

Seeds

Whenever I hear Jesus talking about good and bad soil or faithful and unfaithful people or useful and useless servants, well, you probably know with whom, in my heart of hearts, I line **myself** up with.

Of course I'm one of the good guys!

Maybe some of you are like that too.

But I also know folks who, listening to those same stories, because of past traumas or painful childhoods, routinely line themselves up with the bad, the unfaithful, the useless.

There just seems to be this human tendency to keep things simple: one is either a winner or a loser.

We don't like grey.

Or, as President George W. Bush famously said: "I don't do nuance."

Thankfully, Jesus is never so black and white about who we are.

Thankfully, Jesus does nuance!

He knows we are none of us all good or all bad, and he proves that point by the folks who become his closest followers.

It's a motley crew of mixed up, sometimes faithful, oftentimes head scratching, friends.

And yet, Jesus loves them, as he loves us, in all of our complexity, in our mixture of weeds and rocks, of good and lousy soil.

It's not just about individuals.

It plays out across our communities, our countries.

We see it in the battle lines being drawn around the Confederate flag and race and wealth; or wearing a mask during a pandemic, as some claim that their personal liberty trumps the health of their neighbor.

A white couple, lawyers no less, stand on their front porch, in a gated community in Missouri, holding an automatic rifle and a pistol as a peaceful crowd of Black Lives Matter folks walk to the mayor's house, just down the road.

That couple claims to be totally in the right, because they're being "invaded."

Nations are in the same boat.

The Soviet Union, in less than 50 years, took Russia from a poverty stricken agrarian basket case to a modern industrial power.

Yet, while it claimed to be the great liberator of the poor nations of the world, it also brought devastating repression to much of Eastern Europe.

China is similar.

It's an economic miracle, but at what cost in human dignity, freedom and aspiration?

Our nation often claims to be that shining city on the hill, the hope of humanity.

And there is much good we have done, from the vast amounts of humanitarian aid given to less developed countries to, until lately, being a voice for human rights around the world.

Yet we are also the nation that napalmed Viet Nam, that used the atomic bomb not once, but twice, on innocent civilians, and that created a system of repression against Black folks so thorough and effective that both Hitler and the Apartheid government of South Africa adopted it for themselves.

So when we hear Jesus speak of lousy soil and rocks and thorns and finally of good soil, perhaps what we need to hear is that we are each of us, individually and collectively, a mixture of both.

And in recognizing that truth, perhaps we can unclench our fists a bit, dig out the cotton from our ears, and begin to see each other — to see each nation — as that nuanced, complex mix — for when we do — that's when the good soil grows.

Here's what this might look like in an ordinary life.

"The story comes from Lincoln, Nebraska.

One morning, Cantor Michael Weisser and his wife Julie are unpacking boxes in their new home, when the phone rings.

"You'll be sorry you ever moved here, Jew boy," the voice says, and hangs up.

Two days later, the Weissers receive a manila packet in the mail.

"The KKK is watching you, scum," reads the note.

Inside are pictures of Hitler, caricatures of Jews with hooked noses, Black people with gorilla heads, and graphic depictions of dead Black folk and Jews.

The Weissers call the police, who say it looks like the work of Larry Trapp, a "grand dragon" of the Ku Klux Klan.

A Nazi sympathizer, he leads a cadre of skinheads and klansmen responsible for terrorizing Black, Jewish and Asian families in Nebraska and nearby Iowa.

"He's dangerous," the police warn.

"We know he makes explosives."

Although in a wheelchair because of diabetes, 44 year old Trapp is a suspect in the fire bombings of several African- Americans' homes and is responsible for what he calls "Operation Gooks," the burning of the Indochinese Assistance Center in Omaha.

Trapp is planning to blow up the synagogue where Michael Weisser is the spiritual leader.

Trapp lives alone in a drab studio apartment.

On one wall is a large Nazi flag and a huge portrait of Hitler.

Next to these hang his white Klan robe, with its red belt and hood.

He keeps assault rifles, pistols, and shotguns within easy reach for the day when his enemies will burst into his apartment to kill him.

In the rear is a secret bunker he's built for the coming "race wars."

When Trapp launches a white supremacist TV series on a local cable channel—featuring men and women saluting a burning swastika and firing automatic weapons, Michael Weisser is furious.

He calls Trapp's KKK hotline, saying this into the answering machine:

'Larry, do you know the very first laws Hitler passed were against people like you, an amputee, or people with other physical challenges?

You would have been among the first to die under Hitler!

Why do you love the Nazis so much?’

Weisser continues his calls to the machine, until one day, Trapp picks up.

‘What do you want?’ he shouts.

‘I want to talk to you,’ Weisser says.

‘You black?’ Trapp demands.

‘Jewish,’ Weisser replies.

‘Stop harassing me,’ says Trapp, who demands to know why he’s calling.

‘Well,’ says Weisser, remembering advice his wife had given him, ‘I was thinking you might need a hand with something, and I’m wondering if I can help.’

I know you’re in a wheelchair — so maybe I can take you to the grocery store or something.’

Trapp is too stunned to speak.

Then he clears his throat.

‘That’s okay,’ he said, ‘I got that covered.’

Thanks anyway.

But don’t call this number anymore.’

‘I’ll be in touch,’ Weisser replies.

During a later call, Trapp admits he’s ‘rethinking a few things.’

But then he's back on the radio, spewing the same old hate.

Furious, Weisser picks up the phone.

'It's clear to me you're not rethinking anything at all!'

After calling Trapp a liar, Weisser demands an explanation.

In a surprisingly shaky voice, Trapp says: 'I'm sorry I did that.

I've been talking like that all my life.

I can't help it.

I apologize!'

That evening, the cantor leads his congregation in prayer for the grand dragon.

The next evening the phone rings at the Weissers' home.

'I want to get out,' Trapp says, 'but I don't know how.'

The Weissers offer to go over to Trapp's that night — to 'break bread.'

When the Weissers enter the small apartment, Trapp begins to cry as he tugs off his two swastika rings.

Soon, they're all crying.

Then laughing.

Then hugging.

Trapp resigns from all his racist organizations.

He writes apologies to the many people he threatened or abused.

A few months later, Trapp learns he has less than a year to live.

The Weissers invite him to move into their two bedroom, three-children, home.

When his condition declines, Julie quits her job as a nurse to care for him, sometimes caring for him all night long.

Six months later he converts to Judaism.

Three months after that, he dies." Wink, *The Powers that Be*, 172-3, modified.

We are all of us a mixture of the good, the bad and the ugly.

Some times it helps simply to remember that fact.

So that, perhaps, in the remembering, we might be on the lookout for those chances to connect: with one another, with ourselves, and yes, with God.

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