

July 19, 2020
The Seventh Sunday after Pentecost—Proper 11—Year A
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Genesis 28:10-19a
Psalm 139: 1-11, 22-23
Romans 8:12-25
Matthew 13:24-30,36-43

This Sunday, as last Sunday, the Gospel reading from Matthew is a parable, first told and then interpreted. Last Sunday I offered some general information about parables, and I won't repeat all that. But I will repeat one point from last Sunday, regarding the Parable of the Sower: Bible experts generally believe that the parable itself adheres closely to the actual words of Jesus, but the interpretation is instead the words of *Matthew* or *Matthew's community*. Regarding today's parable, the Parable of the Weeds, Bible experts generally believe that both the *telling* and the *interpretation* come from Matthew. Last Sunday I suggested we stick with the telling, so as to stick most closely to Jesus. Today, that's not an option; we must contend with Matthew.

Last Sunday I also mentioned Matthew's particularity as a Gospel written by a Jew for a Jewish audience. Matthew was dealing with his community's concern about this reality: it is fifty years after the death of Jesus, and some Jews had become followers, but others had not. Both the Parable of the Sower and the Parable of the Weeds reflect tension and perhaps even conflict between the Jesus-followers and the others, some of whom would have been following other messiahs. In the Parable of the Sower, the Jesus-followers are the good soil that promotes grain production. In the Parable of the Weeds, the Jesus-followers are wheat, from which the weeds will eventually be separated and burned. Jesus talks about ultimate sorting, but he leaves that ultimate sorting to God: God will take care of it, so the people don't have to.

Last Sunday I used the parables to talk about the kingdom of heaven, and I'm picking up that theme today. Christians understand the Good News of Jesus Christ to say that the kingdom of heaven has arrived, though it has not been reached in all its fullness. We say that the kingdom of heaven is both *already* and *not-yet*. Last Sunday I talked about imagining what the Parable of the Sower says about God. I described God the happy farmer tossing her seeds of love throughout the land. I actually really can envision God that way. But this week I also began to think about the land through which God walks to toss that seed. Because the kingdom is both *already* and *not-yet*, the land is necessarily one of tension and even conflict.

In Matthew's time, yes, there was tension between the Christ-followers and the others, but that was only part of a much larger picture. Matthew doesn't provide all the details, but he wouldn't have had to; his people were living through an era of massive disruption. The situation was difficult when Jesus was alive, but it got much worse after he died. Matthew wrote his gospel fifty years after the death of Jesus, but only ten or twenty years after the occupying Roman army had destroyed the Temple in Jerusalem. It would be hard to overstate how disruptive that singular event would have been for the Jewish people. Matthew's community would still have been trying to understand and recover from it. They believed Jesus was the remedy, the messiah, the savior.

I was thinking about all this in relation to our own time of disruption. Our most immediate disruption is the coronavirus pandemic. We are only beginning to understand just how very long it is likely to last. Another current disruption is the Black Lives Matter movement. We might actually see that as a long-overdue extension of the civil rights movement. Both disruptions are part of larger social upheavals that seem to be coalescing right now. There is much about which to worry, and there is much to grieve.

Amidst this disruption and all that it evokes in us, we Christians still proclaim, like Christians before us, that the kingdom of heaven is already here, if not yet in all its fullness. That *not-yet* part is *so* hard. It's pretty easy to and very pleasant to imagine the idealized ultimate *fullness*. But it's very hard to live through messy *not-yet*. The Parable of the Weeds tells us that, even among the wheat, the weeds are everywhere. We have to keep on keeping on, knowing that God will take care of everything in the end. As Matthew reminds us, so we must remind one another, the kingdom of heaven *is* here, in this less-than-perfect world, in these less-than-perfect times. The kingdom of heaven *is* here. *This* is the land through which God walks.

The Parable of the Weeds begins with these words: "The kingdom of heaven may be compared to" With that in mind, this week I spent some time imagining how *our* community of Jesus-followers might continue that phrase. And so I wrote a parable. It goes like this.

The kingdom of heaven may be compared to a wise healer during a time of deadly plague upon the land. The healer went to the mountaintop so that the people in the fields could hear him, proclaiming, "There is a deadly plague upon the land! Hie thee to thy home and leave not! Go not to go to thy place of employ; take not thy children to the elders; leave off from gathering to drink and make merry; forgo the offering of sacrifices at the temple. Leave thy home only to acquire enough food to sustain thy bodies. If ye must leave thy home for that purpose, cover thy nose and thy mouth with a rectangle of cloth, tightly woven of cotton or linen and snugly fitted to thy face. Do these things, and thou shall live."

The wealthy landowner noticed the sound of silence settling upon the land. He heard not the servants in his house or the workers in his fields or the artisans in his village. He began to shout, "Listen not to the one who utters falsities! No one knows more than I! Heed not his instructions!" Therefore some people resumed their way, drinking and making merry, offering sacrifices at the temple, and leaving uncovered their faces.

But others remained at home, leaving only to acquire food, their faces covered with cloths. The wise healer gently encouraged them, and his words were a balm for their fright, until the deadly plague departed from the land.

Thus it was that many people were lost to the deadly plague, and yet many more people were saved.

"The kingdom of heaven may be compared to"

For another take on how our community of Jesus-followers might imagine a parable, I'll offer some photographs. The idea came to me while I was reading stories about civil rights giant Congressman John Lewis, who died on Friday. "The kingdom of heaven may be compared to"



This photo accompanied an article in the *Smithsonian Magazine* online edition. I think I see in it wheat and I think I see in it weeds. The article didn't say where or when this photo was taken, but it mentioned that Lewis had been arrested at least 45 times. The article was from 2016, and it mentioned that his most recent arrest was "while protesting on behalf of comprehensive immigration reform in 2013."¹

Here's another photo. "The kingdom of heaven may be compared to"



That photo was taken in Selma, Alabama, at the voting rights march on March 7, 1965. Lewis is on his knees in the foreground.² These photos had me thinking about wheat and weeds. Sometimes, in real time, we don't even know which is which.

“The kingdom of heaven may be compared to”

Imagine the more recent photos that you have seen: imagines of people with masks, and images of people without masks; imagines of Black Lives Matter protestors, and images of people protesting them. About every one of those imagines, we might say, “Behold the kingdom of God.” In the messiness of becoming, the wheat and the weeds are all mixed up. It may be that only God knows which is which. And so, we have to leave that to God. *And* we have to keep walking in the way that we are certain that Jesus is leading us.

Notes

¹ Erin Blakemore, “John Lewis’ Arrest Records Are Finally Uncovered,” *Smithsonian Magazine*, December 1, 2016, available online at <https://www.smithsonianmag.com/smart-news/john-lewis-arrest-records-are-finally-uncovered-180961255/> (accessed July 19, 2020).

² Katharine Q. Seelye, “John Lewis, Towering Figure of Civil Rights Era, Dies at 80,” *The New York Times*, July 17, 2020, available at <https://www.nytimes.com/2020/07/17/us/john-lewis-dead.html?searchResultPosition=4> (accessed July 19, 2020).