

SEEDS
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The kingdom of heaven may be compared to someone who sowed good seed in his field; but while everybody was asleep, an enemy came and sowed weeds among the wheat, and then went away. So when the plants came up and bore grain, then the weeds appeared as well. And the slaves of the householder came and said to him, "Master, did you not sow good seed in your field? Where, then, did these weeds come from?" (Matthew 13:24-27).

Today is the first Sunday in springtime.

The beginning of spring is such a great time because, even though not much has changed yet, we know what's coming. The days are getting longer – in fact, they have been since Christmas, but we really notice now. It's getting warmer too. There will be more cold days, and it might even snow again, but those are just the last gasps of winter. Signs of spring are all around: birds are singing, snowbirds are returning from Florida, and I'm riding to work on my motorcycle.

If there's anything we identify with spring, it's fecundity – new life bursting all around us. We have a small herd of doe that use our back yard as a bed & breakfast, and pretty soon there will be speckled fawns among them. Trees are budding like musicians waiting to start the music, and seeds that have been biding their time underground all winter will start pushing up flowers and trees and weeds in a riot of fertility.

Looking forward to spring and reading Jesus' parables, it strikes me that God is fond of seeds, and because everything is connected to everything else, it's no surprise that seeds should produce not only plants and animals but metaphors as well.

In the thirteenth chapter of Matthew alone, Jesus gives us the Parable of the Sower with the four kinds of soil, the Parable of the Wheat and the Weeds, and the almost-in-passing comment that the kingdom of heaven is like a mustard seed, the smallest of seeds that becomes a bush big enough for birds to live in.

Part of the point of all of these seed stories is that little things turn into big things, and the kinds of seeds we sow determines what grows, not only around us, but within us.

We reap what we sow, and one way to think about morality, for example, has to do with the seeds we sow by our actions and the fruits that grow out of them. Vices are seeds that grow bad things in the long run; virtues grow good things.

So wrath is a vice because we say and do things in anger that hurt people, and set off chain reactions of bitterness and revenge, which in turn lead to more anger and hearts full of hatred. Families and whole peoples can be destroyed by anger. And lust is a vice when we treat people not as persons but as objects for our own gratification. The word "love" gets wrapped around lust to disguise it, but using other people is the opposite of loving them.

The seven deadly sins of classical philosophy – wrath, lust, envy, gluttony, pride, sloth, and avarice – are deadly because they destroy not only relationships and societies but the souls of those who practice them. That insight goes back at least to the ancient Greeks, so it's a good question to ask why people persist in the very things that may destroy them.

The answer has to do with seeds, and the gap between sowing and reaping. Seeds take time to grow. We plant them, and then we wait. For a long time, nothing happens. We don't see any results for a while, and we

might even forget where we planted what. The delay between planting seeds and seeing what they produce is what gets us into trouble.

Lots of popular songs tell how he treated her mean until she finally left him. If he had known then what he knows now, he would never have done her wrong. But it's too late now; she's gone for good.

Some diseases work that way too, don't they? I sat with my father in the waiting room of Eye and Ear Hospital in Pittsburgh years ago, surrounded by retired people who smoked and drank all their lives and were there for the kinds of cancer the surgeon said come mostly to those who smoke and drink too much. We have epidemics of HIV and AIDS and sexually-transmitted diseases, in this country and around the world, that are largely, if not entirely, the result of people's promiscuity.

We could go on with examples, but the pattern is clear. One reason people persist in things that harm them is the delay between what we sow and what we reap.

Vices are popular, even when they turn out to be deadly, because the benefits come right away but the costs show up only later. Sin works like a credit card: buy now, pay later. It doesn't matter what the vice is, they all work the same. In the legend of Dr. Faust, Mephistopheles offers to make Faust the smartest man in the world, in exchange for his soul when he dies. Faust takes the deal for the same reason people always take the deal: the benefits are real and tangible now, while the costs come later and so they seem unreal. That's why the story told by Marlowe and Goethe is called *The Tragedy of Dr. Faust*.

Virtues work the opposite way from vices: the cost of virtues comes first, but we often have to wait for the benefits. So patience is a virtue, but even if good things come to those who wait, waiting is hard. Chastity means forgoing pleasure now, in exchange for a uniquely powerful bond with someone later on, and avoiding a host of diseases. Not doing drugs or becoming habitually drunk trades an immediate high for freedom from addiction down the road. Forgiveness means giving up wrath and revenge in the short run, in order to live without bitterness and find reconciliation in the long run.

