

This parable in the gospel attributed to Matthew, sometimes called “The Weeds among the Wheat,” only appears in this gospel. Way back when I first heard it, it was called “The Wheat and the Tares,” but even back then, nobody could tell me what “tares” were. Maybe some day, given a growing interest in the legalization of a certain formerly out-lawed cash crop, it will be called “The Weeds among the Weed.” What can I say? For better or worse, things change.

In any case, this parable immediately follows one that does appear in Mark and Luke as well. That one, known commonly as “The Parable of the Sower,” tells of a single sower and a single variety of seed. The variable in that parable is the ground that the seed falls upon. The seed is all good, but if it falls on ground in which it cannot germinate and grow to reproduce as much as a hundredfold, the goodness of the seed is lost through no fault of its own nature. In this one, however, there are two different sowers and two different kinds of seed of two very different natures. It is the ground that is singular, and it is equally accommodating to both.

One can imagine the difficult times in which these parables were written. The Jewish community (and Matthew was clearly written for a Jewish audience), was oppressed in its subjugation to the Roman empire, and the Jewish sect that before long would identify as Christian

was facing increasing sanction by Jewish religious authorities. In times of oppression and marginalization, it is an issue of basic survival to be able to discern who has your back and who shares your threatened interests. These two parables, then, are about discernment especially when discernment is a life-or-death matter and particularly when conditions make that discernment difficult if not impossible.

The author of Matthew leaps out in front of the other two gospels with this second parable by proposing that opposition to the gospel is not just an arbitrary product of human choice but has a moral component involving retribution. Weeping and gnashing of teeth, no less. It can even be attributed to an enemy agent, here called the devil, which is just another way to say, “enemy.”

Matthew is probably thinking of Jewish purity laws which sought to establish a rightful claim to Abraham’s promise. If you are entitled to the promise of Abraham, it is because your God-given nature says so. It can’t be challenged. Ah, but the same applies if you are not, and that can’t be challenged either. In this, he effectively planted the seed, if you will, of what is probably the strongest scriptural support for the doctrine of predestination. When Christianity, that is, imperial Christianity, picks up this doctrine, it creates a world of hurt.

Since the dawn of farming culture, humans have known well that if you plant an apple seed, you get an apple tree. If you plant wheat, you get wheat. If you plant potatoes, you get potatoes. Seeds are preprogrammed to manifest a certain product. They are in a sense little karma bombs set to go off under the right conditions, destined to have a very specific cause with very little variability. Matthew, I think, has some good reasons for employing this “people are seeds” metaphor, particularly in terms of social justice. In countless cases across human history, the fruit has rarely fallen a measurable distance from the tree.

But in the light of modern psychotherapy, we can see some limitations to this reading. For instance, there is the old joke, “How many psychiatrists does it take to change a light bulb? Only one, but it takes a long time, and the light bulb has to want to change.” People do have the capacity to change. In fact, elsewhere Jesus repeated the seed metaphor to express our capacity for change, saying that the seed has to die and be resurrected as something else. I love the t-shirt you see around lately, “They tried to bury us, but they didn’t know we were seeds.” It’s a great saying unless you happen to have grown attached to being a seed.

And horticulturally, there are some problems with calling something a “weed.” There is no set botanical

definition of a weed. It is simply a label for something growing somewhere that somebody doesn't want. Some commentators suggest that the author of Matthew is referring to a specific plant called "poison darnel" that grows in all parts of the world. In its early life, the plant is virtually indistinguishable from young wheat, but when it bears fruit, the grain is actually toxic causing a drunken nausea when eaten that can actually be fatal. While useful to an extent, there is problem with accepting this reading as conclusive. First, the word translated as wheat actually translates as "grain." Wheat is not specified, so why would the "weed" necessarily resemble wheat.

Second, and I think more interesting, is the word translated as weed. The Greek word in the original text is *zizania*. Now if you Google that word, you get the scientific name for wild rice. I am told the deacons will soon be selling zizania produced and packaged by a tribe in Minnesota along with the fair trade coffee and chocolate in the narthex. Check it out. I am sure it will be delicious!

