

Wheat and Weeds

The Parable of the Weeds Among the Wheat isn't an easy one, and so, before I deal with the parable itself, I want to say a little about the gospels and their authors. The word "gospel" comes from an Old English word meaning "good news," so what we have in the gospels is the good news about Jesus Christ. And we have it in not one but four different versions. Each version contains the good news, according to a particular author, and I'm sure we can all reel off their names: Matthew, Mark, Luke and John.

Each of these authors wrote at a particular time and place for a particular community. Most scholars agree that Mark's was the earliest gospel written, probably sometime in the 60's, C.E., or about thirty years after Jesus' death. Both Matthew and Luke incorporated all the material in Mark's gospel. They also had a second common source, now lost, as well as some material unique to each. Because of the correspondences between these accounts, they are called the "synoptic" gospels, because all their material can be aligned in a synopsis that shows the parallels between them.

When you look at the parallel passages in the three synoptic gospels, you start to see that each author gave the material his own particular slant. Because their circumstances and audiences were different, Mark, Luke, and Matthew emphasized different things. There is a whole field of biblical study, called "redaction criticism," which focuses on the way in which different writers shaped their materials.

Mark's gospel was written at the time of Nero's persecution of Christians and the Jewish revolt against imperial Rome. Believing that the second coming was close at hand, Mark urges his community to be steadfast in the face of suffering and to emulate Jesus by living lives of sacrificial discipleship. Luke, writing later in the first century, for an audience that included gentile Christians, was more concerned with convincing his readers that Jesus was the Messiah promised by scripture. He also emphasized Jesus' concern for the poor, the marginalized, and the oppressed.

Matthew is the most legalistic of the three synoptic writers. His community appears to be Jewish Christians who had separated from the Pharisee-led Judaism that predominated after the destruction of Jerusalem, in 70 C.E. He is concerned both with pressures on the early church from *outside* the community and with disruption to the church from opposing elements *within* the community. As commentator Dennis Duling notes, *This gospel contains a sharp anti-Pharisaism, moral stringency, and apocalyptic severity. Yet it has a marvelous vision of Jesus as the compassionate, healing Messiah/Son of David . . . who calls his followers to spread the good news of the kingdom of heaven to the whole world.*

The moral stringency and apocalyptic severity are very much to the fore in our gospel reading for today. The language about throwing evildoers into a furnace of fire, where there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth, might make us wonder what happened to the compassionate, healing Christ. It may help you to know that the scholars of the Jesus Seminar judge this parable as “only distantly related to the words of Jesus, if at all.”

It is Matthew, not Jesus, who is really into judgment and who includes passages on damnation unique to his gospel. As commentator, Barbara Brown Taylor puts it, Matthew *warms up to any parable that has to do with judgment. Of all the gospel writers, he is the only one who waxes eloquent about the end of the world, the only one who mentions a furnace of fire where there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth. His is the only gospel that contains the wise and foolish virgins, or the division of the sheep from the goats, or today's parable about the wheat and the weeds. Of all the gospel writers, it is Matthew who most wants a clearcut creation, in which things are either black or white, good or bad, in which people are faithful or wicked, blessed or cursed.*

In a certain way, I “get” Matthew, because judgment is so satisfying, isn’t it? Judgment allows us to claim the moral high ground and to discount and dismiss those who annoy or threaten or hurt us. (We might not even mind hearing them do a little weeping and gnashing of teeth!) It relieves us of the responsibility of trying to understand another’s experience and point of view. After all, “He’s just a jerk,” or “She’s just an idiot.”

Matthew and his community, not unlike many in our society today, wanted a clear division between who was acceptable and who was not, but, unfortunately things are seldom so very clear. This is where it’s important to distinguish what Jesus is saying from what Matthew is emphasizing. Certainly in the parable of the wheat and the weeds Jesus speaks of judgment, but his word to us is “patience.” We must let the wheat and the weeds grow together until the harvest, when it will be up to the reapers to separate them.

