

Earthly Stories, Heavenly Meanings: Wolves, grapes and figs

Third Sunday after Epiphany, Sunday January 25

We're continuing this morning in our series, "Earthly Stories, Heavenly Meanings" by taking a look at a parable that doesn't really sound like a parable. All along we've been saying a parable is an earthly story that reveals the heart of God or the workings of the kingdom of God – it's Heavenly meaning. In our Gospel reading today, the parable doesn't seem to fall into these categories. But, if we look closely, we see the workings of the kingdom is all throughout these verses.

Will you please turn with me to our Gospel reading today? We are going to Matthew chapter 7, verses 15-20. This is the parable of the Tree and its Fruit. Once again, Matthew is the first book in the New Testament, written by the disciple Matthew, or his Hebrew name, Levi. Last week we mentioned how Matthew was probably a wealthy man to start with even before he became a tax collector. Once his life was taken over by the grace of God in Jesus, he left everything behind to become a disciple, and eventually – as tradition has it – lost his life for the faith.

This parable we're looking at today must have resonated with Matthew a bit especially, considering his life before coming to know Jesus. Once again, we're going to chapter 7, verses 15-20: *"Watch out for false prophets. They come to you in sheep's clothing, but inwardly they are ferocious wolves. By their fruit you will recognize them. Do people pick grapes from thornbushes, or figs from thistles? Likewise every good tree bears good fruit, but a bad tree bears bad fruit. A good tree cannot bear bad fruit, and a bad tree cannot bear good fruit. Every tree that does not bear good fruit is cut down and thrown into the fire. Thus, by their fruit you will recognize them."*

First, what's the earthly story? There are two of them here:

- The wolves in sheep's clothing. This would have resonated with the people of the day, because of the agricultural society they were in, and the fact that sheep were commonplace in their world. So were wolves. A wolf will do whatever it takes to get at a sheep: act innocent; subtly try to sneak up on the sheep; and pounce when they are in reach of an unsuspecting lamb.
- The plants. Again, this would have made perfect sense to the people. You get grapes from a grape vine, not a thornbush. You get figs from a fig tree or bush, not a bramble of thistles. A thornbush cannot produce grapes, and a grape vine cannot produce thorns. A fig tree cannot produce a bramble of thistles, and a bramble of thistles cannot produce figs.

Simple, right? Makes sense, right? We 'get' this. "Not much deep stuff here" we might say. But as it often is with Jesus, when He speaks His words carry so much meaning. Luther used to

say we could spend all day, every day, for 100 years reading and studying the Bible, and still not plumb the depths of the words of God.

Let's start with the false prophets, the wolves. In the Greek this is "pseudoprophetas" – pseudo prophets. People who set themselves up as dispensers of the truth, or as authorities on the word of God, but are not; they are 'psuedo' – false. These are folks that, at first hearing, may seem to say the 'right' things, but have not been changed on the inside. How can we know if someone is a wolf in sheep's clothing? *By their fruit you will recognize them.* By the fruit their lives exhibit – the fruit of the Spirit we are given in Galatians 5:22-23. In fact you can write that scripture reference right in the margin of your Bible. Galatians 5:22-23 says, "...*the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness and self-control.*"

The fruits that are not of the Spirit of God are also listed in Galatians 5:19-21 by the way, "...*sexual immorality, impurity and debauchery; idolatry and witchcraft; hatred, discord, jealousy, fits of rage, selfish ambition, dissensions, factions and envy; drunkenness, orgies, and the like. I warn you, as I did before, that those who live like this will not inherit the kingdom of God.*"

So here's the first question to ask when we hear someone who claims to speak for God, or have an insight or word from God, that sounds questionable or is coming from someone we wonder about: What is the fruit of their life? How do they act and compose themselves? Do they bring a spirit of dissension, or a spirit of self-control? A spirit of anger, or a spirit of peace? What's their fruit?

