

“The Parables According to Matthew, Part III: Weeds”:  
A Sermon for Trinity United Church (Nanaimo, B.C.)  
for July 2<sup>nd</sup> 2017 (Fourth Sunday after Pentecost)  
by Foster Freed

Matthew 13: 47-50

Matthew 13: 24-30

I want to get underway, this morning, by acknowledging that I am doing something here that I normally try my best to avoid doing: specifically, I am asking us, this morning, to ponder not one but two parables. I generally try to avoid doing that, because each of these parables, even the briefest of them, tends to contain within itself a world of meaning. It almost feels like spiritual gluttony to attempt to chow down on more than one of these parables on any given Sunday. Nevertheless!

I have chosen to break from that practice on this particular Sunday, not because these two parables are identical (far from it!) but because they share the same underlying world-view. To be specific: both of these parables (both drawn from Matthew's 13<sup>th</sup> chapter) are shaped by a stream of Biblical piety that emphasizes the stark division, the sharp separation, God continually seeks to make between those elements of creation which choose to honour and cooperate with God, and those elements of creation which choose to resist God. Consider, first the parable of the net.

*“Again, the kingdom of heaven is like a net that was thrown into the sea and gathered fish of every kind. When it was full, men drew it ashore and sat down and sorted...”*

...that's a crucial word in the context of both of these parables, the fishermen **sorted**...

*“...sat down and **sorted** the good [fish] into containers but threw away the bad. So it will be at the end of the age. The angels will come out and separate...”*

that's the other crucial word in the context of both of these parables, the word **separate**...

*“The angels will come out and **separate** the evil from the righteous and throw them into the fiery furnace. In that place there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth.”*

And yes: identical pattern informs the second of these two parables which, of course, actually comes first in Matthew's Gospel. While the parable of the wheat and the weeds is a considerably more complex parable (and, in my judgment, a better parable), that same underlying pattern is not hard to detect here.

*"At the harvest time,"* explains the Master, *"I will tell the reapers, 'Gather the weeds first and bind them in bundles to be burned, but gather the wheat into my barn.'"* Weeds bundled and burned! Wheat gathered into the barn! Here again we confront a classic Biblical worldview, one in which God's work of redemption involves the sorting and the separating out of good from bad, faithful from faithless, the things that truly belong to God separated from the things that perhaps never did. And yes!

Nowhere in the New Testament is Jesus more Jewish than in the telling of such parables, parables which are grounded in the classic Old Testament vision of God and of the world God has brought into being. Consider, right off the bat, the way in which the creation account in Genesis 1—the Bible's opening chapter—gets under way. On the first day God separates...

...there's that word again!

...on the first day God separates light from dark. On the second day God separates the firmament above from the firmament below, leaving the earth in between. And then, on the third day, God separates the dry land from the sea. Nor does the theme of separation end there. On the contrary, the entire story of Genesis is powered by a series of such separations: Cain and Able, Noah's family and the rest of humanity, Abraham and Lot, Isaac and Ishmael, Jacob and Esau and ultimately the people Israel over and against all of the nations. God creates, calls, and redeems by sorting and separating...urging us in the process to align ourselves with those who are being woven into the things of God. It's not for nothing that the opening chapter of the book Proverbs insists that *the fear of the LORD is the beginning of knowledge; but fools despise wisdom and instruction*. Nor is it for nothing that the Old Testament's book of prayer—the book Psalms—begins with a wisdom Psalm in which we are reminded (in its opening verses) that those are *blessed...who walk not in the counsel of the wicked...in contrast to the wicked who are like chaff that the wind drives away*. That is the world-view which informs both of these parables. Good fish separated from bad fish in the one parable, finest wheat separated from pernicious weeds in the other. Also worth noting: we will encounter further such parables in Matthew's Gospel. Wise and foolish virgins. Faithful servants who use their talents versus the servant who buries his talent in the ground. Most impressively: sheep gathered at God's right hand versus the goats at God's left hand. These divisions and separations are not merely the way of the world; they appear also to be God's way...God's way of dealing with the world.

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Well! That there is a shadow side to all of this...that there is a dimension to all of this that not only can but perhaps should produce in us at least a small measure of discomfort, seems abundantly clear to me. Perhaps it is a function of the highly volatile times in which we presently live, that makes it almost impossible to overlook the dangers inherent in so divisive a vision of the world. Whatever may or may not be true of God, we certainly know that we human beings have an almost instinctive need not only to recognize such divisions, but to "weaponize" them in all sorts of troubling ways.

On this weekend of patriotic celebration both here and south of the border, there is no shortage of anxious ruminations blowing in the wind. An interview in the weekend edition of the *Wall Street Journal* features distinguished American historian Allen Guelzo, who believes that you need to go all the way back to the 1850s and 1860s—in other words, the decade leading up to the Civil War and the decade during which the Civil War was fought—in order to see the United States as dangerously divided as it presently appears to be. Closer to home, Rex Murphy's column in the weekend edition of the *National Post*—a column in which he reflects upon Canada's 150<sup>th</sup> birthday—warns us that we will pay a significant price if we focus only on our diversity (only on identities that separate us) to the exclusion of our essential unity as Canadians.

And there is no point in pretending that our spiritual heritage does not subtly encourages us to focus on the things that divide rather than those that unify. Each of the three religions that trace their roots back to Abraham, find ways of emphasizing the essential division between those who have—and those who have not—embraced the God of Abraham. While it may well be the case that we Christians are especially uneasy with Judaism's emphasis on the "chosenness" of the Jewish people, and equally uneasy with Islam's division of the world into "the house of Islam" over and against "the house of war", let's not forget that it was Jesus himself who insisted that we ought not to imagine that he came to bring peace to the earth but rather that he came to bring a sword!" While there is good reason to presume that he was not speaking of actual warfare (it's not for nothing that we name him "Prince of Peace") those words serve as a reminder that these parables, far from being outliers in the world of Jesus of Nazareth, represent a dimension of his teaching from which there is no easy escape.

