

Eight Sunday after Pentecost, Year A
Saint Barnabas Church, Falmouth MA
The Rev David Rider
July 19, 2026

Matthew 13: 24-30, 36-43

As a boy in the middle of summer, my world was full of baseball in the morning and pickup wiffle ball in the evening—humidity was intense and mosquitos sadistic, but it did not get any better than that

It was back in the day between the assassinations of John Kennedy and Martin Luther King—talk about an American way of marking time—and our country struggled with increased body counts in Vietnam and civil-rights protests across America

Somewhat like today, chaos and stress prevailed, but a child could find moments of joy and innocence that I embraced in baseball and wiffle ball

Wiffle ball took place after dinner, with pickup teammates showing up miraculously on a street full of lightning bugs, parked cars and neighborly lawns

The wind takes the wiffle ball where it will, and often that meant onto the hood of someone's car or well into a neighbor's lawn

Mr Boubalani lived a few houses away and embodied the archetype of a curmudgeonly old man at perpetual war with his crabgrass and dandelions, plucking them out and spraying every known pesticide on them, seemingly to no avail

We boys eyed him with both fear and mischief, often grabbing our wiffle ball off his lawn before he could growl back at us

One evening, I picked up the wiffle ball from his lawn, our eyes connected, and I asked him with a 10-year-old's mixture of empathy and mischief: "Mr Boubalani, couldn't you just learn to live with the weeds?"

Couldn't you just learn to live with them?

Last Sunday, we heard the parable of the four kinds of soil, and today we encounter another agrarian parable of the wheat and tares

We're reading from Matthew's Gospel this summer, and Matthew brings an edgy view of Jesus as impatient and with his hair often on fire: six times, including today, for example, Matthew has sinners gnashing their teeth on a bad day

Also today, the slackers—symbolized by the weeds—are destined to the furnace of fire

So is Jesus's parable pitching a hope that the wheat and weeds learn to live with one another, or will there be a more ominous parting of the ways?

Yes, this passage has an apocalyptic tone, and this genre of literature always entails binary thinking—hot/cold, saved/damned, righteous/evil

But I am not one for binary thinking

I prefer to look for the nuance in the heart of each parable—spoiler alert, we are in the heart of summer head-scratching parable season

For example, in the Hebrew scriptures, furnace and fire images usually point to the act of purification more than punishment, and we

Christians certainly pick up on this theme when we celebrate Pentecost

So if we sidestep the edgy binary thinking of wheat/chaff or righteous/damned, we might view ourselves as a bundle of all the above

You are wheat and chaff—welcome to the human condition!

Jesus certainly is extending this agrarian parable to our humanity, so why not view ourselves as a package deal, a weird and unique amalgam of wheat and chaff, resilience and brokenness, strength and fear, courage and prejudice?

If we take our broken, prejudiced and occasionally even evil quirks and submit them to the furnace of God's purification, we have a better chance of growing in strength and perhaps becoming more useful to the world around us

We can work on our human stuff without lapsing into Mr Boubalani's futile war against the crab grass

In today's parable, the owner admonishes the servants not to tear out the weeds for fear of ripping up the good stuff in the process

It's not so much complacency as having a plan to sort it out

That may be a good way of thinking about our own lives as we begin an extended discussion this week called Sacred Ground

We all have some bad stuff mixed in with the good stuff, and it is prudent to begin (or continue) naming it and working it out

Like my endless boyhood days of baseball and wiffle ball, each of us has a wonderful human story of how we came to be

At the same time, we need to recognize that nostalgia and time can buff the existential edges from our life narratives

With a bit more introspection and self-honesty, we realize that we heard—and maybe said—stuff that brought pain into the world, sometimes as a result of cultural ignorance, peer pressure, family prejudice or personal fear

My wiffle ball companions were all white and mostly Polish or Irish Catholic—I was a minority among my peers who did not get all the parochial school holidays—and we sometimes made jokes or called names at the expense of black strangers who lived on segregated streets a few blocks away

It tightened our mischievous boyhood bonds at the expense of other people's dignity

Our efforts at racial reconciliation in our church and culture aim to facilitate similar introspection and naming of our own family-of-origin stories in all their good/bad/ugly reality

We do this as Christians not as self-indulgence but as a pathway of deeper knowledge, discipleship and transformation

Matthew's Gospel has a flair for naming the 'enemy'—as he does today—but Matthew takes equal flair in turning the tables to recognize (like Pogo) that the enemy is us

That might feel like the subtlety of poking a finger in your eye, but there is value in naming the enemy within, the crazy irrational forces within our souls that allow us to say or do hurtful things

In our parish conversations, I hope we will continually commit to potentially stressful self-examination and community dialogue, remembering the childhood, adolescent and adult forces that have shaped us in both good and painful ways

As Christians, we commit to such journeys as formation and discipleship, owning our stuff while trying to metabolize existential chaos into faithful witness

In closing, let's find an inspirational nod from St Paul's witness in Romans, read just a few minutes ago

Paul argues that we have not received a spirit of slavery to fall back into fear—and fear certainly permeates our world today—but we receive a spirit of adoption by which we are claimed by Christ

We are claimed not because of our innate goodness or beauty, but because God loves us, grabs us by the scuff of our necks, adopts us as heirs, and breathes new life into us

Paul recites the laundry list of decay and groaning in labor pains, but he also celebrates that we have been adopted and redeemed

Adopted by one who loves us first and redeemed—a forensic word meaning we're sprung from jail—by one who has great hope for us

As the Body of Christ, let's learn to name and live with our weeds, not as complacency but as the first step toward separating the wheat from the chaff in our souls

The chaff becomes purified—not punished—so that its damage is lessened while the wheat within us flourishes

Amid our varied pastoral conversations in Christian community, let's claim the courage and honesty to name our stuff, listen non judgmentally to the sacred stories of our peers, and point each other toward the purified love that the Holy Spirit seeks to send our way