



Growing Together in God's Field
By Bill Lawson

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God loves everyone and wants everyone to live together in peace and harmony. Our part is to reflect God's kindness. If there is any judging to do, God will do the judging. If there is any sorting to do, God will do the sorting. No matter what we think of ourselves or others, God's expectation is that we will be respectful and cooperative, loving others as Christ has loved us.

The Kin-dom of God is like a field, where all the plants share all the resources.

Let both grow together until the harvest: and in the time of harvest I will say to the reapers, Gather ye together first the tares, and bind them in bundles to burn them: but gather the wheat into my barn. (*Matthew 13:30 KJV*)

Like the parable of the seed from last week, the explanation of the Parable of the Wheat and Tares is another allegory within an allegory. There have been many widely differing interpretive perspectives of this parable ever since it was first given.

There is an evangelical perspective that hears this parable as a mission to convert the tares to wheat. But neither this parable nor the context of the other parables before and after it supports the idea of tares becoming converted into wheat. There are plenty of other Bible passages that do support conversion, but this is not one of them. Instead, this parable specifically prescribes that all the wheat and tares remain together and grow to their full maturity, regardless of which self-identify as wheat and which think of themselves as tares. Then they will be harvested and sorted out – not by themselves and not by each other, but by the angels of God.

There is a puritanical perspective that uses this parable as a justification to remove the offending tares from their midst. This seems to have always been the most popular idea and has been applied to ecclesiastical organizations from the largest to the smallest. This weeding-out principle has also been widely used politically. Larger groups have more formal processes for weeding out the undesirables, but the smaller groups have their ways as well. At least with a large group, like our denomination, for example, the rules are clearly stated and documented. In smaller groups, it's more up to the whims of the other members. We have an opportunity to make our case and advocate for changes in the United Methodist Book of Discipline, which we have been doing. Where only opinions matter, there can be little or no advocacy. Throughout history, in either case, people have been excluded, expelled, or ex-communicated for reasons of whatever moral principles were being emphasized at the time, for whatever was considered heretical, for insubordination to ecclesiastical or secular authority, or for whatever other reasons may have been cloaked in the guise of separating the wheat from the tares. The trouble is the wheat in this parable is not tasked with separating anything. The wheat is supposed to grow along with the tares, in the same field, enjoying the same nutrients from the same ground and the same sunshine and the same rain.

There is a spiritual perspective, though, that understands this parable and its explanation as encouraging coexistence, tolerance, and interfaith cooperation. The field is the world. The wheat and tares are all the people, whomever they are and however they came to be in this proverbial field. Most would self-identify as wheat rather than tares, regardless of how they may be viewed by others. They all, that is, we all share the same resources and nourishment and sustenance. So we grow together, mature together, and are harvested together. If there is any sorting to be done, as suggested by the parable, the angels will take care of that.

Each element of this parable serves as a metaphor, together forming another allegory. As with the Parable of the Sower, Jesus spoke the parable to a multitude but then explained it later to a few of his closest friends. His explanation unraveled one layer of the parable. The identification of each element serves to represent another metaphor. The result is another allegory that points us to the kingdom of God within and among us. Consistent with the surrounding parables of this chapter, the Parable of the Wheat and Tares could suggest our individual and collective spiritual growth. The “children of the kingdom” and the “children of the wicked one” could be our thoughts and feelings, our truths and errors. The “angels” could include all the means of grace God sends to sort the good from the bad in our personal lives and in society as a whole. “All things that offend,” as Jesus said in the King James Version, would be ultimately removed. In his explanation, Jesus also included “them which do iniquity.” In the New Revised Standard Version, that phrase reads, “all causes of sin and all evildoers.”¹ Might the evildoers also be a metaphor? Could it signify something *within* each of us that will be separated out, leaving only kindness and love “to shine forth as the sun?” The Message phrases it, “Ripe, holy lives will mature and adorn the Kingdom of their Father.”²

We are all the family of God.

The Spirit [herself] beareth witness with our spirit, that we are the children of God: (*Romans 8:16 KJV*)

According to the *Lexicon*, the pronoun translated *itself* in the King James Version (“The Spirit itself), and “that very Spirit” in the New Revised Standard Version, can also be translated as “himself, herself, themselves, itself... he, she, it... the same.”³ Apparently, the patriarchal influence resists the use of feminine pronouns for the Holy Spirit, no matter how clearly Biblical. There is a pervasive insistence on faithfulness to the text in the original languages, *except* where the text contradicts long-standing prejudices. Yet, it is, at least for me, a more complete and relatable perspective to think of God in both feminine and masculine terms. Whatever pronouns we choose, it is God’s own Spirit who is testifying within us that we are the daughters and sons of God. John Wesley emphasized this witness within and among us, as he wrote, “by a testimony distinct from that of [our] own spirit”⁴

God’s Spirit communicates with our spirit. Our spirit is the essence of who we are, just as God’s Spirit is the essence of who God is. We are created in the image of God, reflecting some facets of who God is in our personal and collective lives. Notably, the very same word is translated as *spirit* in both cases in this verse, referring both to the Spirit of God and to our spirit. What God’s Spirit is communicating with our spirit is that we are “the children of God by faith,”⁵ according to John Wesley. Charles Spurgeon observed that the spirit of adoption in this passage is contrasted with the spirit of bondage. Spurgeon wrote, “It is clear that the Spirit of adoption is in the highest sense the spirit of liberty.”⁶

God encourages us not to be afraid, even through the most difficult times.