It becomes very interesting when you look at how imperial Christianity has interpreted the grain which grows from the master sower's hand as wheat which is the calorie-dense, easily accumulated and transported foodstuff that feeds an imperial army, and which, incidentally, is easily refined in modern times into forms that last and last on pantry shelves but inflame our bodies

when we eat them and cause potentially serious allergic reactions in many people who do. And it gives the word Jesus ostensibly used to signify the devil's seed to one of the plants that has sustained indigenous people and their culture for thousands of years before written history was ever used to validate one culture over another.

For reasons long forgotten, the author of Matthew does not give these two parables the freedom to speak with the same rich, plethora of perspectives that all the other parables enjoy. An allegorical symbolism is imposed by the author. The seed is this; the soil is that; this sower is this person; that sower is, well, the devil. On one hand, it is interesting that in the first parable Matthew casts us as the soil and in the second he casts us as the plants emerging from the soil, destabilizing the presumption of a fixed identity which is an important if sometimes uncomfortable component in spiritual practice. But, on the other, it does, in my view, limit how the Spirit can use this text to speak to us in our time and social context. To say nothing of the fact that our parable today has some of us gathered into God's barn to be eaten later or cast weeping into a fire now. I ask you, is one really that much better than the other?

Although Mark and Luke did not include "The Wheat and the Weeds" in their versions, the Gospel of Thomas did. One of the early Christian texts recovered from an

archaeological dig at Nag Hammadi in 1945, the Gospel of Thomas did not repeat Matthew's limiting symbolic interpretation, allowing for a much freer reading. For instance, if we allow ourselves to identify with the soil rather than the plants either gathered or burned, the two kinds of seeds help us connect with the experience I think we all have of having both good and evil thoughts struggle for the sunlight of our attention. The entire text of this wonderful gospel is available free online. I encourage you to check it out.

The gospel, or good news, of Christ is the promise that, as the daughters and sons of God, the seeds from which we are now emerging carry the genetic code, the divine DNA that inviolably identifies us as children of the Kingdom. We are "children of God" seeds, growing "children of God" plants, producing "children of God" fruit. We all carry the promise of Abraham which last week Dr. Keller told us was to be the source of God's blessing to all the families of the earth.

Yet we look around this crazy world and find it all too easy to believe that someone has planted other seeds here. Some of these plants with whom we share this fertile ground seem more like invasive species robbing weaker plants of the nutrients and sunlight they need to thrive and manifest their God-given promise. Maybe Matthew is onto something. Maybe a harvest is coming. Maybe a sorting is

coming between the wheat and the tares, the life-sustaining grain and the sickening poison darnel. Maybe it is coming soon.

In 1209, Pope Innocent III, initiated the Albigensian Crusade against a Christian sect called the Cathars in the city of Albi in the south of France. The Cathars were a Gnostic sect that taught a dualist view of creation that rejected materialism to the point of starvation and sought the perfection of spirit. They also challenged the material excess and extravagant wealth of the church at that time. So Pope Innocent III (yeah, it's his real name!) launched a successful 20 year crusade to wipe them out.

The leader of the Pope's crusade army, the man who was to lead the first massacre of this Pope's crusade, was named Arnaud Amalric. He has become known to us across the centuries for the answer he gave when asked by a crusader under his command how he was to distinguish between the heretic Cathars and the good Catholics who lived in the same town. "Kill them. For the Lord knows who are His." His answer became the origin of a modern phrase, heard in Vietnam because no one could tell who was North or South Vietnamese, and heard in Iraq because no one could distinguish between Sunni and Shiite, "Kill them all and let God or Allah sort them out."

As people of the wealthiest, most militarily powerful empire the world has ever seen, we cannot afford to

believe that each of us are the unalterable, predestined result, some good, some bad, of seeds from which we have emerged. That belief may justly hold for those for whom our beloved American Dream is more of a nightmare, for whom the Promised Land holds little if any promise. But then, according to that belief, we become the invasive species destined for the weeping and gnashing.

As people of presumed power and privilege, we need a reminder that this fertile ground in which we live, move, and have our being does not belong to us, and it certainly doesn't stop at the makeshift borders of one country or another. It belongs to the master sower. As workers in that soil, as the seeds planted in that soil, and as the plants that depend upon it for our existence, let us carefully heed the command of the master sower, "Let them grow together until the harvest so that not one is prematurely uprooted." Let them live. Make sure each has the sunlight and the soft rain and the good soil so that they have every opportunity to bear the fruit true to their nature.

Let them live and let God sort us out.