

OPENER,

Friends, there are seasons when life feels like a field we can no longer understand.

Some things are growing that we prayed would grow. There is love, faith, recovery, kindness, and new life. Yet tangled among them are disappointments we did not plant, conflicts we did not invite, habits we thought were gone, and wounds that keep returning.

We look across the field and wonder, “Lord, where did this come from?”

That is the question the servants ask in Jesus’ parable. The master planted good seed, but weeds appeared among the wheat. The servants knew those weeds did not belong there, and their first instinct was to do something immediately.

“Do you want us to go and pull them up?” they ask.

Anyone who has worked a garden knows why that is more difficult than it sounds. A weed does not always announce itself clearly. Sometimes it resembles what was intentionally planted. Its roots may wind around the roots of something worth preserving. Pull too quickly, and the soil comes up with it. What looks decisive may damage the very life we hoped to protect.

That is true in gardens, and it is true in souls, families, churches, and communities.

We often see enough to become alarmed but not enough to understand the whole field. We recognize that something is wrong, yet we do not always know how deeply its roots are entangled with grief, fear, history, or our own reactions.

So we understand the servants. When a relationship is strained, we want it settled. When someone is causing trouble, we want the trouble removed. When we discover something unholy within ourselves, we want it gone before anyone else notices.

But the master replies, “Let both grow together until the harvest” (Matthew 13:30, NIV).

Jesus is not saying that evil does not matter. He is not teaching the church to ignore abuse, abandon discernment, or call sin good. The master knows an enemy has entered the field. What he refuses to do is place the final judgment into the hands of anxious servants.

That brings us to the pulse of this message:

God does not abandon the mixed field. God remains present within it, forms a holy people there, and carries creation toward the harvest he has promised.

God Meets Us in the Troubled Place

That Golden Thread begins long before Jesus tells this parable.

Jacob is running from home. He has deceived his father, wounded his brother, and become entangled in a family shaped by favoritism, secrecy, and fear. He is not leaving as a victorious pilgrim. He is fleeing because Esau wants to kill him.

When night comes, Jacob lies down with a stone beneath his head. He has no altar, sanctuary, or congregation. He has only the ground beneath him and uncertainty ahead of him.

Yet God meets him there.

Jacob dreams of a stairway joining earth and heaven. The Lord repeats the covenant promise given to Abraham and then says, “I am with you and will watch over you wherever you go” (Genesis 28:15, NIV).

Notice what God does not say. God does not pretend that Jacob has done nothing wrong. Divine presence is not divine approval of deception. Grace does not rename dysfunction as holiness.

God comes near because Jacob cannot become holy apart from God’s presence.

The Lord will remain with him long enough to confront, humble, preserve, and reshape him. Jacob will eventually receive a new name, but that transformation begins here, while he is still lying in the consequences of his old life.

When he awakens, Jacob says, “Surely the LORD is in this place, and I was not aware of it” (Genesis 28:16, NIV).

Perhaps that is where some of us are today. We can identify the stone beneath our head more easily than the presence above us. We notice what is hard, unresolved, or frightening, but we do not yet recognize that God has entered the place with us.

Paul Anderson calls this a theology of presence. God does not simply offer answers from a distance. God gives himself. The promise to Moses was, “I will be with you.” The same presence guided Israel through the wilderness, spoke through the prophets, and finally came among us in Jesus Christ.[1]

Jacob saw heaven and earth joined in a dream. In Jesus Christ, heaven and earth are joined in a person.

Christ does not stand outside the field and condemn it from safety. He enters creation, takes on flesh, walks among sinners, touches the unclean, bears the cross, enters death, and rises bodily from the grave.

The Gospel of God is not that the Creator has given up on the field. It is that the rightful Lord has entered it.

The Presence That Searches Us

That truth changes how we hear Psalm 139. The God who is present with Jacob is also the God who searches the heart.

The psalmist does not ask for help identifying everyone else's weeds. Instead, he prays, "Search me, God, and know my heart; test me and know my anxious thoughts" (Psalm 139:23, NIV).

Holiness begins there.

Anxiety usually turns our attention outward. It tells us that peace will return when someone else changes, leaves, apologizes, agrees, or finally understands. Families do this. Churches do this. Entire communities do this. We locate the problem in another person and convince ourselves that the field would be healthy if only that weed were removed.

Bowen Family Systems Theory helps us recognize what happens next. Anxiety spreads through relationships. People become reactive, recruit allies, form triangles, and divide into camps. Before long, urgency feels like wisdom simply because everyone is upset.

The servants in Jesus' parable see the weeds and immediately ask permission to begin pulling. The master responds differently. He remains responsible for the field without becoming governed by the servants' fear.

This is what Edwin Friedman called differentiated presence.[2]

The master sees the problem clearly, but he does not panic. His concern is not only removing what is wrong. He is also committed to preserving what is still growing.

That is holy patience.

Isaiah helps us understand how such patience is possible. The Lord declares, "I am the first and I am the last; apart from me there is no God" (Isaiah 44:6, NIV).

