

“A Holy Mystery”

July 18, 2010

Psalm 103:1-13

Matthew 13:24-30; 36-43

*“... in gathering the weeds you would uproot the wheat along with them.
Let both of them grow together until the harvest.” (29b-30a)*

The parable of the Wheat and the Weeds is an action story that draws everyone that has ever heard it or read it into the action requiring - indeed demanding - a resolution. A problem is created within the context of parable that requires a solution ... in short a mystery seeking a solving.

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I love to read for pleasure. And of all the reading I like to do I really love a good mystery. Right now I'm reading through the Donna Leon mysteries – all centering on the Italian Commisario Guido Brunetti and situated in Venice. I've also discovered the mysteries of Elizabeth George and I am presently collecting, in sequence, used paperbacks in her Inspector Thomas Lynley series she began writing back in 1988. There is something about a mystery that captures my imagination. And a series focusing on the character development and the challenges facing one particular character can hold my attention for years. I think my love affair with mystery writers began with Franklin W. Dixon's *Hardy Boys* mysteries and came to flower with Arthur Conan Doyle's cerebral sleuth Sherlock Holmes.

It may not have been apparent to this point, but our summer with parables, has, in its own unique way, been a summer of engaging a mystery -- the mystery of the kingdom of God encountered through the primary teaching technique of Jesus. What is this kingdom, this way of life, this realm of perfect correlation between God and humanity? Who understands it? How does one enter it? And, of course, the question we humans seemingly cannot avoid asking, *“Who's in and who's out?”*

The “Parable of the Wheat and the Weeds” is a story that draws the listener into the action, requiring, - indeed demanding - a resolution. A problem is created within the context of a parable. A puzzle is produced requiring a solution; a mystery is constructed ... the very content seeking a solving. Or so we are led to believe.

God's kingdom is like a farmer who planted good seed. When no one was looking an enemy sowed thistles through out the field. As the wheat began to grow so did the weeds. Shouldn't we dig up the weeds? No, for in rooting out the weeds good wheat will be pulled up too. Leave it be until harvest time. That's when we'll do the separating.

To what part of the action are you drawn? What part of the story stands out? Which character catches your attention? Is it the “farmer”? Or is it the “enemy”? If we were playing the game of CLUE was the culprit Colonel Mustard, who went out into the field at night a Candlestick? Or are we drawn to the weeds and begin trying to pick the crabgrass out from amongst the St. Augustine?

We humans are uncomfortable with mysteries ... by our very nature we simply have to solve them.

Yet the parable of the wheat and the weeds presents itself as not just a mystery but as a picture: *“The kingdom of heaven may be compared to someone who sowed seed in his field but while everyone was asleep ...”*

The picture is disturbing; it’s uncomfortable. If the Realm of God is like this what lesson am I to take from it? What new awareness, new behavior, new understanding of the God’s kingdom and my place in it comes out of this story? If we want to hear the story as it came from the lips of Jesus we need to take the story as it is, not rush to ease the discomfort with easy answers.

The Trappist Monk, **Thomas Merton** offers Christians warning in this regard,

“There is,” he writes, “nothing comfortable about the Bible -- until we manage to get so used to it that we make it comfortable for ourselves. But then we are perhaps too used to it and too at home in it. Let us not be too sure we know the Bible ... just because we have learned not to have problems with it. Have we perhaps learned ... not to really pay attention to it? **Have we ceased to question the book and be questioned by it?**”

As students of the Bible we need to examine the evidence; we need to understand the context; we need to envision how Jesus might have used the parable; and how Matthew presented it to his community following Jesus’ death and resurrection. Then, and only then can we discover it’s meaning for us today.

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In her book Seeds of Heaven, **Barbara Brown Taylor** points out that *“Of all the Gospel writers, Matthew is the only one who is concerned about the end of the world.”* He is only one who mentions a furnace of fire where there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth. His is the only Gospel that contains the parable of the wise and foolish virgins; the only one describing the division of the sheep and the goats; the only one containing the parable of the wheat and the weeds.

Of all the Gospel writers, Matthew is the one who paints in black and white; he's the one who sets up the dichotomies of good or bad, faithful or wicked, blessed or cursed.

Matthew's community of believers, located in Palestine in those early years, was deeply concerned about the purity of the gospel as they struggled with growing the faith in a hostile environment. Those early Christians were threatened, and discriminating between insiders and outsiders was a matter of survival. To them the message of the parable is summed up in its clarification two parables further on in the gospel, when the parable is explained.

In verses 36-43 Jesus takes his disciples aside and resolves the internal conflict they (like we?) are experiencing in this parable. He is the sower, he tells them, the field is the world, and the weeds belong to the devil while the wheat belongs to the kingdom of God. No mystery here. The tension of the parable as it stands earlier in Matthew is resolved. We know the good guys and the bad guys, the antagonist is identified, and that's that. Now the only mystery who's in and who's out.

