

Eighth Sunday after Pentecost – 2023

Isaiah 44:6-8

Romans 8:18-27

Matthew 13:24-30, 36-43

Everyone loves a good conversion story. In the novel *A Tale of Two Cities*, Sydney Carton is a brilliant barrister but he's also ne'er do well dirtbag. He's a self-loathing drunkard, profoundly cynical, and deeply depressed. He is in love with the irrepressible Lucie who is married to another man who, coincidentally, bears an astonishing resemblance to Sydney Carton. The story climaxes in Paris during the reign of terror and the bloody vengeance against aristocrats using the guillotine. Lucie's husband, Charles Darnay, is unjustly imprisoned and facing death. Sydney Carton, in an act of profound altruism, smuggles himself into the prison, debilitates Darnay in order to trade places with him, and secures Darnay's escape. The narrator puts perhaps the most famous words in English literature into the dirtbag's mouth: "It is a far, far better thing that I do, than I have ever done; it is a far, far better rest that I go to than I have ever known." Everyone loves a good conversion story. Conversion resonates with us.

In the movie *3:10 to Yuma*, the villain, Ben Wade, is a ruthless, thieving, murderer. Throughout the film, Wade impresses upon the audience that his heart is as black as obsidian. He is an unrepentant blaggard who would shoot his own mother for \$20. Dan Evans is the honorable Civil War veteran who sets his jaw to the task of bringing Wade to justice. After everyone in a large contingent of men trying to get Wade on board the prison train, the 3:10 to Yuma, after all the other men are killed trying uphold law and order, it is only Evans and Wade. Surprisingly, as his gang fiercely tries to free him, the villain takes the lead in getting himself on board the train when he could have easily fled, thus selflessly achieving heroic status for Evans. Conversion stories are candy to us. Johnny Cash is pure Americana. "The Man in Black" portrayed himself as a converted outlaw. Everyone loved him for it. St. Paul once persecuted Christians. St. Paul branded himself the "chief of sinners" (1 Timothy 1:15). God converted St. Paul and the apostle became the church's missionary extraordinaire. Everyone loves a good conversion story.

Pay really close attention to what I am about to say. This is not a conversion story. In this parable, weeds don't become wheat. I suspect that more than half of you were once in darkness – real, unpleasant, hostile-to-the-light darkness. And God brought you into His Kingdom. This is not that story. Weeds are weeds and wheat is wheat. Turn off whatever is in your head about God converting people, which He totally does, and just focus on what Christ is trying to teach us in this parable. God creates believers. Satan creates sons of his dark domain. The two are spatially near to each other in this world. Saints and future residents of hell are in close proximity to one another. Different agendas, different attitudes toward government, different approaches on how to raise children, different beliefs in regard to what freedom means, different convictions regarding the nature of man, the nature of marriage – weeds and wheat are different. And they grow together... for a time.

The servants' attitude in the parable is worth paying attention to. "Um, hey, Master... like, what's your problem, dude? Don't you know how to sow? You've got a pretty bad weed problem here, bro." Have you ever looked around and thought that God didn't know what He was doing, or, what is more likely, that you knew better? Or how many of you want God to pull

a “clean-up project” à la Sodom and Gomorrah? “Yo, these weeds are a straight-up hassle! Where’s the full-on Kingdom of God? We’d be down for some Christian serenity, so come on, why don’t you let us weed the place, Boss?” “Yeah, no, I don’t want you doing anything like that.” The Master in the parable has one thing in mind – protecting the wheat. That is you.

So let’s get a few things straight. God has His eyes on you. He watches over you, protects you, teaches you His will, shows you His love, His grace, His devotion. He has the harvest in view. Irrespective of what is going on around you with the weed-action, He is going to bring you and all believers to Himself; God is going to bring us home. The weeds are not a problem. Unbelief, in all of its manifestations in this world, is not a problem for God to bring you home. That is the truth. Christ’s kingdom is among us and it is a bumper crop. The Father knows precisely how to sow the Seed of Christ crucified and risen. I’ll grant you; the ongoing presence of sin and evil is shocking. That is also true. Evil seems very much to be growing. Man seems to be becoming less enlightened, less noble, less intelligent, more willing to lie, more willing to corrupt what is good, more willing to defy God. Have you ever thought that that might actually be good for you? Have you ever thought that God uses adversity for you individually and for us corporately, in spite of evil, to draw you ever closer to Him?

Trust; are you a trusting believer? Do these words ever bring clarity to your confused heart: “Be still and know that I am God” (Psalm 46:10)? Is it possible that God wants your trust to grow? Is it possible that God has designed this hour of our history so that His church might awaken to the need to be more devoted to His Word because the hour is so dark with *insane* philosophical notions? How many of you, seeing the world turned on its head, have thought to yourself, “Well, this just means that I need to be in Bible class to learn more about God’s Word so that I’m armed for the coming storm?” No? Well then, that bit’s on you. You might want the weeds to just go away but God wants you to man up, carpe diem, and thoroughly digest His Word. The bottom line is that God works all things together for good (Romans 8:28). Christ’s cross tells you that. If God is for us, who can be against us? (Romans 8:31). Even in adversity, especially in adversity, we are more than conquerors through Him who loved us (Romans 8:37). God is at work in our age to bring about precisely what He wants. For now, the weeds and the wheat grow together. We must learn to live in this tension. And not just to pass the days, but to flourish. If it is God who sees to it that we flourish (and it very much is), how do you suppose He will be at work in us to bring about just that?

“Fix your eyes on Jesus,” the Scripture says (Hebrews 12:2). Strive to see His reign and His rule among us. Engage with other Christians who model trust, who yearn for heaven, who recognize that Christ is with us now. The harvest is coming. God is going to sort all of this out – believers and unbelievers, wheat and weeds, heaven and hell. God may seem slow but He is never late (2 Peter 3:8-13). This world is dying (1 John 2:17). You have a living hope. God has caused you to be born again to a living hope through the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead (1 Peter 1:3). That hope is all around you in the wheat of Christ’s harvest – fellow believers who stand beside you in good times and bad. His Word invades this world, invades the lives of men and women, girls and boys. Our inheritance is imperishable, undefiled, unfading, kept in heaven for you but present here, present now (1 Peter 1:4). By God’s power, your salvation is guarded; you are guarded (1 Peter 1:5). On the Last Day *everything* will be revealed – Christ’s present reign, His kingdom which has come and is in our midst, the glory of His sacrifice, the haven of His

church, the ministry of grace, the nature of good and evil, the operation of the Holy Spirit, the Creator's will to give – it will all be revealed (Luke 8:17).

The weeds are obstinate, unyielding enemies of the cross (Philippians 3:18). That does not change our destiny. Love has secured our destiny. Blood, the redeeming blood of heaven's Prince, shed on this earth, has secured our destiny. We will live as people whose destiny is secure. We will love and sacrifice and pray and sing and rejoice in marriage's sweetness, we will rejoice at the baptism of our ken, we will welcome the Savior by bowing at His cross, standing for His gospel and kneeling at His altar as we eat His body and blood. What a joy it is to live as a Christian – in this hour and at any hour that the Lord gives us. We are so grateful that the Lord sowed His seed, that He brings forth sons and daughters of the Kingdom, that He is the Lord of the Harvest and that He is coming soon (Revelation 22:20). Amen. Come, Lord Jesus!