

7-23-2023 (maybe: “Pierced by an Unpleasant Parable”)

Three Sundays ago Pastor Ben’s call to read the Bible charitably came as a good word to me personally—I’ve never loved this Gospel according to Matthew like some of its counterparts, nor this polarizing wheat-and-weeds parable. Then Pastor Sam showed us Romans’ subversiveness; I was reminded of an unexpected twist in Matthew too. In chapter 9 Jesus notably ignores purity laws to eat with the “unclean” *tax collectors and sinners* saying, *Those who are well have no need of a physician, but those who are sick. Go and learn what this means, ‘I desire mercy, not sacrifice.’ For I have not come to call the righteous but sinners.* But later, in chapter 18, he gives direction that an unrepentant brother should *be to you like a Gentile, or (...) a tax collector.* Unnhh?!? ... Both curiosity and charity lead us to suspect there may be more to find here than meets the casual eye.

Neither pastor, though, gave a trigger warning. Heads up, I’m giving one now! And bearing witness with Psalm 139 that God’s faithfulness can be uncomfortable! As the writer of Hebrews also promises (and cautions!) us, by God’s grace and mercy Scripture can become *sharper than a two-edged sword*, can turn in our hands and encounter us, piercing us to the heart.

Though the pulpit should not become my personal confessional, I wonder if my dilemma might be common to many of us? So will risk sharing further...

Over the past decade or so the whirlpool increasingly polarizing our country, and our big-C Church, has sucked me down. Never have I had such intense feelings and opinions regarding politics, public health, our justice system, human sexuality, our earth, and the US in general. Intense feelings and opinions aren’t the problem, of course, nor are critical (as in evaluative) thinking skills. We are called to seek justice, and stand against the powers and systems of oppression. But in my doom scrolling I found myself piling on with the polarized blaming-&-shaming. I became trapped before I knew it in this pattern of reactive accusation. Likewise with TV news; yes, I admit Daryl and I have had to help each other stop yelling at the TV sometimes—we found “they can’t hear you” works well. ... Do feel free to adopt it as necessary...

You see, most of my frustration would be angrily directed at individuals: “Of course she’s saying that!” or “Can you believe he’d do that?!” Even, “How can they call themselves Christian?!” Honestly, I’ve too often risked the trap of brooding in my venting, drawn into pointing the finger of blame and accusation, on the verge of writing off people whom God loves, and even wanting to do so. I was “creating a hierarchy of value,” as Pastor Ayebale warned us human judgment does. And frankly, much of my venting could verge on despair as well.

Maybe you, whether on one side or the other of our tragically many polarizations, can relate painfully? Lord, have mercy! Beloveds, the Lord always does. ...

So with our pastors’ timely encouragement, I came to sit with this text less reluctantly. ☺ Only Matthew brings us this parable; it encounters us just once every 3rd year in our lectionary, without intervening echoes of any other gospels’ accounts. The author of Matthew intentionally interprets by location, placing this whole “seed” chapter as Jesus’ response to the encompassing rejection and hostility both in ch. 12, and at the very end of this chapter. These words of encouragement come to followers facing hostility and misunderstanding, as a call to persevere. This is how to live in the already/not yet kingdom of heaven (Matthew’s very Jewish avoidance of using the divine name). Remember that God’s good culmination, God’s kingdom or reign, **will** come! Matthew also characteristically emphasizes inclusion of the ultimate unclean outsiders, the Gentiles. If we zoom out a bit, to all of chapter 13, that emphasis emerges in the smaller bracketing of the widely sown seeds and widely cast net. Context is important! ...

Let’s walk briefly through this perhaps unfamiliar kingdom parable and its explanation, noting some details. Unpacking with the disciples privately, Jesus self-identifies as the owner/master of this world-field, who sows good seed. An enemy—called the evil one or the devil—secretly meddles maliciously, planting weeds alongside to limit the growth of the wheat, and the goals of the Farmer. (We don’t get it, but the original audience would know how flagrantly mixing seeds in a field breaks the Levitical holiness/purity code.) A final detail: wheat can be invaded by something called “false wheat”, the bearded darnel, so similar in appearance as to render impossible distinguishing between them before the grain appears; it endangers the whole harvest when it carries a fungal blight.

In a flurry of true, fearful confusion (or perhaps trying to avoid any blame?) the farm workers question how this secret meddling could have happened in the **farmer's** field. *Didn't you sow good seed?* (An important aside: the unruffled Farmer acknowledges, *An enemy has done this*. Jesus clearly acknowledges that bad things do happen that God doesn't want! In our broken world today, as in theirs, just because something happens doesn't mean that it is God's will. So a big shout-out to our Wesleyan theology from Matthew, and Jesus!)

Next the overeager, and perhaps officious, workers want to start sorting out good vs. bad, protecting that wheat from the "infection" and impurity of the potentially dangerous weeds. They want to do it right now; they're that certain of their own discernment. The wiser Farmer, with a note of rebuke, seems to reply, "That's above your pay grade!" He mandates restraint and an outrageous patience with the mixed seeds for the sake of saving the harvest. **Then** any sorting that needs doing will be done, apparently by the better qualified. Then the nearly crowded out and endangered harvest will finally shine with a blinding, irresistible light like the sun's—to mix metaphors jubilantly.

When we sit with and under Scripture, our first and most important question is, "Who is **God** in this text?" God in Christ is wise, even scandalously patient, taking the long view. Not willing to separate the wheat from the weeds prematurely, caring about collateral damage. Emeritus seminary president and professor Theodore Wardlaw says it beautifully:

"[Jesus'] restraint ... makes room ... for a holy and purposeful ambiguity ... that is both wise and intentional. In our impatience with others, we often want to bring matters to a head and so determine whether others are in or out; but the God Who is glimpsed in this parable models for us an infinite patience that frees us to get on with the crucial business of loving, or at least living with, each other."

