

Matthew 13:24-30, 36-43

One of the worst pop songs ever written, at least from a theological point of view, is the song “Imagine,” by John Lennon of the Beatles. Lennon begins by offering this suggestion: “Imagine there’s no heaven; it’s easy if you try; no hell below us; above us only sky; imagine all the people, living for today.” The song attempts to draw our focus away from any belief in God, heaven and hell, and point us rather, to this world in which we live. “Let’s make a heaven on earth,” is the song’s theme. “Forget about life after death—life, here and now, is all that matters—so let’s create one big peaceful, happy community of people.” Sadly for Lennon, who died shortly thereafter, he now knows that his song was one great big lie.

But ironically, sometimes the church, which knows the truth, attempts to make these song lyrics her own. There are those who attempt to create a utopia—a heaven on earth—within the church. Millennialists wrongly teach that there will be a 1,000-year reign of peace on earth with the second coming of Christ; and as this reign of peace begins, all pagan unbelievers will be cast away, along with Satan and all such evil things. Heaven on earth is what they are preaching.

But even those who are not millennialists can fall into the spell of the song’s lyrics. Have you ever heard a non-church going person give as his excuse, “There are so many hypocrites in the pews!” Just what do they expect—heaven on earth? Even in the church that’s not possible. For the visible church is made up of those who believe and those who pretend to believe. And even the true believers recognize that they are sinners—that’s why we come here on Sundays—to receive the Lord’s forgiveness. If you come to church to find one big happy family, you’re going to be disappointed. For although Christ bids us to love each other, daily we sinners fall short. And if you come to church looking for a feeling of peace and contentment in the air, you may go away somewhat confused. For although Christ is here, who brings us the Father’s Word of peace, so is the devil here, who is constantly stirring up trouble.

But there certainly are those people who expect perfection in the church; and if anyone—pastor or member, says anything to offend them—they go elsewhere, or just stop going to church altogether. They’re looking for external peace in the church; but that simply cannot be found in a world of sinners.

What does Jesus say in the Gospel? “Leave the tares alone...allow both the wheat and the tares to grow together until the harvest.” No “heaven on earth” talk here. In fact, life will more resemble hell on earth at times. Why? Because Satan sows his seeds of wickedness right among the seed of the Kingdom. God’s Word creates wheat—sons of the Kingdom—but the devil’s lies produce tares (weeds) right in the midst of God’s wheat field.

And these tares are interesting critters. As they grow, they look just like wheat. You can’t tell them apart. The darnel, the tare he speaks of here has that deceptive quality about it.

Wheat and tares live in the same communities—often in the same houses. They shop in the same stores. They send their children to the same schools. They say the same Pledge of

Allegiance. Wheat and tares also attend the same churches. They sit together in the same pews.

Do we have both wheat and tares in our pews? I cannot look into the heart and see faith. The wheat have faith, the tares do not. God knows the heart. He knows who has faith and who is just a pretender; one who goes through the motions of worship but their heart is far from Him. All I can do is look at the hands, and the mouth. I cannot see your faith, but I can see your hands folded in prayer. I cannot read your thoughts, but I can hear your confession of Christ. I cannot see your repentant heart, but I can hear the words you say—and based upon that, Christ commands me to forgive your sins.

We know God's heart by His words to us. For His heart contains no deceit. There is no pretense with God. He is no hypocrite. He is what He says, and He says what He is. His heart is full of grace and mercy toward us. God's mouth and God's heart are in agreement; and what is in His heart He gives us by His hand. When your pastor forgives your sins, that is God's mouth speaking to you the very word that is in His heart. When the pastor gives you the body and blood of Christ, that is God's hand feeding you.

Our mouths and hands may lie, but not God's. Our words may not truthfully say what is in our heart. God's Word is His heart. He must be true for He is the Truth. Our hands may be folded in prayer even as our heart is planning some evil. God's hands reveal to us His merciful heart. There is no deceit hidden there. His hands can only be holy as He Himself is holy.

And from His words He creates wheat by His gracious hands. Tares He will judge; wheat He gathers to Himself. But this dividing of wheat and tares will not take place until the Last Day. Then, we will be in heaven—not a "heaven on earth," but the "new heaven and the new earth" which He will create for His precious wheat. For this present earth will be destroyed. The tares—those not of faith—will be condemned to hell. But God's wheat—those in Christ—He will gather up. Until then, we all—tares and wheat—live together, work together, play together, and yes, worship together.

The Roman Catholic inquisition of the Middle Ages attempted to divide the wheat and tares here and now. Many whom the church judged as tares were put to death—many thousands were—for their refusal to accept the church's doctrine. The church was trying to create heaven on earth by removing and discarding the tares.

But Jesus says: No! Let them grow up together, that the wheat may not be harmed. This does not mean that we welcome with open arms those who are living openly wicked lives. We do not receive them as members, and we do not admit them to the Lord's Table. But we don't kill them. We can preach God's Word to them. We can preach repentance that leads to forgiveness. But if they insist on being tares, we let them be tares. "Shake off the dust of your sandals at them," says Christ, "as a warning to them."

As long as this world stands there will be wheat and there will be tares. Satan will not stop his incessant contaminating of God's wheat field until time is no more. And his tares will always persecute God's wheat. The true church of Christ has always been, and always will be, under attack—both from tares without, and from tares within. Are we here, at Christ Lutheran, under attack? Absolutely...for if we were not, we would not be His church. If

we had only perfect peace from the pulpit to the pews, we would cease to be the true church. There is no wheat field that is free from tares. On this earth, Christ's wheat will always have tares mixed in, and with the tares, troubles that Satan's sowing causes.

Therefore, do not be faint-hearted and easily discouraged. This is no time to take the easy path. We are the Church Militant, after all—we are in the fight. The fight is out there in the world; it's within our beloved synod; and it's within our very midst. But take heart. The fight will come to an end. The tares will not be with us forever. We look forward to an eternity of peace and joy with Christ.

And if you, my friend, are concerned about which one you are—wheat or tare—then you are in the right place. For God turns tares into wheat by His Gospel. And His Gospel is that Christ died for you no matter if you are a tare or wheat. God loves tares and wheat alike. He will never stop working, by His Word and Spirit, upon the hearts of tares. And that's good for us to know, because very often it's difficult to tell the wheat from the tares, because of our lack of faith; because of how we live.

God is merciful. He forgives you for living as a tare. He forgives your lack of faith. And by His Word of forgiveness He sows you as wheat in His field. Tares do not look to their baptism for the assurance that they are God's dear children. Tares do not desire the Word of forgiveness. Tares do not hunger for Christ's body and blood.

Dear precious wheat—and I say this with joy over you—your Savior loves you; He is here for you in water and Word, bread and wine. We cannot create a heaven on earth, but that's okay, because Jesus will bring you, His wheat, from earth to heaven. Amen.