

Judgment Is Truth Arriving

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Matthew 13:24-30, 36-43

I always start my chemistry classes with a short list of learning goals -- the big headings that help students know what to listen for. Here are the learning goals for this morning:

1) Judgment is truth arriving

2) Sorting is not formation

3) Ask a better question

4) The field is ours to tend

And the reason I chose those learning goals is that this Gospel reading can do real damage if we hear it the way many of us were taught to hear it.

Fear-based religion has done real harm and its roots run deep. For example, many of us learned to hear apocalyptic language, like that in today's Gospel, as a threat -- fear, punishment, to anxiously question whether we are loved, whether we belong, whether God is waiting for us with mercy or with a furnace.

But this passage is not asking us to imagine a future scene where angels forcibly sort humanity into wheat and weeds. I think it is asking something more revealing and more freeing: what happens when truth finally arrives? What happens when what is fruitful and what is destructive can no longer hide - not from God, not from one another, and not from ourselves?

Maybe judgment is not God waiting to punish us. Maybe judgment is truth arriving.

Not truth as humiliation. Not truth as revenge. Truth as what becomes visible when God's mercy gives us the courage to finally see what is real. Judgment is truth arriving when contempt finally has to call itself contempt, when harm can no longer hide behind the language of righteousness, when mercy finally appears as mercy.

And we do not have to guess what God's mercy looks like in the abstract. We look to Jesus. Because His mercy is right there in this parable.

But before we decide what this parable means, I want us to notice how it works on us. Because if we treat this as a fable, we will completely miss the point.

A fable gives us a moral: “slow and steady wins the race;” “don’t cry wolf.” But Jesus’ parables do something stranger. They do not hand us an answer so much as push us to ask a better question. Parables are not just cute stories; they are scalpels meant to cut our confidence in our own understanding of what we think of as reality.

A parable throws one story alongside another reality until we see differently.[1] Most of us, though, were taught to read parables as if they were algebra problems: this character equals God, this character equals us, this character equals someone we do not like, solve for x, put a box around the answer. But Jesus’ parables are not interested in giving us something neat enough to box.

Jesus begins, “The kingdom of heaven may be compared to someone who sowed good seed in his field.” Matthew calls it the “kingdom of heaven,” which can mislead us if we hear “heaven” and immediately think “afterlife.” Jesus is not giving us a map of where people go when they die. He is giving us a way to see this field differently -- this world, this community, this self -- your self -- this strange mixture of wheat and weeds growing in the same soil, where we find ourselves.

That is where this becomes personal for me and I hope, all of us, because the parable is about how we learn to see the field as it exists here and now. It is what happens when God’s truth and mercy start taking root here, in exactly the mixed-up field around us and inside us.

As a professor, there are times when I have to make judgments about what students understand. But I also know that if you assess too soon, with the wrong tool, or with too much confidence, you can mistake unfinished learning for failure. You can damage the very growth you are trying to support.

So, sorting is not formation. Sorting asks, “Which category do you belong in?” Formation asks, “What is God still growing here?”

That is what I hear in this parable. The servants are not wrong that something is growing in the field. They are wrong that they can safely sort it now.

Many scholars think the parable itself likely goes back to Jesus in some form, while the explanation that follows reflects Matthew interpreting the parable for his community.[2] I am not saying we should throw Matthew’s explanation away. But I do think it may narrow Jesus’ parable before it has finished doing its work on us.

I wonder whether Matthew’s explanation gives us the question we most want to ask, but not the question Jesus most needs us to ask. Maybe Jesus wants us to ask a better question.

Matthew's explanation asks: Who is the wheat? Who are the weeds? Who is the enemy? Who are the reapers? And those are natural questions. But Jesus' parable may be asking something more revealing and more unsettling: Why are you so eager to sort?

And this is where the parable catches us. Jesus sets an unsettling rhetorical trap. He lets us feel the servants' confidence: "Do you want us to go and gather the weeds?" they ask. And we instinctively know the answer. Of course we should. We can see what is wrong. We can see what is harmful. We can see what we need to remove.

And then Jesus springs that rhetorical trap: just when you are sure you know the right answer, the farmer says, "No."

Not because weeds are good. Not because harm does not matter. Not because Jesus is telling us to be passive in the face of cruelty. The farmer says no because the servants cannot uproot the weeds without damaging the wheat. Sorting is not formation.

And we Christians are not immune from needing to hear that wisdom. I am not immune from needing that wisdom.

Because we are not simply wheat looking out at weeds. We ourselves are mixed fields. We can work for justice and still take pleasure in feeling morally superior. We can preach inclusion and still quietly decide that some people are beyond grace.

When we discover that we are wheat and weeds growing in the same soil, judgment is truth arriving.

And maybe the prayer this parable asks of us today is not, "Lord, show me who the weeds are." Maybe it is the prayer of today's psalm: "Search me, O God, and know my heart." [3]

Because judgment is truth arriving, and the first truth we may need is not the truth about them. It may be the truth about us.

And if that is true inside us, it is also true in the places we inhabit together.

Paul says creation itself is groaning, waiting for freedom. [4] Here in Los Osos, we know that. We know that the land under us, the water below us, the habitat around us, and the people beside us are bound together. Housing, water, habitat, and community are not separate plants in separate pots. You want more affordable housing in the area? Me too. Where are we going to get the water? Pull on one, and something else moves.