There are two problems with having wolves in the midst. The first problem is the sheep often don't know the wolves are there because they are not paying attention, or because they've gotten so used to the wolves they don't see the danger they bring and actually *invite* the wolves, the false prophets, the pretenders of the faith, into their midst. We've talked about these verses before, and you can write them in the margins of your Bible here, too: 2nd Timothy 4:3-4, "*For the time will come when men will not put up with sound doctrine. Instead, to suit their own desires, they will gather around them a great number of teachers to say what their itching ears want to hear. They will turn their ears away from the truth and turn aside to myths.*" Here then, is the second question to ask: are we actually turning to the wolves because they are saying what we want to hear versus what we need to hear? If so, we're sacrificing ourselves for what we think and want, instead of what God says and desires for us. Lord God, protect the church from people who say what others want to hear!

1st John 4:1 tells us plainly, "...*do not believe every spirit, but test the spirits to see whether they are from God...*" Test the spirit of the person, test the fruit of their lives. Of course we are all sinners, and of course at any one point in time none of us will be bearing all the fruits of the Spirit as listed in Galatians. But we're not talking about a snapshot of a moment in time, we're talking about a prolonged pattern of behavior in a person's life.

The other problem with wolves is that the wolves themselves are often deluded into thinking they are actually right in what they are doing! In fact, if you jump down a few verses in Matthew chapter seven, starting in verse 21, it reads, *“Not everyone who says to Me, ‘Lord, Lord,’ will enter the kingdom of heaven, but only he who does the will of My Father who is in heaven. Many will say to Me on that day, ‘Lord, Lord, did we not prophesy in Your Name, and in Your Name drive out demons and perform many miracles?’ Then I will tell them plainly, ‘I never knew you. Away from Me, you evildoers!’”*

This is the problem the Pharisees had – they had convinced themselves they were right before God – that is, righteous – because of the things they did. They were quick to point out the problems other people had, the sins of everyone else, but they would never point their fingers at themselves. But, the old saying goes, when you point your finger at someone, you have three point back at you! Isaiah 5:20 says, *Woe to those who call evil good and good evil, who put darkness for light and light for darkness!*

Let’s move on to the grapes and figs, and then we’ll wrap this all up with some application. *Do people pick grapes from thornbushes, or figs from thistles? Likewise every good tree bears good fruit, but a bad tree bears bad fruit. A good tree cannot bear bad fruit, and a bad tree cannot bear good fruit. Every tree that does not bear good fruit is cut down and thrown into the fire. Thus, by their fruit you will recognize them.*

In that area, there is actually a thorn bush, called the Buckthorn, which produces berries that resemble grapes. To take a glance at the plant without actually taking the time to examine it, you might think you were looking at a grape vine. The same is true of a certain type of thistle that produces flowers that resemble figs. Look at either of these plants from a bit of a distance, you might think they were the real thing. Reach out to pick the counterfeit things, you end up caught in a thorny bramble or a bush of thistles that would not only hold you fast but cut you deep.

Again, how could someone get caught up in something like that? Because they didn’t examine it closely enough; they didn’t examine the fruit. Don’t believe it’s possible? Just turn on the TV and watch some of the popular preachers of the day. Listen to what they are saying, and watch the people in the audiences just eat it up. Sit around the coffee shop or in just about any place and listen to what joe-average says and hear the venom and bitterness in his or her voice, and yet notice the people gathered around them nodding their approval and agreement.

So, what’s the application for us today? Charles Stanley is a widely know pastor in Christian circles and has a daily on-line devotion. This is a “God-thing”, because as I sat down to write this message, his devotion arrived in my in-box. I’d like to read a portion of it to you:

“Almost every sermon I preach contains an exhortation to read the Bible daily and to carry it to church on Sunday. I repeat that advice because scriptural knowledge is vitally important. You cannot adequately defend the faith unless you know God’s Word.

