “Boss, you want we should take care of these weeds, right?”

But the boss’s reply surprises his workers. He says, “No. If you pull them up, you’ll pull up the wheat right along with them. Just wait. Leave them be. My reapers will take care of them. At harvest time.”

You know, obeying the boss’s orders couldn’t have been easy for those field hands. To see all those weeds growing larger and stronger, threatening to choke out the purity and goodness of the farmer’s grain. What a mixed-up mess! As farm workers, their natural inclination was to yank up those weeds, roots and all. It must have been difficult for them to wait. It must have been hard for them to be patient during the time between sowing and harvest.

That’s the time *we* live in, too. The in-between time. We live in the season between seedtime and harvest. Between the time when all kinds of seeds—all kinds of *people*—have been sown in this world, and the reaping time of the great harvest. The end of the age. We live between the times, too. And like those workers in Jesus’ story, we’ve somehow gotten the idea

that it's our job to go into the field and weed out all those undesirables.

But the boss—that's Jesus—the boss says *No. That's not your job. Be patient.* In this story, is Jesus speaking only to the crowds around him? Or does Jesus mean these words for his field hands—for his disciples—too? For the twelve? And for you and me?

I think Jesus really wants us instant-gratification listeners to hear this parable. Because, of all people, we are those for whom patience is especially challenging. We see something we think looks like weeds, and we want to get rid of them. Now!

In Bob's and my yard in Flat Rock, there are a couple of good-sized plants that we suspect may be weeds. But they look kind of like they're supposed to be there. So we've held off on pulling them up. Because we're not really sure *what* they are.

But in Jesus' parable, there's no doubt that what's sprouting up alongside the wheat are weeds. And they're a particular *kind* of weed. Called darn'-el. Now the thing about darnel is, it looks a whole lot like wheat. In fact, it's almost indistinguishable from wheat. Plus, it has strong roots that intertwine with the roots of

the wheat, making it almost impossible to pull up one without also pulling up the other.

We have trouble discerning one from the other. We can't tell weeds from wheat. But sometimes we get impatient, and we take action anyway. Take matters into our own hands. For nearly two thousand years, people in Christ's church have caused untold suffering: excommunication, torture, and yes, even death, all in the name of trying to purge the "bad seed" from their midst. Wheat got pulled up. Innocent people got hurt because, even in the church, it's impossible to tell weeds from wheat.

In the church today—and I'm talking about the whole Christian church—we don't do these kinds of things. Or do we? Do we speak words that have power to wound? Do we make judgments about people who look to us like weeds?

Sometimes it slips our minds that the One we follow chooses to hang out with "weedy" folk. Tax collectors. Prostitutes. Sinners. We are followers of the One whose harshest words are directed to religious people—to Pharisees and scribes—who self-confidently assume that they themselves are wheat. Most everybody else considers them to be wheat, too.

But, my sisters and brothers, it's not up to you and me to decide who is wheat and who is weed. Ultimately, that decision will be made. But not by us. Our task is to love faithfully. Our task is to serve obediently. Our task is to wait patiently.

And to refrain from judgment. We follow Jesus, who teaches that it's futile to look for a speck in someone else's eye, when my vision is obscured by a log in my own eye. Jesus wants me to remember that I need to be less preoccupied with evaluating others who might be weeds and more focused on my *own* weediness. Sometimes I'm wheat. Other times, I'm weed. And there are times when I can't tell *which* one I am.

If I do a kindness, but do it with a self-serving motive, have I not done something weedy? Do I not need to take a good look inside myself and invite my Lord to do the same? David the psalmist asks the Holy One to search his heart. To know his thoughts. To examine him and find in him whatever is wrong.

The psalm suggests that we need to be careful about praying only that God will deal with the wrongdoing of *others*. And we need to be careful, too, about attempting to deal with that wrongdoing ourselves. Popular culture says: *Don't get mad, get even*. But the Bible says that vengeance is God's. Evil was in

the world when those words of sacred Scripture were written. And evil remains in the world today.

Human greed fuels unjust systems that keep some in abject poverty while others live in opulent palaces. Human prejudice results in discrimination and oppression. Human aggression causes bombs to explode, maiming and killing. And our indignation cranks into high gear.

Along with our puzzlement. From the dawn of human history, people have struggled to understand the presence of evil in God's marvelous creation. We do know that evil is not from God, who has created only good things. And good *will* overcome evil. God's going to have the last word, and it's going to be good!

Still, the waiting isn't easy. At what point will God act? We want to know *when*. We live by clocks and calendars, you and I. We're creatures of schedules. Schedules structure and shape our lives. But the thing is, God doesn't operate on *our* timetables.

And for that, we can be truly thankful! Because we don't worship and serve the kind of God who creates us and then determines our fate. The kind of God who might say to Godself: *Hmmm. Let me see. This one's wheat. But this one's definitely a*

weed. Our God doesn't condemn us to spending eternity as a weed. No! Our God is the God of second chances. Our God is the God of third and fourth chances. Our God isn't counting. Our God isn't timing us. Our God is the God of patience.

Now we know that patience is a fruit of the Spirit. By the power of the Holy Spirit, you and I are given the strength to wait and to place our trust in God's forgiving ways and in God's unfailing mercy. God who gives the gift of time for weeds and wheat to grow together.

In the nourishing soil and the life-giving rain and the abundant sunshine of God's good field, could it be, could it possibly be that weeds have the potential to be transformed into beautiful, golden wheat? Could it just be that we weeds are the very ones the Son of Man came into the world to save? By the wondrous grace of God.

And in God's own perfect time. For the time is sure to come when all will be made right. Until then, in the words of Paul: *If we hope for what we do not see, we wait for it with patience.*

Because there's all the time in the world. For the Lord of time is faithful. The Lord of time has given the assurance that

the harvest will come—the miraculous harvest that belongs to God! And you, beloved, have the hope of being made to shine like the sun in the fullness of God’s kingdom, accomplished in all its glory. From everlasting to everlasting!

In the name of God the Father, God the Son, and God the Holy Spirit. Amen.