God does not react from insecurity. No rival can overthrow him, and no temporary appearance of evil can cancel his covenant.

His patience is not passivity. It is the patience of One who sees the beginning and the end. His mercy does not weaken justice, and his judgment does not erase mercy.

The question, then, is not simply, "When will God remove everything wrong with the field?" The deeper question is, "What is God forming within us while we wait?"

The Spirit Forms Children of the Kingdom

Paul answers that question in Romans 8.

Those who belong to Christ are being led by the Spirit. They are no longer defined by fear, slavery, or the old life of the flesh.

“For those who are led by the Spirit of God are the children of God” (Romans 8:14, NIV).

This is the Gospel convergence.

God is not merely trying to produce better servants. Through Jesus Christ, God is adopting sons and daughters.

We do not become children because we successfully cleaned the field. We learn to resist sin because the Spirit has joined us to the Son.

Holiness grows from belonging.

The Spirit searches what is false, puts to death what belongs to the old life, and forms the character of Jesus within us. Early Friends understood this as primitive Christianity revived. Their concern was not merely that people believe the correct information about Christ, but that they receive the living Christ so deeply that his life becomes visible in theirs.[3]

That does not mean suffering disappears. Paul says the children of God still groan, and creation groans with them.

We live between resurrection begun and resurrection completed. Christ has risen, but graves remain. The Spirit has been given, but creation still suffers decay. The kingdom is present, but the harvest has not arrived.

Yet Paul compares creation’s groaning to childbirth, not a death rattle.

N. T. Wright reminds us that Christian hope is not the evacuation of souls from a world God intends to discard. It is bodily resurrection and renewed creation. God will do for creation what God did for Jesus on Easter morning.[4]

The field will not always remain mixed. The enemy will not keep what he has corrupted. Sin will not write the final chapter because the harvest belongs to Christ.

Until then, our calling is not to deny the weeds or become obsessed with them. Our calling is to grow as children of the kingdom.

That means allowing the Light of Christ to search us before we judge someone else. It means confronting harm without hatred, setting boundaries without contempt, and speaking truth without surrendering mercy. It means remaining connected without becoming controlled by the anxiety around us.

Holiness is not separation from every imperfect person. If that were the standard, none of us could remain in the field.

Holiness is faithful presence: Christ with us, Christ forming us, and Christ becoming visible through us.

Learning to Live in the Field

So, Friends, where is the mixed field in your life?

Perhaps it is your family, where love and pain have grown close together. Perhaps it is the church, where genuine faith exists beside old wounds and unresolved tensions. Perhaps it is your own heart, where devotion to Christ grows alongside fear, resentment, or habits you are ashamed to name.

Do not mistake the presence of struggle for the absence of God.

Jacob's stone became an altar because God was already there. The field remains under the authority of its rightful Lord, and the groaning creation already carries the firstfruits of resurrection.

The God of Bethel has entered the field in Jesus Christ. Through the Spirit, he is forming a people who can live there without being ruled by fear.

We do not have to accomplish the final harvest. That belongs to Christ.

Our calling is to become faithful wheat: to receive the searching Light, surrender the anxious heart, and allow the Spirit to form within us the life of the coming kingdom.

This is where the sermon becomes personal.

We are often more interested in asking God to explain the field than in asking God to form us within it. We want to know why the weeds are there, who planted them, and when God will remove them. Those are understandable questions, but they can also become a way of avoiding the deeper work of holiness.

The more searching prayer is this:

“Lord, what is growing in me while I wait?”

Is anxiety making me harsh?

Is disappointment making me cynical?

Is fear turning discernment into judgment?

Has the presence of weeds convinced me that nothing good is growing?

The Light of Christ does not expose these things in order to shame us. Christ reveals them because he intends to free us from their power.

The same God who met Jacob before Jacob was ready is meeting us. The same Lord who refuses the servants' panic is teaching us steadiness. The same Spirit who raised Jesus from the dead is at work within the groaning places of our lives.

This is the hope of holiness: God is not merely waiting for the field to improve. God is already at work within it.

Open Worship

As we enter Open Worship, perhaps the prayer is not, “Lord, show me who the weeds are.”

Perhaps the prayer is:

“Search me.

Steady me.

Make me holy.

Teach me how to remain faithful in the field where you have placed me.”

God has not abandoned the field.

And God has not abandoned you.

Footnotes

[1] Paul N. Anderson, “A Theology of Presence,” *Evangelical Friend* 26, no. 6 (July–August 1993): 4.

[2] Edwin H. Friedman, *A Failure of Nerve: Leadership in the Age of the Quick Fix* (New York: Seabury Books, 2007).

[3] Paul N. Anderson, “Primitive Christianity Revived—The Original Quaker Vision,” *Quaker Religious Thought* 131 (2018): 5–24.

[4] N. T. Wright, *Surprised by Hope: Rethinking Heaven, the Resurrection, and the Mission of the Church* (New York: HarperOne, 2008), 93–106, 147–64.