That does not mean we stop making decisions. Humility does not mean pretending every answer is equally faithful. It means we do not turn the people who disagree with us into weeds.

St. Benedict's is a community that cares about the Earth. This is a community that cares about neighbors who are hungry, unhoused, or unsure where they belong. The Abundance Shop, our EarthCare work, and the feeding ministries of this congregation are not abstractions. They are not hobbies. They are ways we tend the field.

But the temptation remains. Even in communities committed to justice, even in communities committed to welcome, even in communities committed to mercy, we can still become servants with a weed-whacker in our hands, convinced that if we could just get rid of the wrong sort of people, the field would finally be pure.

Like the farmer, Jesus says, "No."

Because the kingdom of heaven does not grow by our fantasy of a pure field. The kingdom grows in mixed soil because mixed soil is the only kind of soil we have.

In this parable, Jesus shows us that mercy is what lets us tell the truth without destroying ourselves or one another -- not truth for sorting, but truth for formation.

Friends, if fear taught us to hear these passages as threats, Jesus teaches us to hear them differently. Because if judgment is truth arriving, then judgment is not God finally losing patience and becoming cruel. Judgment does not come to burn up what God has been growing. Judgment, as Jesus teaches us to see it, is the arrival of reality seen through God's mercy. It is the moment when what gives life and what destroys life can finally be named. It is the moment when lies and demagoguery can no longer rename reality. It is the moment when love is revealed as love, mercy as mercy, fruit as fruit.

When truth arrives, joined to mercy and grace, it does not come to dig up what is good. It comes to free what is good from everything that has been choking it.

That is the work of the Church after Pentecost. Not to escape the field. Not to sort the field. Not to stand outside the field and point at the weeds. But to live in and tend the field as people shaped by Jesus' truth, mercy, and grace.

So, if judgment is truth arriving, but not truth for sorting, maybe the question is not, "Who should we pull up?" We need to ask a better question, "What would it mean to tend this mixed field faithfully today?"

The answer is not: do nothing.

The answer is not: avoid tough decisions, avoid conflict, avoid accountability, avoid the truth.

The servants are not asked to pretend there are no weeds.

The answer is Jesus' charge to us: bear fruit. Tell the truth. Feed and shelter neighbors. Care for the fragile ecology of this place. Resist cruelty without becoming cruel. Resist evil without allowing evil to set the terms of our resistance. Be soil for formation. And by God's grace, that is work we can actually do.

And in a few moments, we will come to this table as people who grow wheat and weeds in the same soil. Not to be sorted by threats or fear, not for solace only, but for strength, to be nourished and formed by grace and sent back into the field to bear fruit.

Judgment is truth arriving. And when that truth is God's truth, when that truth is the truth we see in Jesus, it does not come to destroy the wheat.

It comes to set it free to "shine like the sun."

Endnotes

[1] The Greek word *parabolē* broadly means a comparison, similitude, or figurative narrative; in Hebrew tradition, *mashal* covers a range of forms including proverb, comparison, riddle, and story. Bible Odyssey summarizes this broader *mashal/parabolē* tradition and describes parables as a form of indirect communication. Bible Odyssey. (n.d.). Parables of Jesus. <https://www.bibleodyssey.org/articles/parables-of-jesus/>

[2] This is a standard historical-critical judgment, though not universal. Jeremias argued that many allegorical explanations of parables reflect later church interpretation rather than Jesus' original parabolic form. A Working Preacher commentary on Matthew 13:24–30, 36–43 similarly describes Matthew's allegorical explanation as shifting the accent from patient trust in divine justice to apocalyptic warning. Khatry, who argues for the authenticity of both the parable and its interpretation, is useful as a counterpoint. See Jeremias, J. (1972). *The parables of Jesus* (2nd rev. ed.). Scribner; Khatry, R. (2000). *The authenticity of the parable of the wheat and the tares and its interpretation*. Universal Publishers; Lose, D. J. (2023). *Commentary on Matthew 13:24–30, 36–43*. Working Preacher. <https://www.workingpreacher.org/commentaries/revised-common-lectionary/ordinary-16/commentary-on-matthew-1324-30-36-43-6>

[3] Psalm 139:23. The appointed readings for Proper 11, Year A, July 19, 2026, include Genesis 28:10–19a and Psalm 139:1–12, 23–24; Romans 8:12–25; and Matthew 13:24–30, 36–43. Vanderbilt Divinity Library. (n.d.). Revised Common Lectionary: Year A, 2025–2026. <https://lectionary.library.vanderbilt.edu/wp-content/uploads/faq/downloads/2025-2026/Year%20A%202025-2026.pdf>

[4] Romans 8:22–23. The appointed readings for Proper 11, Year A, July 19, 2026, include Genesis 28:10–19a and Psalm 139:1–12, 23–24; Romans 8:12–25; and Matthew 13:24–30, 36–43. Vanderbilt Divinity Library. (n.d.). Revised Common Lectionary: Year A, 2025–2026. <https://lectionary.library.vanderbilt.edu/wp-content/uploads/faq/downloads/2025-2026/Year%20A%202025-2026.pdf>