Given the delay between sowing and reaping, and the way costs and benefits flow, it's no wonder vice comes easily to people and virtue is much harder. Any animal pursues pleasure and avoids pain. But human beings were made to be more than animals. We were made in the image of God. We have brains big enough, if we use them, to foresee the consequences of our actions. Just as we know what to expect as spring unfolds, we can anticipate what will grow from the moral seeds we sow.

I had a professor who liked to say, "Smart people learn from other people's mistakes, dumb people learn from their own." That's why Jesus is forever pointing to nature and other people and saying, "Take a lesson..." Take a lesson from the trees, the birds, the farmers, the poor widow with her pennies and the rich man who went away sad. Don't be dumb, Jesus says. Learn the lessons planted all around you. You were made for more. You were made for the kingdom of heaven.

You were made for heaven, but heaven is not a sure thing. Don't imagine that you can do evil, indulge vice, and neglect virtue, and still be fit for heaven.

Of course we Christians believe we are saved by grace through faith in Christ, and not by our own works, as if we could earn our way into heaven. We know it's only by the grace of God that anyone is saved. But still, Jesus says that a tree is known by its fruit. "Not everyone who says to me, 'Lord, Lord,' will enter the kingdom of heaven, but only the one who does the will of my Father in heaven." If we claim to be apple trees, we'd better be making some apples. If we think we're a wheat seed, we ought to be growing wheat, not weeds. Otherwise we're just fooling ourselves.

And that brings up the matter of judgment. The idea some Christians have that the Old Testament is all about judgment and the New Testament is all about love, as if the two were mutually exclusive, is just silly. The Old Testament talks a lot about love – in fact that’s where Jesus gets the great commandment to love God and our neighbors as ourselves – and Jesus has plenty to say about judgment.

The Parable of the Wheat and the Weeds is a case in point. It’s all about judgment. The wheat gets gathered into the barn, and the weeds get burned up in a furnace where, to sharpen the image, Jesus says “there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth.”

Even in judgment though, there is a note of grace. The servants ask their master whether they should go out and do some weeding. But the master says “No, if you do that you’ll pull up the wheat with the weeds. Wait till the harvest, when both are fully grown, and then I’ll separate the wheat from the weeds.”

At one level, the story means that God won’t end this world until all the wheat is ready for harvest. That helps to explain why God allows evil to persist. If people are made to love, and love requires freedom, and freedom means that some will choose evil instead of good, then God tolerates evil for a while in order to let as much good as possible grow up before the harvest. That’s good news for the wheat: there’s still time to grow. But it’s bad news for weeds: the furnace is coming, even if not for a while.

Now that’s a sobering thought, if there’s any chance we might turn out to be weeds. But here again, the gospel is good news. Christ comes not to condemn the world, but to save it. Anyone who wants to be wheat can be, by accepting God’s grace, and being made new by the power of the Holy Spirit. The Old Testament itself anticipates such a transformation: “Create in me a clean heart, O God, and put a new and right spirit within me,” the psalmist says.

God can make us fit for heaven, if we want to be made new. Even in this parable of judgment, Jesus says the Son of Man “will collect out of his kingdom all causes of sin and all evildoers.” Insofar as every human heart is a field full of wheat and weeds, God can remove the weeds within us until only wheat is left.

It may turn out that some hearts have only weeds in them come judgment day, depending on what they’ve sown themselves. If so, Jesus says their future is bleak. But it doesn’t have to be that way for any of us. The psalmist longs for a new heart, and Jeremiah foresees a time when God’s law will be written on the hearts of all who love God: “I will be their God, and they shall be my people.... I will forgive their iniquity, and remember their sin no more.”

All of us are constantly sowing seeds, for better or for worse, by what we think and say and do, and we need to look beyond the immediate costs and benefits to the long term consequences for ourselves and others. But God is sowing seeds too. The promise of grace and new life is there throughout the Bible, in the Old Testament and the New. The seeds of the kingdom are sown in the hearts of everyone who loves God. Even if it takes a lifetime, we can trust God to weed out our souls and make them fit for the kingdom of heaven, if we really want to be made new.