

# THE STRANGE WAY OF JESUS

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Jesus said, “*Let 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.’*” (Matthew 13:30)

Not long ago I picked up a textbook that one of my sons had flung aside at the end of the most recent semester. The book is an anthology of essays, one of which caught my attention. It’s entitled, *The Ignored Lesson of Anne Frank*.<sup>1</sup> As most of you likely know, Anne Frank was the young Jewish girl who in 1942 went into hiding with her family and some friends to avoid deportation to a Nazi death camp. For two years Anne and seven others huddled in a secret annex behind her father’s office in Amsterdam, and during that time she kept a diary chronicling their life in quarantine. Sadly, it didn’t end well. The Nazis discovered the hiding place and deported all the occupants to various camps. Only Anne’s father, Otto, survived the war.

So what is the ignored lesson of Anne Frank? The author of the essay is Bruno Bettelheim, himself a Jewish survivor of a Nazi concentration camp. Upon his release Bettelheim immigrated to the United States and became a well-known child psychologist and professor at the University of Chicago. In his 1960 essay, Bettelheim argued that Anne died because the Frank family wasn’t fully awake to the dangers around them. Their preparations were faulty, or lacking. Instead of secluding together as a family they should have dispersed. The annex where they hid had only one entrance and exit. They should have created another egress and mapped out an escape route. They should have armed themselves, and devised a plan for Otto Frank to defend a narrow corridor in hopes of buying precious moments for the others to flee.

I confess that Bettelheim’s ideas struck me as shocking, even iconoclastic. How dare anyone criticize the Frank family! I had always assumed they were beyond reproach, and the notion of gentle Anne with a gun was too incongruous to imagine. Bettelheim pressed on to say that such a common reaction to the Frank’s story is precisely why we continue to ignore the lesson. In her diary Anne wrote: *I still believe, in spite of everything, that people are truly good at heart* (7/15/44). Bettelheim contends that the public’s fascination with this one line is our delusion, and disarms us against the evil powers of this world. Given the terrible end she met, the lesson of Anne Frank cannot be that people are truly good at heart. Rather, the lesson we ignore to our peril is that evil stalks the earth and infects the human heart. People of good will must be awake and ready to fight against the enemy.

In today’s reading from the Gospel of Matthew, Jesus tells a parable that is applicable to our day on many levels. A farmer – a small business owner – intends nothing but the best for his wheat field. He and his servants sow the good seed into it, and wait for nature to take her course. But something goes wrong – something that is not a random occurrence, or an act of nature, or a matter of bad luck. No, what goes wrong is deliberate and calculated. Unfortunately, the farmer and his servants didn’t plan properly. They should have built a fence. They should have posted a guard. They were not fully awake to the dangers lurking around the field. So one night, while they are sleeping an invisible enemy comes and sows weeds among the wheat. What is more, the weeds that the enemy sows aren’t just any old weeds. They are copycat weeds that look so much like wheat only late in the growing season can anyone tell the difference.

Finally, as harvest time draws near, the servants working in the field wake up to the reality of the evil that has been done. Taking a page that could have come straight out of Bruno Bettelheim’s essay, they approach the farmer with the only plan that would seem to make sense: Let’s get the weeds out of

the wheat before it's too late. Let's take action while we still can take action. Let's not just stand here, let's do something. Strangely, the farmer says no: No, let's not just do something, let's stand here. Not only do the weeds and wheat look identical, but their roots are hopelessly tangled together. Thus, if you pull up the weeds, you will also pull up the wheat, says the farmer. We'll lose the whole crop, and possibly the field itself, which is just what the enemy wants. So the non-anxious farmer adopts a strategy that puzzles everyone: hopeful and patient waiting. He is completely confident that come harvest time the victory will be theirs. They will separate the weeds from the wheat, burn the weeds for fuel, and grind the wheat for bread.

We can well imagine the farmhands' frustration with the passive strategy of their boss. It is the same frustration that Bruno Bettelheim expressed with any passive attitude toward evil. It may be the same frustration that we feel today. You see, we too face an invisible enemy that thrives when we drop our guard. Of course, I'm talking about the coronavirus, something the world desperately needs for all of us to fight against with all our might. Every Sunday we give thanks for the effort to develop a vaccine. Likewise, we wear masks in crowded or indoor places, we observe the boundaries of social distancing, and we take seriously the threat that is all around us. "Wake up," is what we want to say – and sometimes do say – to anyone who behaves as if nothing is amiss. But as we all know, the pandemic isn't the only evil growing alongside the wheat these days. The death of George Floyd earlier this summer has awakened not only Americans, but people around the world to the seeds of racism sown in the field of the human heart. In recent years a new term has entered the English lexicon to describe the stance of being alert and ready: "wokeness." To be a "woke" person is to be awake to the problem of evil in our midst and unwilling any longer to make peace with it.