Cue Genesis! Here we meet Jacob the jerk, whose name means Deceiver. By today's passage, Jacob-the-jerk has already tricked his older brother out of his birthright, and cruelly deceived his blind father to steal the inheritance-blessing meant for the oldest son. Now he's far from home, on the run from the brother who plans to kill him. But God is patient and persistent. God takes the long view. Genesis shows Jacob, **not** as a role model, but as completely undeserving of grace that comes to him. No repentant seeking here, just trying to save his own skin self-sufficiently—but God initiates relationship with promises of both divine presence and care. Across Genesis we see God persistently working with Jacob, even wrestling with him, and Jacob begins to display some of God's own character, patience and persistence. He receives a new name—but now I'm stealing from another Sunday's texts! Confessing how much we are jerks, too, we take away from Jacob's story a hope-full snapshot of the infinite mercy, patience, and persistence of God. We can follow Teilhard du Chardin's ever-appropriate counsel, "Above all, trust in the slow work of God." Take heart, God **is** actively working, and trustworthy!

But does Matthew portray Jesus as a foolishly unrealistic farmer then, who believes the wheat might "infect" the weeds with "wheatness," given time? In the Jewish purity code the unclean certainly flowed to infect the clean, not vice versa! Weeds are weeds and the only way to protect the wheat is to root them out, right? What I read as deterministic, separatist implications of "wheat" vs. "weed" used to make me squirm about this parable, frankly. Well, that's NOT the point, or even A point of this parable! And it's dangerous, as parables scholars caution us repeatedly, to try to push each detail of a parable into theological meaning. Remember interpreting by location? In Matthew's immediate context—you can't get more immediate than between our parable and its explanation!—appear the kingdom parables of the mustard (a weed!) growing into a hospitable shrub, and the yeast spreading and leavening (infecting!) all the dough. So Matthew counters that simplistic and deterministic interpretive extreme (and separatism!) right in the text. As Pastor Ayebale showed us last Sunday, through the previous parable, through Jesus' power we are caught up in transformative and ongoing process of becoming. So a closer and more faithful reading of Matthew would argue that yes, if pushed to that vocabulary we'd have to agree that this Farmer is that "foolish" ☺, and calmly, powerfully so ... powerfully patient, and strategic, and merciful.

Only after we consider who God is do we ask, "Who, then, are we in this passage?" You and I both know how easy it is to jump to what kind of grain we are, wheat or weed—and, alas and especially, what kind "they" are (whoever our "they"). Polarizing can be contagious! We're all easily convinced that WE are the wheat, THEY are the weeds. (Especially in our current heartbreaking polarizations.)

But what if here, most importantly, we are the servants? So obviously omitted in Jesus' explanation, is the omission itself is subversively planned to draw our attention? They are the contrast, the foil to the Farmer's broader perspective. Only his calm, wise, and scandalously patient perspective remains. Clearly, they're misguided. (And isn't that the whole point of the parables, per the Matthew's use of the Isaiah quote earlier, to prod us to more deeply *look... and hear... and understand... and turn* to receive God's salvific healing?!?) What if those disciples, and we today, are being challenged by our likeness to these blaming, finger-pointing, and then impatiently officious, servants? Are **we** trying to dodge blame? Implying "not my fault..." "Oh no, it wasn't us, it was an enemy who did this"—shifting blame, accusing someone else. And as a follow-up, now that it's clearly someone else's fault: "We've got this, we know just what the problem is, we can fix it" ... what arrogance! In Wardlaw's phrasing, we DO want to "bring matters to a head" and "determine whether others are in or out", don't we? The Farmer replies, "Whoa! YOU'VE got this??? Slow down! You don't know the damage you'll do, rushing to uproot what you think you can discern as weeds. You don't know, as I do, the damage trying to uproot them will bring. But at my harvest time all will be set right..."

This is where Scripture turned and pierced me to the heart. Jesus' pictures the harvest revealing who we've become, the families we've chosen. He uses the terms *children of the kingdom* (again, Matthew's avoidance of the name of God), *children of the evil one*, and *the enemy ... the devil*. I had overlooked that specific Scriptural name for the evil one, *the devil* (Hoh diAHbolos). It's a descriptive role; specifically, it means **The Accuser**. It derives from the Greek verb "diaBAHloh"—literally, "bring charges"—so maybe even Prosecuting Attorney!

I was stunned and heartsick when confronted with myself through this passage; patterned by accusing and finger-pointing, I had been unwittingly choosing a "family likeness" completely counter to the Spirit's adoption celebrated in our Romans reading. I was all turned around, playing the enemy's role, achieving the enemy's goals, shooting the ball at the other team's hoop! In horror I cried out to our wise, patient and persistent Farmer who in this convicting, too, was showing me mercy. Thanks be to God!

Romans speaks further to our complicated predicament. I'd call any pattern of accusation a *living according to the flesh*, playing the enemy's role. (So consider that when we avoid accusing others but may yet pile on ourselves, we're still shooting for that other team in **self**-accusation.) But we, beloveds, HAVE received the Spirit of God, the spirit of adoption as children of God. It is in mercy, not judgement, that the Spirit convicts us, and restores us, in that transformative and ongoing process that can feel like labor pains! And it is when we have received that mercy, and can bear witness to the Spirit's faithful transformative work on our own "weediness", that we are empowered with *hope for* the culmination of *what we do not see*, and, trusting in the slow work of our patient God, also *wait for it with patience*. That hope frees us "to get on with the crucial business of loving ... each other." Thanks be to God!