

July 25

The parable of “The Wheat and The Tares” or “The Wheat and The Weeds” (Mt 13:34-30) is familiar, I’m sure, and many of us think we know what the text says and we think we know what it means. We’re wrong 😊—but it’s not entirely our fault (some of the blame goes on unfortunate translation, most goes on bad preaching and teaching). So, while there’s no staying after school to wash the blackboards and beat the erasers as punishment, we do have some re-thinking to do.

The bare outline of the parable is pretty simple: the owner of a field has wheat seed planted; an evil one sows other seeds and the servants discover the other planting growing among the wheat and ask whether they should tear it up, which the owner declines to do saying that the harvesters will do the sorting later on.

I would venture to say that we’ve all heard sermons on this parable that focus on the care-filled patience of God shown in the unwillingness to start uprooting for fear of dislodging good plants (I’d bet I’ve preached sermons along that line). That viewpoint is not entirely wrong, but it leaves a lot out of consideration.

In reading this passage, it is important to remember what is being talked about. The topic isn’t really issues in agriculture, but the kingdom of God and the life of the disciples as they form the church. With that thought in mind, let’s look at the opening section of the parable. Here is the place where our frequent misunderstanding is truly not our fault. The commonly offered translation is something like this: “The kingdom of God may be compared to a man who sowed good seed in his field.”

In our passage for today, the more literal reading is, “The kingdom of God was likened to...” and that’s important to understand. We know immediately from this way of speaking that Jesus is telling a story that begins with a traditional viewpoint that is familiar to his audience, which may be put more clearly this way, “It used to be said that the kingdom of God is like a field in which a man planted wheat and there was an enemy invasion...”. But the common and usual viewpoint is not endorsed here.

That should get our attention because it leaves open the question of whether Jesus even agrees with that outlook, and we'll need to go along to find out what Jesus actually thinks about the kingdom of God.

We also know that when Jesus wants to give his audience his point of view, he says so.

We can see these two ways of speaking much earlier, way back in Mt chapter 5 when Jesus makes a string of declarations, e.g., "You have heard that it was said to those of old time... but I say to you...". The pattern is traditional teaching, new teaching from Jesus. For example, "You have heard that it was said to those of old time love your neighbor and hate your enemy. But I say unto you love your enemies..." (Mt 5:43-44).

Here now, we notice that the formula is appearing again, "The kingdom of God was likened to...", and seeing this we should look for hints of Jesus getting ready to give us a new view of things.

But before we get to that, let's ask ourselves a question. What does this familiar description of the kingdom of God being like man owning a field that he had planted with wheat but an enemy comes in and makes a mess sound like? A description of the garden of Eden and the coming of Satan corrupting Adam and Eve pops into my head (Jesus does not say this explicitly, of course, and it might just be my outlook and no one else's).

Pursuing this line of thinking about a pure planting ruined by some evil interloper, what follows in the parable seems relevant to the ministry of the disciples: the man's slaves report that "zazania"—a kind of wild grain (some think it was wild rice, others wild oats) has appeared in the field and the slaves ask if they should rip it out. The owner says no, the pollution is the result of an alien agent, an enemy, but the wild seed should be left to grow along with the original crop because for the slaves to uproot it now will result in tearing up the wheat as well (the root systems intertwine very quickly). At harvest, we learn, the harvesters (a different group of specialists, if you will) will know what to do to make the harvest be gathered as it should be and all will be well.

This is also in line with Matthew's presentation of Jesus' teaching. Just a few verses on Mt 13:47ff, Jesus talks about the time to come when great seining nets will take up the fish in the sea and the angels will then sort the good from the bad. In all cases, it is not the slaves--or the church--who are to concern themselves with securing a pure harvest (aa bountiful one, perhaps, but the question of what is good or bad is out of the slaves' hands).

Now, think of the early church, communities of believers made up of human beings. It is easy to imagine at least some of those people thinking that the church is the field full of true believers and practitioners of the faith who discover people in the community who sin, who are "weeds" mixed in with the "wheat". What is to be done?

Here is where the landowner's statements in Jesus' parable matter.

Wild oats/darnel/zizania/ does no damage to the planted crop if left alone (it does take nutrients and water). The wild plants are edible, but are not the wheat the slaves planted—thus, "zazania" is a pejorative term here because of the assumption/ intention/ plan for what should be growing there. Just so, by the way, the Galilee could support all manner of fish, etc., whether fit for humans or not. In God's creation there are resources enough so that scarcity need not drive people to hasty sorting out of who is fit to receive those resources.

The planters (slaves) out of fear or annoyance—or both—want to take action against the invader, the undesirable intruder plant, and are willing to start ripping up their own work without really knowing what they are doing.

The landowner prevents this destruction saying that expert help will do what's needed later on. Apply this attitude more broadly and a very different idea about how God works and what God values appears. God is quite willing to be patient. God is willing to have a purpose and to give clear instructions (plant wheat), but God does not entrust even the church to detect the best way to root out weeds.

Moreover, God doesn't seem to worry about the coming of the weeds—birds and animals drop wild seeds, wind blows them, people track them in unintentionally.

Leaving the sorting to the harvesters Leaves judgment where it belongs and gets rid of the notion of a church full of pure perfect people, doesn't it? We are also disabused of the idea that there was once an edenic state which we in our pride destroyed. Jesus never talks about such a thing. But, at the same time that Jesus says we should not fret about things not being pure and right just now, we should understand that the kingdom will be established fully. In the mean time we are to do our work—which topic he discusses elsewhere, not here.

Naturally, the re-framing of the kingdom of God that Jesus gives in the parable has implications for us as well. It is not our job to worry about being the perfect, homogeneous community—in fact, we cannot be. But we don't have to be.

I'm sorry this is coming out late. I have been laid low by migraine this week.