

“Tares of the World”

A lot of what we learn as we’re growing up consists of things we simply absorb. Without much reflection we learn how to relate to the world. For example, I grew up with the clear but unstated conviction that if you can’t find fault with a person, product, cause, situation or even with a TV program, either you aren’t very smart or you aren’t trying hard enough... maybe both. I think I got this from my mother. She was warm and loving and playful; but she could also be bitingly cynical and hilariously funny. From her I learned to be wary of uncritical affirmation and to admire a withering critique... so long as it was aimed at somebody else.

But after a while I came to understand that my mother was not a very happy person. I now recognize that the protective coating worn by cynics is thin and fragile; and that beneath this inadequate armor hides a wounded romantic. A façade of detached humor often masks intense disappointment. To avoid the pain of disillusionment, cynics are determined not to buy into any illusions—not to be seduced into believing that anything is as good as it appears. If you keep your expectations low enough, all of life’s surprises can be happy ones: that’s the failed logic of the cynic. It means that nobody out there ever gets the benefit of the doubt... not a happy way to live.

Only after many years did I discover that there might be another way to deal with the fact that sooner or later everything and everyone lets us down. And it took me until this week to see the connection to Jesus’ story of the wheat and the tares.

I got some help with this story when I was reading a commentary on the passage and was introduced to a plant called bearded darnel. Do you know this plant? I did not. Here’s what I read about it:

The bearded darnel is a devil of a weed... Known in biblical terms as “tares,” bearded darnel has no virtues. Its roots surround the roots of good plants, sucking up precious nutrients and scarce water, making it impossible to root out without damaging the good crop. Above ground, darnel looks identical to wheat, until it bears seed. Those seeds can cause everything from hallucinations to death.¹

I may have needed to learn about bearded darnel from a book, but Jesus’ first listeners didn’t. They knew this stuff. And they knew the desperate feeling they got when, despite their best-laid plans and their good intentions, they found themselves raising a crop of wheat and tares together.

An enemy did this! That’s what it feels like, anyway. “Master, did you not sow good seed in your field? Where, then, did these weeds come from?” And the Master

¹ So writes Talitha Arnold in a pastoral commentary on this passage in *Feasting on the Word, Year A, Volume 3*. Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2011, p. 260.

answers, “An enemy has done this.” It’s nasty: sowing the seed of the Kingdom of God, the Son of Man looks for a harvest of wheat that will be the just reward for his righteous labor. And at first things look pretty good. But once the plants begin to bear grain it is evident that the field is a mess, a hopeless hodgepodge of golden grain and wicked weeds.

In the experience of the church to which Matthew was writing, the good seed of Christianity as it grew up among Jewish Christians is being choked off by an influx of unwashed Gentile Christians. And now the church is bewilderingly diverse: all these different kinds of people!

There is an impulse in every time, of course, to sort things out, to purify the field. Let’s sort out the wheat from the tares. Let’s sort out the righteous from the unrighteous. Let’s figure out who really is a member here and who isn’t. Let’s require attendance at communion once a quarter. Let’s weed out the folks who don’t pledge. Let’s draw a circle to figure out who’s in and who’s out... let the boundary start right here behind me. We’ll get this thing figured out: get in there and separate out the wheat from the tares. OK, Master? “... Do you want us to go and gather [those weeds]?”

But it’s never that easy. The Master replies, “No; for in gathering the weeds you would uproot the wheat along with them.” Ay, there’s the rub. While we’re administering membership standards or loyalty oaths or doctrinal tests there’s the chance we might root out some good ones. Set the standard high enough, or dig deep enough, and you’ll rule out everybody.

Garrison Keillor told a story of Memorial Day in Lake Wobegone when they were trying to decide who should speak at the ceremony at the cemetery. The town’s leading citizens were all vying for the honor; so they decided to do a little historical research to see whose ancestor was the most illustrious and therefore which descendant the most worthy. Naturally they discovered that they were all descended from draft dodgers and horse thieves. Perhaps it’s best not to be in too big a hurry to sort things out... whether the project is throwing stones at sinners or “weeding the rolls.”

That, at any rate, is the wisdom that prevails in the parable. At the harvest, things will be sorted-out. Let all of it grow together until the harvest.