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I mentioned earlier...mentioned earlier...that we will encounter (during the course of our travels with the parables found in Matthew's Gospel) further examples of parables through which Jesus promises the coming of a time when God separates good from bad, righteous from unrighteous, wheat from weeds. In our encounter with each of these parables of division, we will see a number of different ways in which Christ conditions and qualifies their stark promise of a coming day of sifting, sorting and separation. That is certainly true of the parable of the Wheat and Weeds: a parable that incorporates a level of complexity not found in the Parable of the Net.

*"The kingdom of heaven may be compared to a man who sowed good seed in his field, but while his men were sleeping, his enemy came and sowed weeds<sup>1</sup> among the wheat and went away. Notice, right off the bat, that it was not the original intention of the Master to sow weeds. There is nothing natural about their presence in the Master's field; they are, in effect, a foreign intrusion.*

*His enemy came and sowed weeds<sup>1</sup> among the wheat and went away. So when the plants came up and bore grain, then the weeds appeared also. And the servants<sup>1</sup> of the master of the house came and said to him, 'Master, did you not sow good seed in your field? How then does it have weeds?'<sup>8</sup> He said to them, 'An enemy has done this.'*

*So the servants said to him, 'Then do you want us to go and gather them?'<sup>9</sup> But he said, 'No, lest in gathering the weeds you root up the wheat along with them. Let both grow together until the harvest, and at harvest time I will tell the reapers, "Gather the weeds first and bind them in bundles to be burned, but gather the wheat into my barn."'"*

I think it entirely appropriate for us to interpret this parable pretty much as the Christian tradition has tended to interpret it down through the ages, an interpretation that chooses to see the Master of the field as a stand-in for God, and chooses to see the field itself as the Church. In effect this parable anticipates the obvious question, namely: "Why, if God has called and fashioned a people set apart for discipleship, a people set apart so that they might credibly live and share with others the good news of Jesus Christ...why then...why then are there so many stinkers inside the church?" "Why are there so many people inside the body of the "saved" who appear to be to be so woefully far from saved?"

And yes, as mentioned a moment ago: the most obvious answer offered by the parable, serves as a reminder that the Master did not intend for there to be weeds in the field, nor does God intend for there to be unworthy folks inside of the church. No! That's the work of an enemy. That's the obvious answer the parable offers to the riddle...but it is not (in my humble opinion) the really important thing that the parable wishes to reveal. The really important thing...and the thing we have so much trouble getting through these thick skulls and stubborn hearts of ours...is that it is not our job, it is not our vocation...it is not our calling, to occupy ourselves worrying about the presence of those who might be unfit for the Kingdom since the time is not yet ripe for acting on those worries.... any more than it was the vocation of the Master's servants to occupy themselves with the weeds since there was nothing they could do about those weeds without also causing harm to the wheat.

*So the servants said to him, 'Then do you want us to go and gather them?'<sup>9</sup> But he said, 'No, lest in gathering the weeds you root up the wheat along with them. Let both grow together until the harvest, and at harvest time I will tell the reapers, "Gather the weeds first and bind them in bundles to be burned, but gather the wheat into my barn."'"*

In short, this is a parable about time: about time and eternity, about our time in contrast to God's time. The work of gathering and binding, sifting and sorting is work that will unfold in God's time, not in our time. That will be then, but this is now and this is not yet the day for that work to unfold. Not yet! Not now. For now patience and humility are what God asks of us: the patience to wait on God in the midst of an ambiguous world including a church with a checkered past and present, coupled with the humility to know that while we are called to serve God, we ourselves are not God. We presently see but through a glass darkly. Only in the end will we see as God sees; only in the end will we know as God knows. And only then...then and only then...will the time be ripe for separating out the wheat from the weeds. Until then we watch...and we wait...and yes we wonder and perhaps a few of us, as we wonder cannot entirely suppress our worries. Our worry about the state of our own soul. The state of the souls

of those we love. Weeds or wheat? Which is it? Which will it be? Wheat for the Master's expansive barn? Or weeds for the burning?

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Here's the thing. I found myself, as I pondered these troubling parables over the past few days, hearing echoes of a profound observation made by the great dissident writer, Aleksander Solzhenitsyn. In the novel that first brought him to the world's attention, he writes: "If only there were evil people somewhere insidiously committing evil deeds, and it were necessary only to separate them from the rest of us and destroy them. But the line dividing good and evil cuts through the heart of every human being." Let me repeat that.. The line...the line dividing good and evil cuts through the heart of every human being.

And yes!. Maybe...just maybe, anytime we find ourselves face to face with one of these unsettling parables—parables that speak to us of the dividing line between good and evil, between wise and foolish, faithful and faithless, sheep and goat, wheat and weed...

...maybe, just maybe, in our encounter with any one of these challenging parables, we can do a lot worse than to recall Solzhenitsyn's words—his words about that line running through the heart of every human being—and recognize that these parables will always constitute first and foremost a call to self-examination...a call to ponder the condition of our own hearts and minds...rather than a call to put others to the test. Patience! Humility! And the courage to come to know ourselves as God knows us. To know ourselves as servants: servants whose Master urges them to watch and to wait and never to relinquish our hope for the life of the world which God so loved.

In Jesus' name! Amen!!