

Luke 3:15-22

If you were raised on a farm (especially if it was years ago), you not only know the expression, “separating the wheat from the chaff,” you may have done it--throwing the wheat up in the air with a winnowing fork, the wind carrying the chaff away, but the wheat falling back down to the threshing floor. Our text for today begins with this picture. The focus for this Sunday is the Baptism of our Lord, but we begin with wheat and chaff.

Everyone is one or the other. Everyone in the world, everyone in our country, in our community, everyone in here today is either wheat or chaff. Since the chaff is eventually burned with the “unquenchable fire of hell,” all of us, most certainly, want to be wheat. The wheat is gathered into God’s eternal barn of heaven.

Now chaff is lighter than wheat. That’s why farmers used the wind to separate it from the wheat. The chaff blows with the wind, the wheat does not. People are like this as well. Those who are chaff are carried away, it says in Ephesians, “*By every wind of doctrine.*” The wheat are rooted within the church, but not the chaff. The wheat do not blow with the wind, but they know the truth of Jesus Christ and stand steadfast in His Word.

Our text presents to us, after speaking of wheat and chaff, a strong example of each...John the Baptist and Herod. John was God’s wheat; Herod was chaff. John was not carried through life by the whims of his flesh. He stood in the Word of God. He preached that Word. He baptized according to that Word. He pointed sinners to the Word that came in the flesh, Jesus Christ. Herod was just the opposite. He allowed his sinful passions to carry him through life. He was married, but when he saw Herodias, the wife of his half-brother, Phillip, he stole her away from him. Wanting to be popular with the people, he did not what was right, but he ruled to be liked. Herod was not the ruthless man his father, Herod the Great had been, but he was a weak man....weak, like chaff, so that the direction the wind blew is the way Herod went.

Scripture gives us examples of wheat and chaff, and we also have examples in our everyday life. All of us know those who are rooted in Christ, who live as wheat, and we know those who are like chaff. They are not encumbered with the structures in life the wheat are encumbered with. Chaff do what they want to do on Sunday mornings. Chaff do not begin and end each day with prayer and the Word of God. Chaff may outwardly obey certain commandments of God, but not for the same reason the wheat do. Wheat love the Lord and desire, therefore, to obey His Word. Chaff obey to avoid punishments and to receive rewards. Wheat and chaff both have sinful hearts, but the wheat desire to confess their sin to God and live, not in sin, but in grace. The chaff do not. And something else...the chaff persecutes the wheat. Herod put John in prison...not because he was a criminal, but because John condemned the sins of Herod. He reproved him for his adultery with Herodias. As a result Herodias hated John, and Herod, that weak chaff, threw John into the dungeon.

Chaff has always persecuted God’s wheat ever since Cain killed Abel. And the thing is, the wheat know that they deserve such persecutions. Abel was a sinner and so he deserved to die, just not at the hand of his brother, Cain. John the Baptist was not a man without sin, and so he certainly deserved a prison cell, but not for the reason Herod put him there. I have had persecutors attack me as a pastor, and they are right. I am not without blame. The devil knows how to accuse God’s wheat. He knows my weak areas and he knows yours. Our secret sins he knows. He knows how to accuse us and make it hurt. God’s wheat are not people who live without troubled consciences. Wheat know they have offended God with their sinful lives, and the chaff are only too happy to point this out to them.

Now consider the farmer when he is about to separate the wheat from the chaff. He looks for a dry day. The chaff must be dry in order to blow away in the wind. If the chaff is wet, the process does not work. And so John is sent to baptize. God sends him to baptize His wheat, and this is why the wheat do not blow away with the chaff--the wheat of God are wet with the waters of baptism. The chaff are not rooted in Christ. They are not baptized into Him. The dry chaff blows away with the wind when God separates His wheat from the chaff.

Now with all this talk about our baptism into Christ, you may be wondering if the theme for today is the baptism of our Lord, or if the theme is our baptism into Christ. We cannot separate them. They belong together. Jesus was baptized, not for Himself, but for you. He was baptized so that as the heavens were opened to Him in His baptism, so they are opened for you in your baptism. Jesus was baptized so that as the Holy Spirit came down on Him, that same Spirit comes to you in your baptism to raise you from death to life. Jesus was baptized so that the Father's voice that declared Jesus His beloved Son, in your baptism declares you to be His beloved child. If Jesus had not been baptized, then your baptism would have no meaning whatsoever. But because Jesus was baptized for you, your baptism is a baptism into Him. You can say, and should say every day, "I am baptized into Christ!"

And so when you, my fellow sinful wheat, lay your head down upon your pillow at night and bemoan the fact that you lived more like chaff than like wheat that day, say these words, "I am baptized into Christ!" When your sinful flesh gets the better of you and you fall from grace, do not despair, but come with your sorrowful heart here to God's house of mercy and say, "I am baptized into Christ!" When your life is blown by the howling winds of sin so that you no longer feel that you are rooted in Christ, no longer standing steadfast in His Word, remember that the sign of His cross was made upon you and say with confidence, "I am baptized into Christ!"

God did not bring you to His Son, Jesus, in the waters of baptism for you to be blown away with the chaff. He is your God no matter how often you have disobeyed Him. He sent Jesus to become chaff for you, in your place. Jesus hung on the cross and endured the unquenchable fire of hell so that you need never go there. You are still wet with the waters of your baptism even if that day took place decades ago. You are still God's forgiven child. You are still beloved to Him. This does not mean that you can go out and sin for all you're worth. Do not reject Christ by living in sin. Do not walk away from your baptism by refusing to repent. This is how the chaff live. But you, because you are God's wheat, you have a God who loves you. You have a God who will help you to live the risen life in Jesus. You have a God who will not forsake you when you sin, but forgives you for Jesus' sake. And why? Why all this? Because (say it with me) "I am baptized into Christ!" Amen.