In Jesus' parable the farmhands were caught sleeping, but no longer. Now they are awake and eager to eliminate the weeds – to cancel them. In fact, some describe this particular moment in history not as a moment at all, but as a movement. It is a movement to shine the light of truth on those who make or made deals with the devil and cancel these people not matter who they are or were. For example, if the founding fathers of our country were slave owners they should be canceled, or at the very least have an asterisk forever beside their names. Is it iconoclastic? Yes, but no one should be exempt. Interestingly, Bruno Bettelheim today would be numbered among the canceled. Shortly after his death in 1990 it came clear that he misrepresented his credentials. Students stepped forward with complaints of his abuse, and fellow Jews have condemned his views as anti-Semitic. He's done. He's out. Every essay he wrote, every thought he expressed is to be discarded. Of course, the cancel culture goes both ways. It is a movement of both the left and the right. I was grieved to read that in Rochester, NY a statue of Frederick Douglas, the pioneering 19<sup>th</sup> century orator and abolitionist was toppled. Monuments to Ulysses S. Grant, who won the Civil War, and Union soldiers who fought against slavery have been destroyed or defaced. Is it iconoclastic? Of course it is. The smashing of emblems is the highest expression of the cancel culture.

Here is where we might pause and be willing to take a deeper look at the ways of the farmer in the parable of the wheat and the weeds. His counsel was to be patient, and to wait, and to hope. You see, human beings are like wheat fields. We are all a tangle of good and bad impulses, and a great purge of humanity would result eventually in the annihilation of us all. No person, no hero, no institution, no statue, no monument, no martyr, certainly no political party could stand up to the scrutiny. All have sinned and fall short of the glory of God. All are done. All are out. Thus we can see why the farmer tells his eager workers, *"Let 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.'"*

Let both grow together. Would you like to learn a fun fact from the land where Biblical scholars dwell? I've read that the Greek word they translate as *let*, is the same word that often comes through in the New Testament as permit, or suffer, or even forgive. Do you remember what Jesus said about the evil being done to him on the cross? "Father, *forgive* them, for they know not what they do." The first word of Christ from the cross is the same word. *Let* both grow together, is what the farmer says. *Forgive*

both to live together. The strategy that the farmer offers is one of being patient, being hopeful, and living faithfully in full confidence that the God of love is also the God of burning holiness who will sort things out at harvest time. You may have wondered why on a July day pushing 100-degrees outside we are singing the Thanksgiving hymn, “Come, ye thankful people, come.” Well, not only is the hymn a paraphrase of today’s Gospel reading, it also invites us to trust in the ways of God. Be patient. Harvest time comes every year.

What the farmer does in his field, and what Jesus did on his cross, is hard to understand, and even harder to practice in our own lives. Believe me, forgiving my foes is not my natural inclination, and sometimes I think that God made me a preacher to save me from myself. Today Jesus invites us all to be saved. He challenges us to strive to make his way our way when confronted with evil. What does it really look like to have the patience, and the hope, and the longsuffering of the farmer in our life today? Let’s be clear about one thing: the strange way of the farmer is not a call to do nothing, or be passive, or maintain the status quo. Far from it.

To me, the story of a man named Daryl Davis wonderfully illustrates how the patience of the farmer can redeem the whole field. Davis is a black man who was ten-years old when his family moved the largely white suburbs of Boston. Almost immediately he began experiencing hateful comments and snubs from fellow students and others in the community. His parents tried to explain racism, but for the life of him, Davis could not understand how someone who didn’t know him could hate him. The question haunted him, and he began a lifelong pursuit to answer it. What drives people to hate?

Daryl Davis became a musician in Maryland, and at one point was playing in a country band. One night after their set a white man complimented Davis on his piano skills and offered to buy him a drink. The white man commented that he’d never before had a drink with a black man. When Davis asked why not, the man said it was because he belonged to the KKK. Eventually Davis asked the man if he knew Roger Kelly, the Grand Dragon of the Maryland KKK. Consistent with his quest to dig to the roots of hatred, Davis wanted to meet one of its chief proponents. The man warned against it, but made the connection. Strangely, Roger Kelly agreed to meet with Daryl Davis and arrived with a bodyguard. Despite sharply disagreeing with much of what Kelly had to say, Davis hung in and listened. Kelly did the same.

At the end of the conversation the two shook hands and agreed to meet again. Davis invited Kelly to his musical gigs and dinner in his home. Kelly would come and eventually dropped the bodyguard. In time Kelly reciprocated, hosting Davis to dinner at his home, and even to a Klan rally. Davis went, met people, listened, and kept the conversation going. Along the way many of his friends criticized what he was doing, declaring that members of the KKK deserved neither the time nor the respect that Davis was giving them. They should be canceled. But Davis pressed on with patience and in hope. To make a long story short, Roger Kelly and then two other Grand Dragons of the Maryland KKK quit the hateful organization because of their improbable friendship with Daryl Davis. They even surrendered to him their robes and hoods.

What does Daryl Davis say to his well-meaning critics now? “I pull out my robes and hoods and say, ‘look, this is what I’ve done to put a dent in racism. I’ve got robes and hoods hanging in my closet by people who’ve given up that belief because of *my* conversations sitting down to dinner. They gave it up. How many robes and hoods have you collected?”<sup>2</sup>

“*Let both of them grow together until the harvest,*” said Jesus. Behold: the strange way of the farmer, which is the way of Jesus, can disarm – and even disrobe – the Grand Dragons of the KKK. In the sufferings of this present time, it is the lesson that the children of God who are awake to the Spirit of God dare not ignore.

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<sup>1</sup> *The Eloquent Essay*, John Loughery, editor. Persea Books/New York, 2000.

<sup>2</sup> “The Audacity of Talking About Race With the Ku Klux Klan,” Conor Friedersdorf. *The Atlantic*, March 27, 2015.