Every person has a story to tell. And while they’re all different, there’s often a tension, like a tug of war, between the ending of a short story and the unfolding of a story of a lifetime. Three weeks ago I heard the inspiring back story to the song *Forgiveness* by Matthew West.¹ It could’ve been a short - and sad - story. But room was left for the story to grow. To this day the story continues to provide abundant ground for hope and repentance of sins to many.

Back in May 2002, a 24-year-old drunk driver killed two girls, two best friends. Both were 20 years old. When Renee Napier learned of her daughter’s accident, she said the grief was incomprehensible, the pain, so horrible.

Eric Smallridge was found guilty on two counts of DUI manslaughter and sentenced to 22 years in prison. Renee felt a sense of satisfaction knowing he wasn’t going to get away with what he had done. End of story? Nope.

The verdict wouldn’t heal Renee’s pain. She grieved for many months. Along the way, Renee realized, and I quote, “I could hate him forever and the world would tell me that I have a right to do that.” But “it’s not going to do me any good, and it's not going to do him any good. I would grow old and bitter and angry and hateful.”

You see, in the quiet of her conscience, where it’s only her and God, Renee somehow found it in her heart to slow the execution of judgment, to extend the hope of redemption, to add more chapters to their story. She chose the hardest thing to give away, the last thing on her mind that today. *Forgiveness*.

She then campaigned to get her daughter’s killer freed from prison early, and the judge agreed.

Her faith in Christ Jesus left room for Eric to realize that he was in shackles and chains even before he got behind the wheel that awful day.

Over time, Eric discovered it wasn’t about him anymore. And so while still in prison, he asked and got permission to join Renee Napier educating youngsters about the dangers of drunk driving. A mother’s trust in God’s promise had left room for Eric to atone even more for the sins he had committed.
End of story? Nope.

Standing alongside one another, and seeing Eric mature affected Renee greatly.\(^2\) They have in fact developed a friendship. Renee has grown to love Eric as a son. They admit that their relationship is hard for us to understand, but it’s a way for them to heal.

Their story is a God story. Their story is one of a God who doesn’t smother us with his almighty power, but lifts us up with patience, justice, forgiveness, and hope. Yes, their story is about the wheat and the weeds left with room to grow together.

But which is which in our story of Renee and Eric?

You see try as we might, appearances are deceiving. Take for example the weeds in our parable. They’re most likely the poisonous ryegrass known as darnel. Darnel looks so much like wheat when they’re young that it’s impossible to tell the difference until they mature and bear grain. By then their roots are so intertwined that we can’t pull out the weeds without taking some wheat too.

So can’t we just spray some weed-killer and cull these weeds out now?

This, my brothers and sisters, is exactly the response Renee wanted and received - satisfaction in Eric’s sentencing. And isn’t this weed-killer response what the world expects from us even to this day? You know, might makes right?

Just look at what’s going on in the world right now: the radical religious group ISIS is trying to root out those in Iraq they consider to be weeds. Christians and others are being systematically expelled and slaughtered. Seems to me they’re only proving that they aren't the wheat.

Today’s parable from Jesus is teaching us the hidden meaning of true power. Only God, the farmer in the field, knows when it’s time to pull the weeds. Your mastery [Lord God] of all things makes you lenient to all… those who are just must be kind, to give your children good ground for hope\(^3\) that you will make room for repentance of sins.

Now to be clear, I’m not suggesting that we hold a sort of holy indifference and cower from violence in society or wrongs in the church, or idly wait for an ISIS or al-Qaeda strike.

My brothers and sisters, we are being called:

- to live with the Spirit and bask in the Son
- to prayerfully consider what to root up and the cost to the life growing around it.
Let’s be careful about harvesting the crop and snuffing out the stories before God decides they’re mature and bearing fruit.

Until that harvest comes, Lord show me how to love the unlovable. Show me how to reach the unreachable. Help me now to do the impossible.

The story of Eric and of lives lost could have ended prematurely, buried in grief, without healing, and yes, without true justice. But the Spirit himself interceded with inexpressible groanings, and took Renee’s prayers to God.

Through Renee Napier, a convicted killer, witnessed the mighty and merciful power of our Savior Jesus Christ, who reaches out with arms wide open, to the weak, to the weary, to the lost, to bring all his children home.

Brothers and sisters, let us take in His life-giving body and blood here at this table. Let us be freed of the shackles and chains which bind and blind us and be amazed by what we see through eyes of grace.
1 With grateful thanks to Matthew West, singer and songwriter of *Forgiveness*, from the album *Into the Light*, released July 10, 2012.

2 [http://fridaymagazine.ae/real-life/i-forgave-my-daughter-s-killer-1.1168726](http://fridaymagazine.ae/real-life/i-forgave-my-daughter-s-killer-1.1168726)