Wheat and Tares

July 19th, 2020

The only other parable of Jesus that comes with a clear explanation is the Parable of the Wheat and Tares: "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.'" (Matthew 13:24-30). It is one of several frightening, apocalyptic discourses that Jesus gives. The weeds could well be *Lolium temulentem* that can overrun wheat fields. In antiquity, the difference between what was sown and what was reaped in compromised fields was so dramatic that naturalists believed that the wheat was actually transforming into another species (Howard Thomas, "Grass Blindness", *Plants People Planet,* Vol 1., No. 3 July 2019: 197-203, New Phytologist Trust). It was not. Wheat is wheat; weeds are weeds.

The parable of the wheat and tares speaks of the confusion of our world. Because of the subtlety of evil and our limited comprehension of reality, we cannot easily distinguish the wheat from the tares. Some of us will see the world as nothing but a field of weeds. Others will see the world as nothing but a field of wheat. The parable says it is neither. There is wheat, and there are weeds, but both have intermingled in the field. When asked by the servants if they should pull up the weeds, the Master enjoins caution: "'No; for in gathering the weeds you would uproot the wheat along with them. Let both of them grow together until the harvest." Today, I see a frantic world that wants to pull up weeds, but is also pulling up the wheat. That is because we do not trust in God to judge us, and we feel that we must judge society, history and other individuals first. Though we might think we understand history, we only perceive a fraction, and often, because of our unique experiences, we will only affirm a fraction. The parable affirms the duality of wheat and tares in uncompromising apocalyptic fashion—but it also affirms that our ability to judge is poor. It affirms that there are those who love God and will be harvested by Him and there are those who will reject Him till the end, but in this life, God is patient, and God is gentle with his field, wishing to preserve what is good. This is the great mystery of history. The parable presents a clear vision of what is godly and ungodly; it enjoins a patient gentleness, almost a silence, and a strong sense of waiting for God to reveal and judge.

One thing stands out when I reread this parable: *Master, did you not sow good seed in your field?* In Roman Law it was forbidden to sow weeds in a man's field—in antiquity this was considered the ultimate revenge, but it was terribly destructive, and thus illegal. Drawing on this very realistic background, Jesus presents us with a summary of the world picture. There is nothing wrong with the sower or the seed. The world is the problem. Theology is always trying to shape the Word to fit the world, but it will never work. One does not repair a plow by looking at another broken plow. One looks to what is perfect to heal the imperfect. It is the Word that should speak to the world and not the other way. A great challenge of theodicy is justifying faith in a broken world. The problem with theodicy, however, is that it is redundant, if not absurd. God has already revealed what the problem and the solution are; theodicy is to demand that the revelation be given again, that it be revised somehow, or that it be revoked altogether. Ultimately, the first two amount to the third—a rejection of the initial revelation.

The Word is good, and the One who sows the Word is good. And if we really believed this today, we would believe all that comes from our God and Father in heaven. Psalm 19 says: "The law of the Lord is perfect, reviving the soul; the decrees of the Lord are sure, making wise the simple;

the precepts of the Lord are right, rejoicing the heart; the commandment of the Lord is clear, enlightening the eyes; the fear of the Lord is pure, enduring for ever; the ordinances of the Lord are true and righteous altogether. More to be desired are they than gold, even much fine gold; sweeter also than honey, and drippings of the honeycomb" (Psalm 19:7-10). This is not how we believe or live today. There are any number of things that we rate more worthy of our time and consideration than the word of God. In the depths of our hearts, we do not believe that God knows anything at all, much less anything to compare with what we know. As long as we persist in this, we will not grow, and neither will the church on our continent. As long as anything takes pre-eminence over the word of God, we will be lost in fields of weeds and pulling up wheat. After discoursing at length about the search for what is good in life, all of the great spiritual masters like Augustine, Aquinas, and even reformers like Jan Comenius have concluded what many other philosophers have concluded, what Jesus himself said: "Only God is good" (Mark 10:18, CEV). And thus, only God can speak to what is good for our lives. After commenting in this vein and remarking on the confused lot of humanity, Jan Comenius, the Moravian Reformer, said: "If it should seem otherwise, know that on your nose are the eyeglasses of general deception through which you see everything upside down" (Jan Comenius, *The Labyrinth of the World and the Paradise of the Heart.* Tr. Howard Louthan and Andrea Sterk. NY: Paulist Press, 1998. 59-60). That is where we are today, and where we have been for millennia. Some Bible scholars like to think of the kingdom of heaven as the "upside down" kingdom—an inversion of what we know and are accustomed to. And in one sense, they are right. The truth, however, is that the world and its inhabitants and their values are upside down—it is the kingdom of heaven that is right-side up and always will be, whether we enter it or not.

