

Seventh Sunday after Pentecost

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Introduction

Jesus tells a parable; another one about fields and seeds and harvests. And then he explains the parable, going through a cast of characters. Parables, parables, and fields, and wheat and weeds-that-look-like-wheat, and enemies secretly planting things at night: all leading to a repeated concern of Jesus — what will your *actions* reveal at the End of Days?

Text

Matthew 13:24-30, 36-43

He put before them another parable: “The kingdom of heaven may be compared to someone who sowed good seed in his field; but while everybody was asleep, an enemy came and sowed weeds among the wheat, and then went away. So when the plants came up and bore grain, then the weeds appeared as well. And the slaves of the householder came and said to him, ‘Master, did you not sow good seed in your field? Where, then, did these weeds come from?’ He answered, ‘An enemy has done this.’ The slaves said to him, ‘Then do you want us to go and gather them?’ But he replied, ‘No; for in gathering the weeds you would uproot the wheat along with them. Let both of them grow together until the harvest; and at harvest time I will tell the reapers, Collect the weeds first and bind them in bundles to be burned, but gather the wheat into my barn.’” ...

Then he left the crowds and went into the house. And his disciples approached him, saying, “Explain to us the parable of the weeds of the field.” He answered, “The one who sows the good seed is the Son of Man; the field is the world, and the good seed are the children of the kingdom; the weeds are the children of the evil one, and the enemy who sowed them is the devil; the harvest is the end of the age, and the reapers are angels. Just as the weeds are collected and burned up with fire, so will it be 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. Then the righteous will shine like the sun in the kingdom of their Father. Let anyone with ears listen!

Comment

In the storyworld of Jesus' parables — or, to be more accurate, I should say in the storyworld of *Matthew's narration of Jesus' parables* — there are repeated themes: enemies, infiltrators, loyalties questioned, fruitfulness, and great reckonings at the Judgment. Matthew's gospel, for all its wordy parables, has a concern with the practice of justice, not just the discussion of it. When, at the end of Matthew's gospel the imagery of being "thrown into the furnace of fire, where there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth" is employed again, it is not those whose theological formulations are pristine, or even those who worked miracles who will find a place in the great beyond, but rather those who saw the prisoner, the naked, the needy and acted.

The setting for this chapterful of farming stories is strange: a boat, by the water. Jesus — a carpenter, it is to be assumed, because that was Joseph's profession — is on a boat, telling stories about farming. And his stories demonstrate an interest in storytelling, but not in farming. The stories leave many gaps, including this one: why would the 'enemy' come at night to sow wheat-like-weeds among the wheat of the farmer? where does one get this wheat-like-weed? Why didn't they just destroy the field if they were an enemy? Similarly, what is the function of the "while everybody was asleep" in the story, and who — in the great cast of characters that's explained in the second part of this lectionary reading — who are the servants? What is happening in the conversation with the servants and the master? Why didn't the servants gather in the wheat at the end? Who are these reapers? And why didn't they just discard the weeds as they harvested the actual wheat? Also, what does the barn mean?

Parables are short stories that are designed to irritate, to displace, to leave people with questions that irk their moral sensibilities. What did *that* mean? The aim is not usually to scapegoat the already scapegoated, but rather to cause those who consider themselves to be righteous to question whether their own estimation of themselves as righteous is to be trusted. In this way, a parable is an invitation to enter into conflict with our own self reckoning: to wonder whether what we imagine is our pristine intentions is manifest in either impact or action?

In the storyworld of Matthew's Jesus there exists, too, a final reckoning: a judgment, and a judge. This linear view of time has lent itself to many Christian apocalyptic imaginations of a reckoning day at the end of time. But this is only one view of time. John's gospel proposes a different understanding: that the end times are already here, circling in and out of the everyday, and in such an imagination, reckoning, judgment, accountability and action are called for now, and now, and now, and now.

Response

As a response, consider how you might identify with different characterisations within parables, so rather than taking the side of the one whose righteousness is always proved, consider that you might be someone whose righteousness is queried.

Prayer

Storytelling Jesus,
annoying your listeners and followers

with parables that irritate
and questions that interrogate the faithful.

Irritate us,
displace us from the centre
when we tell stories that demean others
for our own comfort.

Because you told stories in the hope that
action would follow.

Let action follow.

Now, and Now, and Now, and Now.

Amen.