

By Deb Richardson-Moore

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Matthew 13: 24-30; 36-43

Prayer: Dear Lord, Please go with us into our service, and allow us to hear a word from you. In Jesus' name we pray, Amen.

The Sung Parable, Part II

If I ever get a chance to meet Jimmy Buffett, I will ask him: *Did you ever pay the Mini Mart back?*

Before he moved to Margaritaville, before he became King of the Parrotheads, Jimmy Buffett was a country-folk singer. He once wrote a song called "The Peanut Butter Conspiracy." It may be the world's only song about shoplifting.

It's a song about how Jimmy and his guitar-picking friends survived their lean years by stealing from the corner grocery.

Who's gonna steal the peanut butter

I'll get the can of sardines

Runnin' up and down the aisle of the Mini Mart

Stickin' food in our jeans

We never took more than we could eat

There was plenty left on the rack

We all swore if we ever got rich

We would pay the Mini Mart back.

It's an entire story of larceny told in under four minutes.

Back in October, I talked about Jesus as a writer. In the gospels of Matthew, Mark and Luke, he spoke and taught almost exclusively in parables.

That is, he composed fictional settings and characters and storylines just like modern writers do. But the truth is, those parables don't relate to our novels or even our short stories so much as they relate to another writing form. A form can that encapsulate an entire story in three or four minutes.

And that form is ... the song.

Modern songwriters from John Prine to Dolly Parton to Kris Kristofferson to Lucinda Williams to Leonard Cohen to Billie Holiday to Townes Van Zandt to Bob Marley can tell an entire story in a very short form. Like a parable.

Four years ago, Taylor helped me deliver a sermon by playing two of those modern storytelling songs. Today, we're going to present *The Sung Parable, Part II*.

Country songs may be the best at storytelling, start to finish. Blake Shelton has one called *Ol' Red* about a top-notch tracking dog at a prison farm. The singer gets himself assigned to look after Ol' Red and exercise him every night.

And the warden sang

Come on somebody

Why don't you run

Ol' Red's itchin' to have a little fun

Get my lantern

Get my gun

Red'll have you treed before the mornin' comes.

But the singer is wily. He gets his cousin to deliver a pretty little blue tick hound nearby. And every night when he's supposed to be exercising Ol' Red, he takes the dog to see the female hound.

As he's planning his escape, he holds Ol' Red back from visiting for three nights. Then he breaks out of prison, headed north -- knowing Ol' Red will head south to that blue tick hound.

It is a perfectly encapsulated and complete story, told in a parable's worth of words.

But if you bounce around the Internet a bit, you'll run into what one site calls the greatest storytelling song ever told. It was made popular by Johnny Cash, and it just so happened I'd seen Taylor perform it when we visited Warsaw.

Taylor? (*He plays A Boy Named Sue.*)

I'm betting this is the only church in America where you'll hear that song this morning.

We speak of parables that can be held up to the light like prisms – prisms that can reflect many meanings, many truths. It is seldom that they offer only one black and white lesson.

They can even pose unanswered questions. For instance, in the parable of the unjust steward, why did the master commend his cheating manager?

In the parable of the workers in the vineyard, was it fair that all the laborers received equal pay?

And in the parable of the rich man and Lazarus, what are we to make of the conversation taking place between characters in heaven and hell?

Well, songs, too, can leave us with unanswered questions. Who's so vain, Carly Simon?

Who's the jester, Don McLean?

Bobbie Gentry, What did Billy Joe McAllister throw off the Tallahatchie Bridge?

And Jimmy, did you pay the Mini Mart back?

Some parables are so well known that we have only to say a touchstone word or two, and the whole story comes flooding back. The Good Samaritan. Throwing pearls before swine. Sowing seeds on fertile ground.

Some songs are so well known, we have only to hear a few bars to conjure up a movie or TV series. Feel free to call out when you know it.

(Taylor plays theme song from James Bond movies.)

(Theme from *Pulp Fiction*.)

(Theme from *Peter Gunn*.)

The theologian Paul Tillich once said that because we moderns don't do so well at talking about the gospel, it is left to our artists. Artists like John Prine, who wrote about the addiction of a returning war vet.

There's a hole in Daddy's arm where the money goes.

Artists like Woody Guthrie, who sang of the plight of the migrant.

All along your green valley, I'll work 'til I die.

Artists like Guy Clark, who wrote about our ultimate human loss.

When Guy Clark was a young boy, he spent a lot of time with his grandmother's boyfriend, a driller of oil wells. He idolized the man and followed him around like a sidekick, imagining their lives "like some old Western movie."

But as Guy Clark grew to manhood, the older man aged and died, like every other human who has ever lived.

You may have heard this song performed by Jerry Jeff Walker or the Highwaymen.

Taylor? (He plays *Desperados Waiting for a Train*.)

To me he's one of the heroes of this country
So why's he all dressed up like them old men?