The followers of Christ naturally wanted to be the wheat that would be harvested and treasured, not the explosively growing weeds that would be burned. What distinguishes the wheat from the weeds? In Romans 8, Paul directs our gaze towards the hope that we have in Christ. I believe this hope characterizes key differences between being wheat and being a tare. There are three things that characterize this hope: life in the Spirit, waiting for the new creation, and hoping in redemption. Paul says, "So then, brothers and sisters, we are debtors, not to the flesh, to live according to the flesh— for if you live according to the flesh, you will die; but if by the Spirit you put to death the deeds of the body, you will live. For all who are led by the Spirit of God are children of God…I consider that the sufferings of this present time are not worth comparing with the glory about to be revealed to us. For the creation waits with eager longing for the revealing of the children of God…We know that the whole creation has been groaning in labour pains until now; and not only the creation, but we ourselves, who have the first fruits of the Spirit, groan inwardly while we wait for adoption, the redemption of our bodies. For in hope we were saved. Now hope that is seen is not hope. For who hopes for what is seen? But if we hope for what we do not see, we wait for it with patience. Likewise the Spirit helps us in our weakness; for we do not know how to pray as we ought, but that very Spirit intercedes with sighs too deep for words. And God, who searches the heart, knows what is the mind of the Spirit, because the Spirit intercedes for the saints according to the will of God. We know that all things work together for good for those who love God, who are called according to his purpose" (Romans 8:12-28).

*To live is to live by the Spirit. To suffer is to wait for the new creation. To pray is to hope in the redemption.* There are no religious sins anymore; there are only political sins. In politics, any sin can be justified. It is not so with religion. In our time, we do not really believe in sin. And that means that we do not have a good grasp of what remorse is, for there is little or nothing to be remorseful about. And if we do not have a good grasp of what remorse is, I fear for our generation and the future. That means anything is possible, and not in a good way. To live this way is to live according to the flesh. To live according to the Spirit is to be led by the Spirit, to live with an awareness of all that God has given us and done for us and all that God asks of us that we might participate in His glory. Suffering is not just a given in this life, it is a means by which we wait for the new creation. It keeps us from worshipping this earth, the world and its way; it strengthens us, as it were, for a spiritual life that transcends the self and its desires. Longsuffering is a prerequisite for love; it is found in prayer. There are myriads of books on how to pray and be contemplative—*myriads.* And yet the apostle, a spiritual giant who himself saw the Risen Christ on the road to Damascus, says quite simply: *For we do not know how to pray as we ought.* And this does not bother the apostle in the least. If you do not know how to pray, then pray. Besides the abiding work of the Spirit, what is it that our prayers ultimately seek? Paul says, we "groan inwardly while we wait for adoption, the redemption of our bodies. For in hope we are saved." In the end, a prayer without this paramount longing for the redemption and resurrection of humanity is not Christian prayer. It turns towards what is shallow and pointless. The only prayer that a believer should know is the prayer that seeks salvation and what is eternal in God, the prayer that allows the Spirit to intercede with sighs too deep for words. *To live is to live by the Spirit. To suffer is to wait for new creation. To pray is to hope in the redemption.*

Wheat and tares. They are two different kinds of existence; one is life and one is death. The apostle Paul says to the Corinthians: "What you sow does not come to life unless it dies. And as for what you sow, you do not sow the body that is to be, but a bare seed, perhaps of wheat or of some other grain. But God gives it a body as he has chosen, and to each kind of seed its own body. Not all flesh is alike, but there is one flesh for human beings, another for animals, another for birds, and another for fish. There are both heavenly bodies and earthly bodies, but the glory of the heavenly is one thing, and that of the earthly is another. There is one glory of the sun, and another glory of the moon, and another glory of the stars; indeed, star differs from star in glory. So it is with the resurrection of the dead. What is sown is perishable, what is raised is imperishable. It is sown in dishonour, it is raised in glory. It is sown in weakness, it is raised in power. It is sown a physical body, it is raised a spiritual body. If there is a physical body, there is also a spiritual body. Thus it is written, ‘The first man, Adam, became a living being’; the last Adam became a life-giving spirit. But it is not the spiritual that is first, but the physical, and then the spiritual. The first man was from the earth, a man of dust; the second man is from heaven. As was the man of dust, so are those who are of the dust; and as is the man of heaven, so are those who are of heaven. Just as we have borne the image of the man of dust, we will also bear the image of the man of heaven." To be the wheat, we must learn to be like the second man from heaven, our Christ, who said: " Truly, truly, I say to you, unless a grain of wheat falls into the earth and dies, it remains alone; but if it dies, it bears much fruit" (John 12:24).