

Forbearance
Reading from the Gospels: Matthew 13:24-30, 36-43

Well, Ed was having none of that. Elvis could shake his hips from Memphis to Manchuria, but Ed Sullivan wasn't going to broadcast it to the nation, and so in 1957 when Elvis Presley stepped up to the mic to sing *I ain't nothin' but a hound dog*, the cameras allowed the tv audience to see the King only from the waist up.

The next year, the Mutual Broadcasting System dropped all rock and roll records from its network music programs, calling it “distorted, monotonous, noisy music.” Similarly, “Rock ‘n’ Roll was also banned from the jukeboxes at public swimming pools by the city council of San Antonio, Texas. The council disclosed that the music, “attracted undesirable elements given to practicing their gyrations in abbreviated bathing suits.” (Bailey Banville, *Blog-University of New England*)

Ten years later, fearing that the lyrics might contain politically objectionable or lewd messages, a radio station in El Paso banned all Bob Dylan records, saying, “it is too difficult to understand the lyrics.” Okay, they probably had a point there about Dylan's diction, but everyone knew the real reason behind the ban. And yet here some fifty

years later, shorter than the period between Jesus' crucifixion and the writing of Matthew's gospel, Dylan is awarded the Nobel prize and Grandma is itching to see the Elvis impersonator in Vegas. Go figure.

Righteous indignation. We are never at a loss for people, trends, activities, institutions, movements, music, or distractions to target with our moral outrage. At various times the very fabric of society and all that is good have supposedly been imperiled by: The Rolling Stones, Lenny Bruce, George Carlin, Joseph McCarthy's catalogue of commies, busing, who moved into your neighborhood, who your neighbor's kid is dating, who your neighbor's kid is marrying, MTV, *Brokeback Mountain*, *The Last Temptation of Christ*, high-fructose corn syrup, Twinkies, and fidget spinners, and yet, somehow we've survived.

We live under the illusion that if we could just exorcise, ban, excommunicate, exclude, wipe out, or eliminate, building bigger fences, buying bigger guns, eating nothing without a root, and coating ourselves with latex, we would have heaven on earth. But alas, that is not possible on this flawed third rock from the sun. Not being able to bubble wrap our lives, we tend toward blame and outrage instead of figuring how to live amidst the brokenness and find meaning and

purpose amidst the mess, or at least confess that the iniquities we lament in others are no less than the iniquities at war within us.

The crowd pressing in to hear Jesus is such that Matthew tells us Jesus had to climb into a boat to keep from getting crushed, using the boat as a makeshift pulpit in order to be heard. Looking upon this spontaneous assembly, we don't know if Jesus envisioned the challenges future congregations would encounter, but today's parable was certainly germane to the church to whom Matthew was writing some 50-60 years later, and it is no less relevant to the church today. Wherever there are people, there are schemes to classify others somewhere on the gradient from good to evil, and we are so bad at it, our efforts destined for failure before we even begin, for we are utterly unqualified for the task.

The farmer or gardener is out sowing seed again, this time a bit more attentively to ensure the seeds fall on the good soil, yet surreptitiously, an intruder came in the dark of night planting weeds amidst the wheat. I think the same guy has been messing around in my lawn, too.

Lolium temulentum, commonly known as darnel or cockle or false wheat, is an insidious weed that, in the days before modern sorting machinery, was a major headache for the wheat farmer because the weed looks a whole lot like wheat. The English translation for the Latin scientific name, *temulentus*, is *intoxicated*, a reference to the drunken nausea experienced after eating darnel infected by a particular toxic fungus to which it is susceptible. Imagine the face on the baker when you ask for a darnel-free loaf of whole wheat. Thus, you can understand why the farmhands are in a tizzy upon discovering the darnel thriving amongst the wheat.

Can't you picture the group dynamics that transpire between the farmhands' discovery and their report to the farmer? They're blaming one another, *It's your fault, you know*. They're blaming the farmer, *Jeez, you'd think the old fool would know enough to put a fence around it*. They're blaming aliens, wind patterns, and of course, the ever ubiquitous *some kid!* You know, whoever that *some kid* is, he's been blamed for just about everything since the dawn of humanity. When Moses first saw the burning bush, you know his first thought probably was? *I'll bet some kid did that*. When all those frogs were hopping

around Pharaoh's front lawn, he probably muttered, *I'll bet some kids set them loose*. Whenever my dad would see a teenager dressing/behaving/stepping outside the norm, he'd ask me, *Is that what kids are doing* today? I don't know.