Our ministry here has been very much informed by what a homeless man once said to me. You've heard me repeat it 100 times.

“Pastor, do you know the worst thing about being homeless? It's not being cold or wet or hungry. The worst thing about being homeless ... is being looked right through.”

That's what John Prine's song about an addicted vet is about.

That's what Woody Guthrie's song about invisible migrants is about.

That's what *Desperados Waiting for a Train* is about.

These modern-day parables, these sung parables, are about looking right through people because they are addicted. Because they do our dirty jobs. Because they are old.

Our job as Christians is to look, to see, to include, to love.

Now as far as I know, Jesus didn't sing his parables. But he sure told a ton of them. The gospel writers Matthew, Mark and Luke show him telling these

parables consistently and almost exclusively. Stories about people building barns and sowing seeds and attending weddings. Stories about kings and rich men and rascals.

Here's one of my favorites. If you'd like to read along, it's found in **Matthew 13: 24-30.**

24 He put before them another parable: 'The kingdom of heaven may be compared to someone who sowed good seed in his field; ²⁵but while everybody was asleep, an enemy came and sowed weeds among the wheat, and then went away. ²⁶So when the plants came up and bore grain, then the weeds appeared as well.

²⁷And 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?"

²⁸He answered, "An enemy has done this."

The slaves said to him, "Then do you want us to go and gather them?"

²⁹But he replied, “No; for in gathering the weeds you would uproot the wheat along with them. ³⁰Let both of them grow together until the harvest; and at harvest time I will tell the reapers, Collect the weeds first and bind them in bundles to be burned, but gather the wheat into my barn.” ’

The word parable actually means “to lay alongside” or “to place beside.” In the parable, Jesus compared one thing to another, a familiar thing to an unknown thing.

He told these largely agricultural stories to inform his listeners of a parallel truth, a larger truth. And a truth he talked about frequently was the kingdom of God, or as Matthew called it, the kingdom of heaven.

In first-century Palestine, there was a weed called darnel that looked almost identical to wheat. You couldn’t tell which was which until harvest time. So trying to pull up the weeds without destroying some of the wheat was almost impossible.

Yet, that was what farmers tried to do. For by getting out those choking weeds, the wheat left behind could thrive more easily. The entire crop of wheat would be the better for it, stronger, healthier.

But this kingdom farmer knows that to pull up the weeds endangers some individual wheat plants. So he chooses to let the plants exist side by side. They will be dealt with at reaping time.

Until then, the two will live side by side.

Until then, the children of the kingdom and the children of the evil one will live side by side.

While I do not often proclaim categorically what a particular parable means, I'm pretty sure about this one. For a few verses later on, the disciples ask Jesus to explain it. And he tells them that the wheat are good people, the weeds are evil ones.

And we are not the ones to declare the difference. Because we are bad to get it wrong.

In the days of the Civil Rights Movement, many Southern pastors and deacons decided that black people, even black Christians, were weeds – unworthy of sharing a field with the wheat. Fifty-five years later, I think

everyone agrees that was a dark day in our history.

But have we done much more than substitute one group of weeds for another?

Who are our weeds? *Who are our weeds?*

Whoever we decide isn't thinking or believing or behaving according to our standards.

But the fact is, we don't always know. We might think someone is a drug addict when, in fact, he is mentally disabled.

We might think someone is choosing not to participate in church when, in fact, she's paralyzed by social phobias.

Franklin Graham may think we are driven by demonic forces when, in fact, we simply disagree with him on the character of our president.

At various times in our history, our weeds have been native Americans, Japanese, Irish, African, Chinese. They have been women, gays, immigrants, former prisoners.

It is a constantly changing list. That is exactly why *we* do not decide who is wheat and who is weed.

In the kingdom of heaven – *even that part of the kingdom that's already*

right here among us – we do not decide who is wheat and who is weed.

Even if our weeds are truly children of the evil one, where better for them to be than in the house of God?

In this kingdom parable, we get a picture of a wide and inclusive and invitational time on earth, followed by a Judgment Day of divine decisiveness.

There's not a thing we can do about that day -- about how God deals with good and evil. Whether God gathers the wheat and burns the weeds is entirely God's decision. That's simply not our call.

But we need to note the part of the story that represents our time here. According to Jesus' parable, the children of God will live side by side with children of the enemy.

No matter how we read that – whether they are evil or lost or criminal or simply not clean enough to suit us – we will share a church and a world with them. And extended periods of time before judgment are represented in Scripture as periods of grace – a time in which a weed might just become ... wheat.

In modern songwriting, not every song has a message for us. Stealing peanut butter, outwitting a bloodhound, naming your boy Sue – some of those are just fun.

But every parable that Jesus spoke has something to say to us, something to tell us about this kingdom of God he portended, something to teach about how to live with each other.

How to live as wheat alongside the weed.

How to make sure we see those folks the best of our songwriters see -- the elderly and the addicted, the poor and the invisible.

Amen.