We need to be patient, first of all, because only God can really tell the wheat from the weeds. As much as we think we can do it, we’re often not very good at it. In all communities, and within each of us, wheat and weeds grow alongside each other. Sometimes, they can be hard to distinguish. The weeds that the servants were concerned with, in the parable, were dandelion, a weed whose seeds can cause blindness and even death if eaten. The trouble is, dandelion is related to wheat, and it looks like wheat. It can be hard to tell them apart.

As commentator, Douglas Hare, notes, *Perhaps Jesus used this parable to point out that human beings are not competent to make the kind of judgments implied in separating wheat from [weeds]; in plucking out what they think are [weeds], they may very well be pulling up wheat. Only God can make such judgments . . .* Psalm 139 reminds us of how deeply we are known by God. None of us, no matter how close we are, can have that kind of knowledge of another.

When I was pastoring in Irasburg, I attended a funeral officiated by a pastor whose theology was far more conservative than mine. I spoke with him afterwards, and he told me that doing this funeral had been a real pleasure for him, because the deceased was such a good Christian. His wife was standing with us, and when he turned to speak to someone else, she stayed to continue our conversation. She told me that the funerals her husband found difficult were the ones he had to do for those he didn't think were saved, because he couldn't honestly say to the mourners that their loved one was with God. At this point, I felt my smile freeze and my eyes glaze over. I had to excuse myself, before I said something I might regret. *What gives you the right*, I found myself mentally addressing this pastor, *to decide who is and who isn't saved?*

When we claim to know the mind of God, we are remaking God in *our* image, and when we set ourselves up to make judgments about who is and who isn't beloved of God— or that there is *anyone* who isn't beloved of God— we are trespassing on God's territory. In her book, *Bird By Bird*, Ann Lamott quotes a clergy friend, who tells her, *You can safely assume you've created God in your own image when it turns out [God] hates all the same people you do.*

We also need to be careful of our judgments because we may be very much in danger of the hypocrisy, to quote another of Jesus' sayings, of seeing the mote in another's eye while ignoring the beam in our own. The householder in the parable tells the servants not to gather the weeds, for in gathering the weeds they would uproot the wheat along with them. When we become overly concerned about uprooting the weeds, we may also damage the roots of the young wheat growing alongside.

Many people, especially young people, have left the Church because they have been so troubled by churches and church members judging and condemning others. They expect that being a follower of Christ should make us kinder, more generous people and are disillusioned when that turns out not to be the case. In my experience, those who are closest to being wheat are those who are most aware of their own weediness and are, thus, more ready to have compassion for the weediness of others. Who among us can compare our lives with all that it means to follow Jesus and say that their are no weeds in *our* field?

Finally, we must be patient because unlike the darnel, which will never become wheat, people *can* change, and the weed of today may become the wheat of tomorrow. All of us know people who have dramatically turned their lives around— we may even *be* those people— when they really “got” the nature of God's love for them. The wheat and the weeds grow together. It was this way in Jesus' time, and it is still this way today.

It's interesting to me that Jesus says, *The kingdom of heaven may be compared to someone who sowed good seed in his field . . .* He compares the kingdom not to a place but to a person and to his actions. This implies that the realm of God is present whenever we sow the seeds of goodness, even if we know that the weeds are going to continue to grow alongside. Discouragement is not an option.

Jesus asks us to be patient with one another, continuing to sow good seeds and leaving judgment up to God. We are asked to be patient because it's not up to us to decide who's wheat and who's weeds. We are asked to be patient because, in our enthusiasm to root out weeds, we may endanger ourselves and others with our own hypocrisy, pulling up the wheat along with the weeds. And we are asked to be patient, because human weeds can become wheat, especially if they are given a chance to grow along with the wheat. Let us give thanks that God isn't as quick to judge as we are, but gives us the chance to keep growing right up until the harvest.

Amen.