

The Gospel According to the Compost Pile

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Matthew 13: 24-30, 36 -43

Anyone who's ever tried their hand at gardening knows that the outcomes are often completely unpredictable. From drought to flood, springtime frost to midsummer heat waves, and worst of all... bug infestations... when we humans attempt to collaborate with mother nature, we have to learn to let go of our control issues. No matter how hard we try, we cannot control what grows in our gardens. We cannot predict the outcomes. In the creation business, two plus two does not always equal a nice, clean, predictable four.

At the church I served in Charlotte, North Carolina, there was a ministry called "EarthKeepers." This was a dedicated group of folks who were really on the cutting edge of environmental stewardship (before it was the cool). The EarthKeepers were smart, they were passionate about their work, they were dedicated to their mission, and they knew everything about gardening! It was great for me because I had a little start-up garden in my back yard. Anytime I had a question I had a whole group of people at the church I could go to with my questions.

For some time, the EarthKeepers kept a community garden on the church property. They'd grow all kinds of produce: squash, tomatoes, cucumbers, peas... you name it, they grew it. Cold weather and warm weather crops. There was always something growing in their garden. One year they added a compost heap to the garden project. It was a huge wooden structure that was adjacent to a big brick wall separating the garden area from the church dumpsters. Church members were encouraged to bring their compost from home to add to the pile. The church kitchen would also contribute whenever possible. Over time, the pile did what compost piles do and the scraps and leftovers began to decompose forming nutrient-rich soil to go into the garden.

From time to time, voluntary plants would pop up in the compost and one of the faithful EarthKeeper gardeners would decide whether the sprout was a good one that should be planted in the garden; or if it was a weed that needed to be pulled out and tossed aside. You get all kinds of strange things in a compost pile.

One year, a vigorous new vine emerged and quickly began to grow in the compost. The EarthKeepers couldn't identify it and so they were puzzled about whether or not to pull it up or let it grow. By some stroke of luck, genius, or perhaps good faith, the gardeners (who perhaps were familiar with today's Gospel reading), decided not to pull it up, but to wait and see what it might become.

The vine grew to extraordinary lengths, quickly climbing out of the compost pile, it covered the garden floor, leaving little space for gardeners to walk between the raised beds. It also grew out the other side, climbing up the brick wall and down around the dumpsters. I have never seen a vine so massive. It filled in every inch of unclaimed space

over on that side of the church. Left alone to grow and mature for the summer growing season, the vine eventually produced gigantic, pumpkin-like fruits that were the deep green color of acorn squash.

One brave gardener and his wife took one home, cooked it, and ate it for dinner. They survived the night and lived to testify that the crop was both non-toxic and absolutely delicious. Over the course of the summer, this mystery vine produced over 100 pounds of food that went to a local non-profit called Friendship Trays, which works to alleviate food insecurity in the city.

All because of the patience of our gardeners and their wise curiosity that urged the rest of us to wait and see what would become of that vine.

A gardener sows good seed in the field but while she is sleeping, another gardener sows weeds among the wheat and then vanishes into the night. Before long the servants notice the weeds growing together with the wheat and immediately want to pull them out. It's a reasonable response. But in the world of the parable, reasonable is scarcely rewarded.

Instead of indulging the temptation to rush to judgment, the good, patient, gardener says, "No. Let's wait, watch, and see what comes... After all, we don't want to risk uprooting the wheat in pulling up the weeds. Let's just wait..." "Let them both 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.'"

This parable – perhaps more than most – resonates deeply with our human fascination with creating groups of "us" and "them". We want to know who is "in" and who is "out," and we want to secure our place within the "in" group so that we never have to feel the isolation and loneliness of being left or thrown out.

In its original context the parable undoubtedly brought comfort to Jesus' disciples who faced daily persecution, judgment, and hostility against their movement. Viewing themselves as the children of God, they might have found a peaceful sense of patience with the way things were going. But somewhere between then and now, popular interpretations of this parable have grown to encourage dreadful and deadly ideologies that seem to overlook that little part about holding out judgment.

The problems with this are fairly self-evident, but none is more problematic than the theological certainty produced by those who just know that we are the children of God and *they* are not. Churches are real good at this, and it should scare us to death.

Parables are intended to arrest the reader by their strangeness. They are intended to subvert the worldview and to leave us with far more questions than answers. So why does this one tend to feel so definitive? Have we traded our sense of spiritual curiosity for some sense of eternal certainty?