Fear ye not, neither be afraid: have not I told thee from that time, and have declared it? ye are even my witnesses. Is there a God beside me? yea, there is no God; I know not any. (*Isaiah 44:8 KJV*)

Do not be afraid, my people! You know that from ancient times until now I have predicted all that would happen, and you are my witnesses. Is there any other god? Is there some powerful god I never heard of?” (*Isaiah 44:8 GNT*)

In the Gospels, Jesus repeatedly told everyone not to be afraid. John reported Jesus saying almost

exactly the same thing Isaiah said in this verse, “Peace I leave with you, my peace I give unto you: not as the world giveth, give I unto you. Let not your heart be troubled, neither let it be afraid.”⁷ God has been telling us all along... throughout human history... throughout our own lives, that we are loved. Here, through Isaiah, God invites us to consider, Is there a God except for our Creator? God is not aware of one. Are we?

God loves us, and will always be as patient with us as we need, and God is always kind.

But thou, O Lord, art a God full of compassion, and gracious, long suffering, and plenteous in mercy and truth. (*Psalm 86:15 KJV*)

But you, O Lord, are a merciful and loving God, always patient, always kind and faithful. (*Psalm 86:15 GNT*)

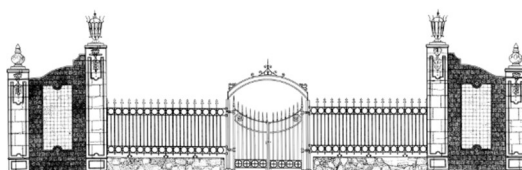
With the Psalmist, we affirm that God is merciful and loving, patient, kind, and faithful.

There are some ways of reading the Bible that seem to suggest otherwise. The Parable of Wheat and Tares contains a reference that is often used for condemnation, along with verse 13 from today’s Psalm, where the Bible says, “Thou hast delivered my soul from the lowest hell.” John Wesley, in his notes for that verse, said that meant “from extreme dangers and miseries.”⁸ The profound description of God the Psalmist gives in verse 15 connects with the Great Commandment highlighted by Jesus, with John 3:16, and with the New Commandment of Jesus. God is “merciful and loving.” God is always patient – always. That means God is as patient with each of us and with all of us as any of us may ever need God to be, now and forever. We need to remind ourselves and everyone else that God is “always kind and faithful.” These are attributes for us to emulate. It is so contradictory to the fears and distortions and misinformation and condemnation so often spewed. Those are the ideas Christ came to save us from, and to bring us into a personal saving relationship with God, helping us to know God as always kind to us, to everyone, forever.

Conclusion

Everyone is a child of God. Everyone has a place in God’s world. God’s own Spirit communicates her love to us and to all, helping us to know that we are her daughters and sons. One of the great sacramental messages of Holy Communion, as practiced in our United Methodist heritage, is that it is the Lord’s Table around which we gather. Likewise, it is the Lord’s World we live in, and God loved the world so much that God sent Jesus to be our savior. Today’s Bible readings invite us to grow spiritually right alongside everyone else, and let God work out the rest.

In the Name of Jesus, Amen.



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Manuscript of the sermon preached by Rev. Bill Lawson on July 23, 2023, at Briensburg UMC
Bible Readings for the 8th Sunday after Pentecost, Revised Common Lectionary
Isaiah 44:6-8, Psalm 86:11-17, Romans 8:12-25, Matthew 13:24-30 & 36-43

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Notes

¹ Matthew 13:41 (NRSV).

² Matthew 13:43 (KJV, MSG)

³ Thayer and Smith. "Greek Lexicon entry for *Autos*." The KJV New Testament Greek Lexicon. <https://www.biblestudytools.com/lexicons/greek/kjv/autos.html> 22 July 2023.

⁴ John Wesley. "Romans 8." *Explanatory Notes*. Bible Commentaries. *Bible Study Tools*. Notes on Romans 8:16. www.biblestudytools.com/commentaries/wesleys-explanatory-notes/romans/romans-8.html Accessed 22 July 2023.

⁵ John Wesley. "Sermon 9: The Spirit of Bondage and of Adoption," 1872. Thomas Jackson, editor. John Wesley Sermons. *Resource UMC*. [/www.resourceumc.org/en/content/sermon-9-the-spirit-of-bondage-and-of-adoption](http://www.resourceumc.org/en/content/sermon-9-the-spirit-of-bondage-and-of-adoption) 22 July 2023.

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⁷ John 14:27 (KJV).

⁸ John Wesley. "Psalm 86." *Explanatory Notes*. Bible Commentaries. *Bible Study Tools*. Notes on Psalm 86:13. www.biblestudytools.com/commentaries/wesleys-explanatory-notes/psalms-76-150/psalms-86.html Accessed 22 July 2023.

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