“False teachers will use faulty interpretation and half-truths to lure believers to their way of thinking. The prime targets are Christians with no firsthand knowledge of Scripture--men and woman who listen to sermons but do not study for themselves. According to Jesus' explanation of His seed parable, these are people without roots (Luke 8:13). In contrast, the seeds in good soil hold fast to the Word (v. 15). A believer's roots must be sunk so deeply into Scripture that no false ideology can squeeze through. In spite of the world's claims, truth is not a matter of interpretation.

“Believers have a responsibility to guard against error. In fact, John went so far as to encourage his flock to shut out anyone who preached a message different from Christ's (2 John 10). He saw no need to greet deceitful teachers...

“Deception will reach your ears from many sources. You must be able to identify falsehood quickly to prevent error from taking root and strangling your growing faith. Study biblical principles so that you can confidently proclaim, ‘I know the truth because I have read it for myself.’”

You see, when we get caught up in the false teachings, or the thorns and thistles of false teaching, getting free of them is always painful, and always leaves scars.

Some of us here today have scars. Scars from teachings we were given in the past that were not true and we're struggling with now. Scars from things people have said to us that lead us away from Christ to their false words and interpretations. Scars from things said about us, to us, around us, that we did not combat with the Word of God. Scars because, if we're honest with ourselves, we wandered too deeply, and got caught up into, the false words of too many people, and agreed with it because we didn't know any better... because we didn't utilize the weapon of God's Word we have at our disposal. Again, all this does not just relate to people who are pastors and teachers. This relates to *anyone* who claims to speak for God or offer an insight into God's heart or the workings of the Kingdom of God.

Do you remember our sermon series last year, “The Spirit's Healing for Emotional Wounds”? We talked a lot about Ephesians 6: 10-18, “*Finally, be strong in the Lord and in His mighty power. Put on the full armor of God so that you can take your stand against the devil's schemes. For our struggle is not against flesh and blood, but against the rulers, against the authorities, against the powers of this dark world and against the spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly realms. Therefore put on the full armor of God, so that when the day of evil comes, you may be able to stand your ground, and after you have done everything, to stand. Stand firm then, with the belt of truth buckled around your waist, with the breastplate of righteousness in place, and with your feet fitted with the readiness that comes from the gospel of peace. In addition to all this, take up the shield of faith, with which you can extinguish all the flaming arrows of the evil one. Take the helmet of salvation and the sword of the Spirit, which is the word of God. And pray*”

in the Spirit on all occasions with all kinds of prayers and requests.” And we asked the question over and over again, “How big is your Sword?”

The Sword of the truth of God’s Word kills the wolves in sheep’s clothing. It cuts through the thorn bushes and the thistles. In fact, note what Jesus said about those in our verses from Matthew. They will be “*cut down and thrown into the fire.*” We have the Sword of the Spirit available to us. Are we using it? How big is our Sword?

But you have to use the whole Sword, not just a portion of it. Anybody can take a portion of scripture and twist it to say what they want it to. We won’t be very effective with just the hilt of the Sword – we need the whole blade! We need the whole council of God in His word from Genesis to Revelation!

It’s an earthly story about wolves and sheep, grapes and thorns, figs and thistles, with a Heavenly Meaning about attacks on the Kingdom of God and the need to remain rooted in God’s Word to recognize the fruit and the dangers of what comes at us that in the end will only take us away from Jesus.

Will you please pray with me?

Lord Jesus, You are the One who conquered the enemy, and the One who sent Your Holy Spirit to us to give us faith, and strengthen us in our journey. Be with us and give us discernment to recognize the wolves and understand the false words, the false insights and false teachings of those who, even though they may sincerely believe what they are saying, are sincerely wrong.

Make each one of us like the Bereans in the book of Acts who didn’t just listen to what the Apostles and Christian believers said, but went back to scripture and diligently searched Your Word to make sure they were not being approached by wolves or getting tangled in thorns. Give us courage to sharpen our Swords, and the wisdom to wield them for Your glory.

Amen.