In Jewish thought, there is an idea that human beings are created with two inclinations. Each of us is born with an inclination toward good and an inclination toward evil or self-interest. We spend our entire lives sorting out these pieces of ourselves. It's no wonder we cannot accurately do it with others. Often we think we can identify some of the flaws in our neighbors; we think it's pretty clear what they are doing is wrong. But more often those flaws are merely a projection of something that we don't like or have repressed deep within our own selves. Quickly, we learn that the lines between right and wrong, good and evil, are blurred and permeable. Neither of us is fully weed or wheat... we are both.

A similar conclusion is found in a book called, *The Gospel of Solentiname*. Solentiname is a remote village in Lake Nicaragua, populated by peasants. Each week the priest would come through, the people would gather and in lieu of a sermon on the Gospel reading for the day, there would be profound discussions, reflecting on the reading. The author of the book, Ernesto Cardinal, was their priest and he recorded their conversations because their discussions, "were often more profound than those of many theologians, but they reflected the simplicity of the gospel readings themselves. "That is not surprising," he writes. "The *gospel*, or good news (good news to the poor), was written for them, by people like them."¹

The peasants of Solentiname discuss today's reading from Matthew 13 and agree with our Jewish sisters and brothers saying that the weeds and the wheat represent justice and injustice in our world. Another adds that often the two (justice and injustice... good and evil) are so intertwined that they cannot be distinguished or separated from one another. The peasants agree that it is our responsibility to work toward becoming the wheat, which is justice, it is righteousness. And it requires a faithful and carefully discerning spirit.

In the same period as the peasants of Solentiname were gathering each week to discuss the Gospel, Latin America experienced great political and economic unrest. There were priests, like Camilo Torres, who worked hard to unite the peasant farmers, students, slum dwellers and trade unionists to fight for their liberation. It was the righteous thing to do. But Torres soon came to the conclusion that working within the system as a priest of the Catholic church, he would never be able to help usher in the change that was so desperately needed. In 1965, Torres discarded his vestments and joined the Colombian Revolutionary Forces saying, "I took off my cassock to be more truly a priest."²

Of course there were many who did not agree about this means of achieving justice for the people. Like his fellow priest, Gustavo Gutierrez, they remained committed to non-violence and they could not condone his decision to engage in violence, even for a righteous cause!

¹ Ernesto Cardinal, xi

² Miguel De La Torre. *Liberation Theology for Armchair Theologians*. Westminster John Knox Press: 2013. (kindle book loc 398)

Perhaps they recognized that there's a sprout of both wheat and weed in each of us, even those we meet on the many battlefields of life, and the decision to pluck up and cast out is not ours to make.

Like my friend, the faithful EarthKeeper, looking at that mysterious vine climbing all over the garden... I can hear the Spirit begin to whisper, "Just wait a while. Let's see what becomes of this one, here.

One of the most perplexing things about parables is that you can never really be sure you know who is what and what is who. Take this one, for example. The kingdom of heaven is like a gardener. Hmm. The whole kingdom is like a gardener who sewed good seed into good ground. Little seeds of heaven sewn right into the gardener's creation.

Then comes another sower, the enemy of heaven... hell, perhaps? This one sowing the seeds of hell or evil, but also in the same garden. The garden that was God's creation. So both are growing together, within God's created garden.

We've often thought that we (whoever we are) are the children of God, but now I wonder... what if we are the garden? What if the seeds of heaven were sown within us and began to germinate until the seeds of hell were sown right alongside them. What if the weeds of hell have also grown – perhaps unnoticed – right there alongside a more promising crop?

Perhaps we have felt the pinch of greed squeeze out the sprouts of generosity that were beginning to take form? Perhaps we have experienced a surge of self-doubt just as confidence helped us to answer God's call. Or maybe a sprig of fear threatens to isolate us from our neighbors, touting self-protection as a human right as opposed to beloved community as our sacred calling.

The weeds and the wheat, they all look so similar at first. How will we know what needs to go and what needs to grow? Perhaps we won't. And that's ok because there is one thing that is fairly clear from this parable... whether we are children of God, children of the evil one, or some combination of both; whether we are servants of the master or the compost worked into the garden; the sorting of weeds and wheat is not our task to complete. But perhaps we might find a sprout of hope growing up within us, for our Master Gardener is full of patience, grace, and a whole pile of curiosity.

Can't you just hear the Gardener's voice whisper gently, "Hold on. Don't pull that one up quite yet. Let's just wait and see what she might become."