As conspiracy theories multiply, so do the farmhands' formulae for fixing the problem. *Why say anything? Maybe he won't notice — Mow it and bale it — No, burn it, subdivide it, and build a bunch of spec. houses on it...* Finally, the lowest guy on the depth chart is tasked with telling the farmer the news, *Um, weeds ... out there ... you know, the poisonous ones that look like wheat? You want us to pull them out?* Meanwhile, all the farmhands are praying under their breath: *Please no! Please, no! Anything but that!* Can you imagine how fun it would be to inch your way across the acreage on a heatstroke of an afternoon, individually examining each strand of grass and removing the darnel? *Wheat. Weed. Wheat. Weed. Weed. Wheat. Weed. Wheat...*

Thankfully, the farmer has a pretty good handle on what to do. "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.” So, the farmhands breathe a huge sigh of relief, thanking God that they are not the reapers.

Unfortunately, however, we are regularly volunteering to be the reapers. *Good. Bad. Good. Bad. Bad. Good. Bad. Good ... ooh, Bad. Bad. Bad!* — *God loves you ... he loves you not ... he loves you ... he loves you not* — *You’re in. You’re out. You’re in. Oh, you’re definitely out ... and your little Toto, too!* Oh, how we relish the role of the reaper. For 2,000 years we’ve been abusing this parable, claiming the role of the reaper, clipboard in hand separating *us* from *them*, assigning *them* to their eternal fate. *In. Out. Out. In. Out. Crank up the party music over here. Crank up the furnace over there.* But listen to the farmer, “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.’”

News flash. You’re not the reaper. That’s not your job. Never has been. Nowhere in this story are you given license to be the reaper. And whether the reapers are angels or Jesus himself, Jesus makes it clear that he is the one calling the shots, and Jesus, you may recall, is the one

who took all evil upon himself for our sake. The judge takes the place of the judged. “He was crucified, dead, and buried; he descended into hell...” The reaper doesn’t carry a scythe, he carried a cross.

As our Brief Statement of Faith puts it, “teaching by word and deed and blessing the children, healing the sick and binding up the brokenhearted, eating with outcasts, forgiving sinners, and calling all to repent and believe the gospel.

“Unjustly condemned for blasphemy and sedition, Jesus was crucified, suffering the depths of human pain and giving his life for the sins of the world. God raised this Jesus from the dead, vindicating his sinless life, breaking the power of sin and evil, delivering us from death to life eternal.”

I don’t mean to sound like a Blue Oyster Cult tribute band, but don’t fear the reaper. Rather, give him thanks for his amazing grace. What’s the Thanksgiving hymn say? “From each field shall in that day, All offenses purge away.” Folks, that’s good news, because truth be told, not only is it impossible for us to distinguish weeds from wheat out there, a look in the mirror reveals both weeds and wheat to be thriving

side by side within us. We are not good or evil. We are both good and evil.

Augustine understood that to be true for the church and true in himself. He used the term *corpus permixtum*, understanding that the church and each individual in it is a mixed bag. Gary Peluso-Verdand says Augustine's experience in the church and within himself led him to conclude "that it is impossible to maintain absolute outward holiness in the visible church and that an unholy action by a member does not disable the possibility of future holiness." (Gary Peluso-Verdand, *Feasting on the Word*)

The next time you invite someone to church, which I trust you are each going to do on a regular basis, if you are rebuffed with that tired excuse, "I'm not interested because the church is full of hypocrites;" before you get defensive ... *I know you are, but what am I?* ... it may be more helpful for you to see and confess the truth of our presence in and need for the church using one classic comparison of the church to Noah's ark: You can stand the stench on the inside only because of the storm on the outside. (Theodore Wardlaw, *Feasting on the Word*)

Wheat and tares together sown. That is true of society. That is true of the Church. That is true of you. The sooner we acknowledge that the sooner we will see hints of holiness preparing to emerge all around us through the grace of Jesus Christ. So let us grow in grace together, because you never know when what we perceive to be a weed, bursts forth with an abundant harvest of golden wheat. Amen