

Earthy Wisdom: Jesus' Parables of Creation
Part 4: Parable of the Weeds and Net

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Scripture: Matthew 13:24-30, 47-52

On a stormy spring morning in 1987, I was waiting impatiently to board a small aircraft in King Cove, Alaska. I had been working as a Quality Assurance manager aboard a seafood processing ship named the Blue Wave, and we had just pulled into this tiny fishing village at the far tip of the Aleutian Peninsula after spending 3 months at sea in order to change gear for the upcoming herring and salmon fisheries. Since we had some down time, my employer had graciously agreed to fly me to Anchorage for some much-needed R & R before spending the next 3 months aboard ship.

What I could not have known at the time is that I would meet my future wife on the Bering Sea during that upcoming herring season, where she was also working as a Quality Assurance Manager, but for a competing company. What I also could not have known is that I almost wouldn't make it to the Bering Sea at all – or even to Anchorage that morning – due to something that was about to happen that would change my life from that day forward.

The weather had turned nasty overnight, and the gate agent announced that they could take just eleven of the twenty-one of us who were set to leave. Apparently, they needed to lighten the load. My heart sank. Bad weather can prevent flights from entering or leaving King Cove weeks at a time. There was no way that I was going to miss that flight and spend my “vacation” in the cold rain in the middle of nowhere. So, I made sure that I was one of the “lucky 11” who got onboard that plane!

As we made our way down the dirt runway – a runway that ends in a sheer cliff over the ocean – the wind was blowing so hard that the plane was struggling to lift more than a few feet off the ground. We kept jerking up and down so hard that someone who had failed to fasten their seatbelt flew out of their seat and hit their head on the roof of the plane! By the time we were approaching the runway's end, we were no more than ten or twenty in the air.

Moments after clearing the runway and starting our ascent over the ocean, the plane was suddenly struck by a vertical windshear bearing down so hard that it sent us plummeting toward the churning waves. Bells and beepers sounded as the pilots frantically tried to regain control. People around me were gasping and gulping.

“Are we going to crash?” I asked myself. Looking out the window at the rapidly approaching ocean, I concluded, “I'm pretty sure we're going to crash.”

A moment later, I revised my conclusion: “We're definitely going to crash. We're going to die! *I'm* going to die!”

What happened next defies all logic.

Once my mind left the territory of “pretty sure” we were going to crash and arrived at 100% certainty, I had one of those experiences that people talk about where one’s entire life flashes before their eyes. I didn’t literally see images of my life, so much as felt it all in a matter of seconds. It was like each and every moment of my life had been recorded on a some sort of ethereal hard drive and the information on that drive had instantly been downloaded into my conscious awareness.

When this happened, a feeling of profound peace and gratitude washed over me. For, experiencing the entirety of my life all at once, it became abundantly clear that I had experienced many more blessings than curses in this life. I had received such an abundance of gifts compared to what I thought I lacked, that the balance was tipped firmly on the “gain” side. So much so that I realized that, already at age 23, I had lived more than long enough to make the journey worth it. And even if I lived to a ripe old age, I wouldn’t have nearly enough time to give proper thanks for the blessings I’d already received, let alone new ones.

“Okay. I get it,” I said to as much to myself as to God. “I’ve had a good run. Thank you. Thank you. I’m ready.”

Just then, the plane caught an edge and the pilots managed to wrestle the nose up just moments before we slammed into the ocean.

No one cheered. No one said one word, as far as I recall. We had all come so close to death that were too caught up within ourselves to react outwardly.

Needless to say, I lost my fear of death that day. I also lost all fear of flying. After all, I figure that if I ever do go down in a plane – or die in any way with just a few moments notice – I will once again experience my life set before me, and see how blessed I have been. I don’t expect to be afraid. I expect to be giving thanks. And deeply at peace.

I strongly suspect that my experience is indicative of how a great many people feel just moments before their death. They truly do “rest in peace.” It’s those of us left behind who struggle with the un-rest.