But our lesson is in two parts: first the story and then the interpretation. In the interpretation, which some scholars attribute not to Jesus but to Matthew, things take an ominous tone of judgment. The “enemy” who sowed the tares is the devil. The harvest is the end of the age, when the weeds will be gathered and burned. Of course, the good seed will be ground into flour and baked into bread—not such a happy prospect in itself—but that is to over-extend the metaphor. Cast in terms of judgment, apparently the story leaves us to ponder who is wheat and who is not.

Or does it? Mostly I think the parable is about who is *God* and who is not. It counsels patience and the understanding that the final disposition does not belong to

us. It warns against any sort of rush to judgment, tempting as that may be. It seems to suggest that this easily understood image of a mixed field is the way things are. And that certainly rings true to the lives most of us live.

As individuals, even when we mean well the results we achieve can be mixed. How did the Apostle Paul put it in his letter to the Romans? “For I do not do the good I want, but the evil I do not want is what I do.”² And that’s when he means well and he’s really trying! To be blunt about it, sometimes we don’t mean well, or we don’t try so hard to do the right thing. We’re all a mixed bag.

And when you put a bunch of us together the results, if anything, are worse. Acting collectively as corporations or nations or political parties or religious communities also yields mixed results. We’re never really sure where the responsibility lies to keep the whole thing on track; but we’re pretty sure that when push comes to shove it falls on somebody else.

So what do we do about the tares of the world growing in among the wheat? How do we deal with that disappointment?

Denial is always a popular option. We can pretend that the field is just perfect as it is: harvest the field and eat the poison along with the grain, drink the cool-aid and see no evil, live an unexamined life with uncritical loyalties and ignore what doesn’t fit your world view.

A variation on denial is anesthesia. In the words of Neil Postman, we can “amuse ourselves to death,”³ embracing distraction and entertainment and bathing our brains in banality. We can trade real life for reality TV, and pretend politics is a sporting event.

The opposite extreme is to burn down the whole field: condemn every one and every thing, become a sour-dispositioned curmudgeon. We can think the worst of everybody, see conspiracies everywhere, look behind every door to see what’s lurking there. We can refuse to be involved: the church is all hypocrites, politicians are all crooks, elections are all rigged, the whole system is corrupt.

So those are the extremes: see no evil or see no good. E.B. White, author of *Charlotte’s Web*, stakes out the middle ground when he writes, “I arise in the morning torn between a desire to improve the world and a desire to enjoy the world. This makes it hard to plan the day.” Of course everybody’s day ought to be some combination of the two, because the world is a delight to the senses and an affront to the sensibilities, both.

We can’t close our eyes to the fact that the world needs improvement, treating half-truths as though they were the real thing or investing in causes or ideologies or movements or leaders as though they would somehow solve all our problems, make

² Romans 7:19.

³ The full title is *Amusing Ourselves to Death: Public Discourse in the Age of Show Business*. The trends Postman sees in this 1985 book are startlingly on target... before the rise of the internet, cell phones and FaceBook! New York: Penguin Books.

our lives complete, fill in the missing hole in our hearts and make us happy... in other words, save us. The free market will save us... the welfare state will save us: those are forms of denial. We have to ask more of ourselves and others than that. And we can't simply abide injustice in the name of reality. The world needs improvement.

But neither should we fail to enjoy the world and see life for the wonderful gift that it is. We shouldn't miss out on the thrill of beauty, the joy of laughter, or fail to celebrate the minor and sometimes not so minor accomplishments that give us hope. Even things that aren't perfect can still be good; but maybe not so good that they can't be made better. "I arise in the morning torn between a desire to improve the world and a desire to enjoy the world. This makes it hard to plan the day." But it also makes for a full and meaningful day.

The parable finds its focus in the notion that there will be a final reckoning to sort it all out; but we won't be the ones to do the sorting. In other words, the parable reintroduces us to the realization that we are not God; that we are not the ultimate arbiters of good and evil, that our judgments and sensibilities are not the standard by which all things are assessed—the underlying message of most commercials notwithstanding.

The parable challenges us to grow up: to let God be God and so allow ourselves to be fully human: celebrating the gift of life and sharing its blessings as widely and as wisely as we can; to avoid the paralyzing sin of cynicism and get on with living, tares and all—not just for ourselves but for the sake of the world, as well.

Let anyone with ears listen!

Amen

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