

Wheat and Chaff
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That stuff about the wheat and the chaff is pretty intense huh?

Winnowing fork.

Unquenchable fire.

There are plenty of things like things like this in scripture that we might be tempted to brush over, or avoid all together.

I will confess that I was tempted to read the baptism of Jesus story this year from one of the other gospels. One that really emphasize that beautiful image of the Spirit descending like a dove, and God's proclamation of Christ's belovedness.

Those are after all the parts of baptism we know well, and we are comfortable with. Those are the parts I emphasize when I baptize people in our church.

I was thinking this week about what it is we bristle at the talk of wheat and chaff, and Jesus sifting through and separating it out. Burning the unusable parts of the wheat, preserving only what is useful for making flour.

I think what stops us short in this image is that we always imagine Jesus as so loving, so forgiving, so tender, and kind.

And we find it hard to believe that he would discard some people or abandon them to fire.

I find it nearly impossible to believe.

It's not the God I have known in my life and in my heart.

Yet as I wrestled with this question I suddenly realized something about this text.

It never says that the wheat and the chaff are different types of people.

In my mind I was reading this story like a straight up allegory. There are people who are like wheat and people who are like chaff, and Jesus is just sorting them out, into granary and fire.

But what if Christ's winnowing fork is not sorting people, rather sifting through the stuff of each of our hearts.

What if each of us have wheat and chaff in our spirits, and Christ is churning through us sifting out what is holy from what is fallen, what is helpful from what hinders us. Separating our egos from our selflessness, separating our prejudice from our love.

That feels like the God I know.

That feels like Jesus.

Not proclaiming one group of people holy and the others doomed.

But piercing the arrogance and self-righteousness of each of our hearts and stirring up what is good.

We often say here that faith is a journey, it is a lifelong seeking for God, and a lifelong process of opening our hearts ever wider to love.

This story gives us another metaphor for living in faith.

It is a lifelong threshing.

It is opening ourselves to God's work of sifting and sorting through the recesses of our heart, constantly helping us to pull out and lift up all that can nourish us and others, well letting the rest fall away.

It's good news.

It means that no one is so bad that our spirit is beyond salvation.

But it also means that none of us are so good that we are free from this deep and challenging soul-work.

So the question is not “Am I wheat or chaff?”

The question is “what is my wheat? what is my chaff?”

What belongs in the granary?

What belongs in the fire?

January is often a time for new year resolutions. It is a time when we make delicious to change habits or behaviors. It can be a good time for a reset.

Here is an invitation for you. Sit with this question. What is my wheat? What is my chaff?

Go deeper than the regular New Years resolution, the one that decides to change a habit or behavior, eat better, exercise more. Those are fine.

Don't think of the thing you can decide to change.

Think of the thing you feel powerless in the face of.

That wound or resentment that rests beneath the others.

The prejudice you cannot shake.

The part of you that feels unworthy or alone.

Because when we each realize that there are things mixed into the best of who we are, that seem to just gum everything up again and again. Where we realize that there are things in our hearts that, even if we cannot remember how they got there, feel like they are holding us back from being who God needs us to be.

Fear. A need for control. A feeling of worthlessness. Feeling beyond overwhelmed.

Then suddenly you might hear these words as the Good News God intends them to be.

“God’s winnowing fork is in hand, to clear the threshing floor and to gather the wheat into the granary. But the chaff God will burn away with fire.”