Since that day in 1987, I have experienced some significant struggles in my life. I may be a cisgender, straight, white male, who grew up in a middle-class home in America, and I certainly have enjoyed many of privileges and advantages that come with my genetic and social profile, yet none of these advantages have exempted me from experiencing enough of life’s darker, more tragic side that I could literally write a book about life in the Dark Wood.

Yet, my book is called “*Gifts of the Dark Wood*” for a reason. Each time I have found myself in a low, dark space, my experience on the plane has reminded me that the darkness I am seeing is an illusion. I know that if my whole life were once again set before me, and I saw Reality as clearly as I did in 1987, the blessings of life would so far surpass its curses

that I would be singing praises, not wallowing in sorrow. And so, I have sought always to find the pony inside whatever enormous pile of horse manure has been set before me.

You may wonder why I am telling you this story on a morning when I'm supposed to be preaching on Jesus's parables of weeds and nets. I'm telling you this story because, when Jesus talks about how God eventually sorts out the wheat and the weeds, and the good fish from the bad – incinerating the weeds and throwing out the bad – I believe that this is exactly what happened when my whole life flashed before me on that plane. All I had in my lap once the plane stopped plummeting was wheat and fish.

Just as it became abundantly clear that my blessings far outweighed my curses, what also became clear, in hindsight, is how much time I had wasted in my life obsessing over all the things I felt I lacked, and all the ways I felt I had been given the short end of life's stick. I had been harboring no small amount of anger and resentment toward other people, and to life itself, for failing in my perception to measure up to my expectations. To be perfectly frank, I even had felt resentment toward God for not protecting me from certain hurts, and for not blessing me more.

With the benefit of hindsight after that experience, it seemed completely crazy to feel resentment or disappointment for what life had served me. Yet, before the experience on the plane, I had felt perfectly justified and rational to be a bit disappointed or resentful toward life and God. I thought I had been seeing Reality objectively. Yet Reality was quite different than I supposed. Seen in this light, all those negative thoughts, and all those built up disappointments and resentments, were like so much bad fish and weeds that were suddenly incinerated when my life flashed before my eyes and I was overwhelmed with gratitude. I resolved then and there to be more grateful even during my deepest struggles.

To me, this is exactly how God's judgment works. The scriptures tell us that God is love. Therefore, one cannot experience God's judgment as something separate from God's love. This is Reality. Expecting God's judgment without love is Illusion. Really, *delusion*. Just as expecting God's love without judgment – that is, receiving a clearer view of God's loving Reality that lifts our vision of life and our response to it – is just as delusional.

When it comes down to it, we only become aware of how stingy we are when we experience generosity. We become aware of how selfish we are when we experience selflessness. We become aware of how tightly we hold on to grudges and resentments when we experience grace and forgiveness. Again, love works hand-in-hand with judgment, and judgment with love.

In this respect, we should all hunger and thirst not only for God's love, but for God's judgment. They are one and the same. This is because God wants us to be light on our feet and free dance and be joyful in this life, and the next. We can't dance if we're carrying a thousand pounds of anger, resentment, envy, or fear on your backs. So, we need both God's love and God's judgment to help us release our grip on it all.

I strongly suspect that when each of us dies, we will face our own personal Day of Judgment. It may involve some weeping and gnashing of teeth, but only in so far as we see clearly how much time we have wasted wallowing in self-pity, in judgment of ourselves and

others, and in resentment toward other people, toward life itself, and even toward God. Yet, through our tears, we will see clearly that this great Love and Grace that we have failed to see in its fullness, much less respond to, has not suddenly shut off like a spigot at our death. Rather, we will perceive its flow – in, through, and around us – more clearly than ever. On that Day we will gladly walk into our inner field to pull up every weed toss it into the fire. We will joyfully sort through every fish in our baskets and throw the smelly, rotten ones into the trash.

Speaking of incineration and trash, did you know that nearly every time the word “hell” comes out of Jesus’s lips in the Gospels, he is not talking about a place of eternal damnation and torture, but a literal trash pit where garbage is incinerated?

