

## Things Hidden

Maybe some of you are thinking, after hearing today's parable, that I'm all wet to say that the parables are mysterious and hard to understand, that the meaning is hidden and getting it requires us to develop Kingdom eyes and Kingdom ears.

After all, isn't this story of the weeds and the wheat as clear as day, using just everyday eyes, everyday ears?

Of course the world is divided up between good guys and bad guys; even Jesus' explanation of the parable seems to make it pretty cut and dry: good and bad live side by side, but someday, God will show up and reward the good and send the bad to a fiery furnace; so please Fr. David, stop making things more complicated than they actually are....

Except despite what appears to be so obvious in today's parable, perhaps Jesus is inviting us to take a closer look, to not be satisfied with what seems to be.....

Remember, this is the same Jesus who just got through saying: "Therefore I speak to them in parables; because while seeing they do not see, and while hearing they do not hear, nor do they understand." Mt 13:13.

So maybe it's a safe bet that what seems obvious may not be so obvious after all.

That things may be a bit deeper begins with the weeds he's talking about.

Jesus isn't talking dandelions.

As the over 60 crowd knows, this parable used to be known, back in the King James Bible days, as The Parable of the Wheat and the Tares.

Tares being an old English word for what we call today "Cheat Wheat."

It's a particular kind of weed that looks for all the world like wheat, even as it grows, and only when it's ripe, ready for harvest, does it display the tell-tale sign of not being what it seems to be.

The seeds of the wheat plant are ground into bread and flour for nourishment.

The seeds of the tare weed cause hallucinations and even death.

Yet, both plants, for most of their lives growing in the field, are virtually impossible to tell apart.

And there's something else about these particular weeds.

They don't actually grow side by side with the wheat; they grow in and around it; so that weeds and wheat are intertwined, particularly in their roots, at their base, that place from which they receive life and nourishment.

Which is already a step away from the apparently obvious meaning of the parable; since, rather than a world where we have the good here and the bad there, yes, in close proximity to each other, but still separate and apart; what Jesus is actually saying is that good and bad are relentlessly woven together, even to the very root of our lives.

Don't take my word for it.

Just look at the gang Jesus chooses to follow him, starting with that Rock, St. Peter himself, who, in one minute is praised by Jesus for his ability to see in Jesus the promised Messiah, but only moments later is at the end of Jesus' accusing finger, "you Satan, get behind me!" when Peter cannot accept that Messiah must suffer and die.

Not to mention the rest of that motley crew, from James and John who in a heartbeat leave everything to follow him, but who also shamelessly lobby for seats of glory as Jesus is only days away from crucifixion; to the whole rest of them who follow him through thick and thin, until the thin gets too scary, and all but the women run away and hide – terrified.

Jesus, not only in his parables, but with his whole ministry, invites us to see that we are none of us purely good and we none of us are purely bad....we, individually and collectively, are that mixture of wheat and weeds, right to our roots, right from the beginning.

Those good seeds were indeed sown right at the beginning, when God's creation was new, and that creation was not only good, but very good indeed.

Those good seeds were invaded by bad seeds, also right at the beginning, when humanity decided to take for ourselves the power to say what is good and what is evil, what is right and what is wrong, that long ago day in the garden, when the evil one coaxed us into eating what God said to leave alone.

And so ever since, we've had wars: between spouses and siblings and neighbors and nations, all caused by competing

claims of who is right and who is wrong.

Today, Jesus reminds us yet again that we are simply not equipped to make those judgments, and to the extent that circumstances in this broken world compel us to make the call, that we do so with full knowledge that even our best and most considered judgments may be completely wrong, because whatever good roots we have, they are always entwined with the bad.

Now you might still be objecting to my take on the parable, because when Jesus explains it, he talks about how, at the end of the age, "The Son of Man will send his angels, and they will collect out of his kingdom all causes of sin and all evildoers, and they will throw them into the furnace of fire, where there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth."

Which, to our everyday eyes and ears sounds like the good being rewarded and the bad punished.

But even that may not be as it seems.

Take a step back and think again how God enters our lives: not through power and punishment, but by submitting to our oh so human violence.

God incarnate is dismissed, ridiculed, arrested, tortured, and killed on one of the most heinous devices human depravity has ever invented.

Rather than fight back, he forgives.

Rather than condemn, he embraces.

So what about this line: "The Son of Man will send his angels, and they will collect out of his kingdom all causes of sin and all evildoers, and **they** will throw **them** into the furnace of fire, where there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth."

Does it perhaps mean something other than the obvious?

Try this on for size:

What if it's not the angels throwing evildoers into the fire but rather the "**evildoers**" who throw **the angels of God**, "into the furnace of fire, where there is weeping and gnashing of teeth."

Sounds crazy, right?

But what might be really crazy is our insistence that the God who comes to us as a suffering servant will someday return as a terror inflicting judge.

So what if, at the end of the age, the angels, like Jesus before them, rather than engaging in violence, submit to human violence?

I say all of this so you might consider that maybe it's not God who's in love with sacrifices and just desserts, maybe it's us!

Maybe that's why St. Paul can shout with amazement that while we were still sinners, God sends Jesus to save us; why Paul can correctly see that there is not one of us who is blameless, not one, yet God takes on flesh, submits to the worst we can do, and forgives us.

It reminds me of the scene from the Book of Revelation, where the question is asked of St. John concerning a vast multitude clothed in white robes:

"Who are they, and where have they come from?"

And he said to me,

"These are the ones who come out of the great tribulation, and they have washed their robes and made them white in the blood of the Lamb...." Rev 7:13.

You see, as much as we secretly long for the day when God will give all the baddies that one-two knockout punch, what Jesus keeps reminding us is that at the end of the day, to our very roots, we are all a profound mixture of baddie and goodie.

While we so often crave bloody sacrifice; God gives us mercy, which is why, in Matthew's gospel, Jesus tells us, quoting the prophet:

"For I desire steadfast love and not sacrifice, the knowledge of God rather than burnt offerings."

And again, "Go and learn what this means, 'I desire mercy, not sacrifice.'

If we can keep that truth squarely in front of us, we might come to see that the first lesson of kingdom living is NOT looking forward to the day when all scores are settled, but to meditate deeply on our own individual and collective need for repentance.

"Repentance, as Jesus and John the Baptist insist, is not a ticket needed to enter the kingdom, rather, repentance IS the

kingdom of heaven as it invades the earth.” J. Shea, *On Heaven As It Is On Earth*, 232. (modified).

Instead of offering us a black and white picture of good folks and bad folks, perhaps today’s parable might remind us that what really matters is not so much just desserts or evening scores, what really matters is mercy – mercy that is rooted in our own profound and never ending need for mercy ourselves.

+amen

