

How many times have you felt like giving up on something that was hard?

When I was a child, I was never very good at drawing. I was one of those kids who would start to draw a picture of a house, or a dog or something, but I'd get part-way through and make a terrible mistake. And instead of erasing it, or figuring it out, I'd just scribble all over the page and crumple up the paper in frustration. I'd probably even throw the balled-up paper on the floor.

When things are hard – it's so natural for us to want to just give up.

It would usually be so much easier to give up – on relationships, or jobs, or on ourselves – than to patiently work through the hard stuff.

We tend to have these ideas of how life should be. We should be happy. We should be healthy. We should be secure and successful and all pulled together. Our kids should always be well-behaved and our families always get along and our work always fulfilling.

We put a lot of pressure on ourselves – and others – to be perfect, don't we? And when life doesn't fit this ideal picture (it rarely does), it's so easy to feel defeated. It's so easy to storm out of an argument, or want to quit the team, or give up on yourself when you fail at a new goal.

But today in this parable of wheat and weeds, Jesus teaches us to have hope. Hope for ourselves, and for our communities and for all of creation. Jesus teaches us not to give up on hard things, but to really believe in God's vision of wholeness.

To understand this parable fully, it's helpful to know a bit more about these weeds Jesus is talking about. Some translations of this story include the more specific word, "tares." And tares are a very sneaky type of weed. They grow right alongside a wheat plant, and they sort of entangle themselves around the plant, so that removing the weed would also destroy the good plant. That's one problem.

The other thing about tares is that they look very much like wheat, until the time comes for the wheat to bear fruit. Only then can the farmer really tell which plants are fruitful, and which were destructive all along. They're sneaky, and deceptive.

So when the workers in Jesus' story notice the field has been tampered with, they do what we might reactively do: "Master!" they cry, "Should we pull out the bad plants??!" If it were up to them, they'd throw the baby out with the bathwater – to use another analogy. Their fear about the possibility of weeds would lead them to destroy the whole crop. Their impatience would lead them to make a rash and harmful decision.

I did that once. I'm a terrible gardener.

When my family was living in Milwaukee for my internship, we had a beautiful plant outside our back door. It was green and lush and healthy, and it bore long, lovely purple flowers. I wanted to protect it, so daily I would pull out the little weeds that kept springing up all around it. They were persistent, but so was I!

Until a particularly busy week when I just didn't find the time to pull the weeds. And one morning I walked out onto the patio and spotted out of the corner of my eye the most beautiful flash of orange-red next to the bush. Turns out that all this time, I was pulling up another, wonderful plant that complimented my purple flowers perfectly!

My little gardening failure – like this parable – taught me that we aren't always very good judges between what's good and what's bad. What's valuable and what's worthless.

Our own assumptions or anxiety can very easily cloud the truth. But we *love* to make judgments, don't we? We constantly put people and events into simple categories: good guys and bad guys; fake news and truth; right and wrong. And of course we always *think* we are on the right side of an issue.

But Jesus knows better than to put us in charge of judgment. We, like the workers in the field, would be willing to throw out all kinds of good things out of our fear of what *we* deem is bad.

Even this story is used to perpetuate flawed human judgment. When we hear things like, "the wheat will be saved, and the weed will be burned away," we quickly jump back to our categorizing. Weeping and gnashing of teeth causes anxiety in us, so we quickly start with the defensiveness and judgement. We might try to figure out which one we are. Are we the righteous, well-behaved, fruit-bearing Christian wheat? Or are we the invasive, unwanted, sinful, weeds?

I think we all know which we would like to be. And I think we also know some people we'd like to put into the "other" category.

But Jesus teaches us that it's not so simple. The truth is that God created all things good. Remember? Creation is good. Human beings are made in God's good image. Plants and animals and land and sea and sky are good.

It can be hard to believe that because we live in a world that doesn't always appear to be "good." A world in which creation groans because of pollution; a world in which we do terrible things to one another; a world in which we get sick and we suffer.

That's sin, my friends. That's the separation from God that we live with. But it is not from God. Disaster and illness and war and tragedy are not from God, but they do ensnare us and our communities.

So which are we? Wheat or weed? Sinner or saint? We are both.

The good news is that God is much more patient than we are. Much more hopeful. God doesn't crumble us up and throw us away. Even though we are sick with sin -- God does not give up on us.

Instead, God keeps teaching us about the kingdom God intends! A kingdom in which wolves lie with lambs, and rivers are clean and grasses green. One in which swords are turned to plough-shares, and wars cease, and tears are wiped away. Where all people receive love and dignity and freedom.

Instead of placing ourselves, and others, in categories, Jesus' parable reminds us that we are all children of God. Yes, we live in the shadow of sin, but that sin does not define us. And it doesn't define others, either. When we look at a person with whom we disagree, and we see only their sin or their wrongness, we are denying God's good creation. When we look at ourselves with only judgment and self-loathing, we deny the goodness of God's creation.

Thankfully God is a better judge than we are. So we can take that job off of our plates and get back to nurturing the field – the kingdom of God. We don't have to worry about who is a sinner and who is a saint; that's God's work...not ours. *Our* work is caring for the crop. Building one another up. Feeding our bodies and minds with healthy, nourishing things. Caring for the earth. Soaking in the light of God and the living water that is Jesus. Showering the world with love and light, and helping others grow.

We are called to be workers in the field, and to wait with hope – the same patient hope that God has for us. And as we wait, we continue to pray, in confidence: “Your kingdom come.” Amen.