The word translators render as “hell” is “Gehenna,” which is short for the Hebrew “*Gey Hinnom*,” which means “Valley of Hinnom” was a literal place south of Jerusalem just outside the city walls. Participants on the Holy Land Pilgrimage in January will see Gehenna with their own eyes. It’s no longer a garbage dump, but it had been one for centuries even in Jesus’s day.

Gehenna has a curious history that’s worth exploring for a moment, since it is so misunderstood. As we’ll see, it is not only misunderstood, but Christian clergy who know its history yet continue to speak of hell as a place of eternal torture for those who displease God are, so far as I am concerned, committing a form of Christian terrorism. I don’t say this lightly! Nor do I expect you to agree with me unless you know something of its history, too.

Many centuries before Jesus, the Valley of Hinnom was a place where worshippers of a certain god named Molech performed horrific ritual sacrifices which they believed would appease Molech’s wrath for their sins and return blessing to the land. According to a number of passages in the Bible, what worshippers sacrificed in the fires of Molech’s altar were children! (Lev. 18:21; 20:2-5; 2 Kings 23:3-10) This practice was so abhorrent to the ancient Israelites that the book of Leviticus calls for anyone who sacrifices their child to Molech, whether they be an Israelite or non-Israelite, to be stoned to death.

According to 1 Kings 23:10, right around the beginning of the 6th C BCE, King Josiah finally was able to put an end to this practice once and for all by turning the Valley of Hinnom into the city dump. As medieval Jewish scholar, Rabbi David Kimhi, writes, Gehenna henceforth became “a place of filth and dirt in which the fires were always burning to consume the filth and bones.” By burning garbage there in this way, the altar of Molech was perpetually defiled and rendered useless as a place of sacrifice by his worshippers.

Isn’t it ironic – and tragic – that a place where the Jewish people perpetually burned trash in order to prevent God’s children from ever again being burnt with fire was later, in Christian imagination, turned into a place where the God of Jesus would burn God’s children in fire – and keep burning them for eternity specifically to cause them pain? Compared to the Christian god, Molech seems downright kind and gentle!

Yet this is the god whom Christians accept as their own. This is the god who, even if certain Christians do not accept this version of God, they remain silent while other Christians proclaim such a god in Jesus's name to the world.

Not that you asked me, but if you did, I would tell you that a god who eternally burns his or her own creations in fire, specifically for the purpose of creating pain, with no hope of ever leaving it, is not the God of Jesus. This is Satan.

Are you sorry you asked? If you find my thinking unorthodox on this point, let's consider orthodoxy for a moment. According to orthodox Christian faith, is Satan God's helper or God's adversary? Does Satan oppose God's will, or affirm it? Of course, the answers are obvious. The word Satan literally means "adversary".

Now, according to orthodox Christianity, is the God of Jesus a loving God, or is God really Satan in disguise? Again, the answers are obvious. While it is popular among some new age spiritualities to claim that God and Satan are one, and Good and Evil are the same, such notions are completely unorthodox in Christianity.

Yet, if God casts people into hell, and God is the one who insists on keeping them there for eternity, then God and Satan really are one, for Satan is perfectly performing God's will by locking people in hell, and Satan is serving God perfectly by tending hell's fires.

No, according to Jesus, hell is nothing more – or less – than a spiritual garbage dump whose eternal flame burns away that which is useless or impure and leaves behind that which is godly. In this respect, the fires of Gehenna do exactly what prophets Isaiah and Malachi always said God's fire does. God's fire is the refiner's fire, burning away the dross so that only the precious silver remains. The fire of God does what John the Baptist always said it does: it burns away the chaff, leaving the nourishing wheat behind to feed the world. The fire of God also does what Luke says it did on the day of Pentecost when "tongues of fire" are said to have rested upon the disciples: God's fire of love and judgment makes us so incredibly happy that people observing us might assume we are drunk.

As we say at the end of every worship service on Sunday, "May the fire of God's *blessing* burn brightly upon you, and within you, and through you now and always. Amen."