That is how the Matthean Community of the latter part of the First Century came to understand this parable. Don't worry that there seems to be a lot of weeds in the world right now, Matthew tells them, some may even be growing right here in this church. So be alert. Be watchful. Don't take your eye off of the field of the faithful. When the last day comes, when God brings this vale of tears called life to an end, the wheat will be vindicated ... and those weeds? Up in smoke!

The explanation of the parable is a sermonic gloss on the parable proper, preached and then written to a community under stress and in need of supporting explanation. Words shaped to offer comfort by allegorizing a parable; words of comfort that continue to speak to Christians who view the world in black and white, with insiders and outsiders, with enemies who attempt to sow strife and discord within the church. Yet most likely, not the words that came from the heart of Jesus as he taught his disciples by the lakeshore, for we have come to understand that...

"At its simplest a parable is a metaphor or simile drawn from nature or common life, arresting the hearer by its vividness or strangeness, and leaving the mind in sufficient doubt about its precise application to tease it into active thought."

So wrote **C.H. Dodd**, who taught generations of biblical scholars and pastors how to understand them, *"The typical parable, whether it be a simple metaphor, or a more elaborate similitude, or a full length story, presents one single point of comparison."* (Dodd, pps 5, 7)

However much we want to resolve the tension of a parable and read it like Morse code, it behaves more like a dream or a poem instead – delivering its meaning in images that talk more to our hearts than to our heads. Parables are mysterious, and their mystery has everything to do with their longevity. Left alone, and dealt with on their own, they teach us something different every time we hear them, speaking across great distances of time and place and understanding.

The field hands in Jesus' story are conscientious and eager to please their boss. They see something awry out in one of the fields that was planted with good seed – darnel has sprung up among the wheat - and they offer to fix it. "Shall we go out and weed the fields?" they ask, wanting to be faithful sheep instead of being counted among the goats.

We moderns miss the nuance here for we deal with weeds in our fields with herbicides developed by Dow or Ortho – farms all across this country are essentially weed free through the growing season. But farmers of Jesus' day dealt with weeds by hand, uprooting them several times during the growing season to prevent the quality of the harvest to be polluted by variants.

As a counter to our deep seated need to be watchful stewards and to Matthew's explanation as well, the parable proper does not solve the mystery of either the problem of the weeds or the identity of the enemy. The landowner says "allow the weeds and wheat to grow together ... do not disturb the good growth by rooting around as you seek the weeds. "We'll do the sorting at harvest time."

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You see this is not a mystery we are qualified to solve!! We are not in the least bit qualified to sort the weeds from the wheat, for the moment we believe we can tell the difference between the good seed and the "bad seed" we have fallen into the trap of the religious authorities who saw Jesus as the weed growing in the field of *Beth Israel*. And not only Jesus but those tax collectors and those fishermen and those women and that prostitute.

And in the way of all things, in time, the outsiders (weeds) become in the insiders (the wheat) and the church has been just as guilty as those we have condemned when we take it upon ourselves to protect the Body of Christ from those we believe would weaken our message by their presence.

We find our faith so easily threatened. So we run to Matthew's explanation of the parable, to ease our insecurity – to solve the mystery as Matthew's community did, and the moment we do place our emphasis, curiosity - and yes our paranoia - on discovering the identity of the enemy. And so we take on the role of gate keeper, making sure that our community is pure, that we

know all the good seed, and through structure and institution can identify and weed out the bad.

Diana Eck, Professor of Comparative Religion at Harvard University writes,

*“Through the years I have found my own faith, not threatened but broadened and deepened by the study of [other faith] traditions. And I have found that only as a Christian pluralist could I be faithful to the mystery and the presence of One I call God. Being a Christian pluralist means daring to encounter people of different faith traditions and **defining my faith not by its borders but by its roots.**”* (A New Religious America, p 23)

The explanation of the story of the Wheat and the Weeds, has without a doubt provided xenophobic fodder for ages.

Yet as the unfolding revelation of God, first to the Jews and then to we Gentiles, testifies there are no insiders and outsiders; no clean and unclean; no Jew or Greek or male or female; no slave or free. In Christ no east or west; in him no north or south; but one great fellowship of love throughout the whole wide earth. In the Kingdom of God labels are anathema ... simply not allowed.

No, this story is not a mystery to be solved, it is a mystery to be lived. It's a story to remind us that our mission is not that of being **weeders in the kingdom**, but rather **seeders of the kingdom**. Our purpose is to spread the good news of God's amazing love in Jesus Christ and allow the God to do the sorting.

Thanks be to God for this liberating word!!

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