

SOWING SEEDS IN BELLOW'S "SEIZE THE DAY"

A Sermon by Dean Scotty McLennan

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For a second week in a row in our Sunday lectionary readings, we're given a gospel lesson from Matthewⁱ that has Jesus teaching through a parable, describing the kingdom of God in relation to sowing seeds. Last week four kinds of people were described in terms of their receptivity to the news of the imminent coming of the kingdom -- compared to four kinds of soil upon which seeds are sown.ⁱⁱ This week's parable describes the contrast between receptive people and sinful deniers of God's kingdom by a comparison to good seed growing up next to weeds in a field. The farm owner asks his servants to let the weeds grow until harvest time, though, because their roots are intertwined with the growing wheat. It's very hard to separate the bad weeds from the good grain early on when the plants are small, without destroying both. They must come to full growth before they can be clearly distinguished, separated, and either utilized as food or burned as refuse. Jesus again interprets this parable for his disciples, explaining that the field is the whole world, the good seed are the children of the kingdom of God and the weeds are the children of the devil. The harvest will come at the end of time. The righteous people will be identified by reaper angels, and they will then shine like the sun in the kingdom of God. The evildoers will likewise be identified by the angels, and they will be burned up in a furnace of fire.

Presuming that all of us here today are still living well before the end of time, two thousand years after Jesus appeared on earth, how do we separate the bad weeds from the good grain early on now, when plants are still small and their roots are intertwined? How do we even know which is which -- between people and even inside of ourselves? I think the novel *Seize the Day* by Nobel Prize-winning author Saul Bellow elucidates these questions beautifully and ultimately provides us

with some answers. In particular, I want to explore the relationship between two characters, and within themselves. They are a man in his mid-forties named Tommy Wilhelm, and an older father figure named Dr. Tamkin. The whole novel takes place during one day, described by Tommy midway through as "a day of reckoning."ⁱⁱⁱ

Tommy Wilhelm seems to be a failure in life. He'd once been an actor in Hollywood, unsuccessfully. He's recently been fired from a corporate salesman's job. His estranged wife won't give him a divorce, and he's being strangled by her monetary demands and child support payments for his two boys, who he's rarely allowed to see. And he's almost broke now.^{iv} We first meet him in a residence hotel in New York City where his father lives -- a retired physician in his late seventies who's amassed a considerable fortune. Tommy's meeting him for breakfast, hoping to get some financial help, as well as emotional support. But we soon learn there's no possibility of either. His father is vain, selfish, and judgmental, and he's ashamed of his son Tommy. To his face Dr. Adler calls Tommy self-indulgent, lazy, and sexually promiscuous,^v and he refuses him any financial assistance whatsoever. The reader does begin to wonder, though, about Tommy's character. He's dirty and slovenly, a liar, a college drop-out who ran off to Hollywood against his parents' advice, a man who married his wife after he'd made up his mind not to, and a person who generally doesn't seem to have taken any control over his life.

Enter Dr. Tamkin. He's presented as a psychologist, although it's not exactly clear what professional credentials he has. He becomes a mentor and a second father to Tommy. Dr. Tamkin speculates on the commodities market, and he offers to go in with Tommy and make some investments together at a local broker's office, using Tommy's small amount of remaining savings. Dr. Tamkin claims to be investing scientifically, not based on greed or as a gambler, and Tommy signs a power of attorney for him. But the commodity orders he put in for Tommy and himself four

days ago are still falling in price, and Tommy's having to make daily margin payments on them as well.^{vi}

Dr. Tamkin provides Tommy with another kind of help -- psychological, merging into the spiritual. He speaks with him of "the elemental conflict of parent and child," which "won't end, ever."^{vii} He explains how he pursues "spiritual compensation" in life, beyond any financial rewards, describing it this way: "Bringing people into the here-and-now. The real universe. That's the present moment. The past is no good to us. The future is full of anxiety. Only the present is real -- the here and now. Seize the day."^{viii} Dr. Tamkin also explains that within each of us there are two souls: the real soul and the pretender soul. Unconditional love is the essence of the real soul, and egotism or vanity is the essence of the pretender soul. Life is largely a conflict between these two souls within each of us and among us. Tommy comes to feel that with Dr. Tamkin's help he "would recover the good things, the happy things, the easy tranquil things of life;" his mistakes "could be forgiven," and "the time wasted ... relinquished."^{ix}

But, in fact, Tommy has become totally consumed by the status of his commodity market investments. As rye goes up well beyond his purchase price on the electronic board at the broker's office, and it looks as if most of their losses on lard can be covered, Tommy suggests selling. Dr. Tamkin responds, "you've got to keep your nerve when the market starts to go places. Now's when you can make something." But Tommy retorts, "I'd get out while the getting's good." Dr. Tamkin even goes on to question Tommy's character, calling him neurotic and saying the difference between healthiness and pathology is not changing one's mind every minute. He suggests, "You should try some of my 'here-and-now' mental exercises. It stops you from thinking so much about the future and the past and cuts down confusion." "Yes, yes, yes, yes," says Wilhelm, "his eyes fixed on December rye."^x

When Tommy and Dr. Tamkin go out for lunch, rye is still ahead, and lard is holding its own. Tommy's chest is in so much pain he can't even swallow his yoghurt. Dr. Tamkin moves him back to a discussion about his relationship with his father, asking him, "[Do] you love your old man?" Tommy responds, "Of course, of course I love him..." And then, "as he said this there was great pull at the very center of his soul," like "when a fish strikes the line you feel the live force in your hand."^{xi}

But there are limits to Tommy's compassion, because as they're walking back from lunch to the broker's office to see how their commodity investments are doing, an old man they know, nearly blind, asks for help in crossing the street. Tommy turns to Tamkin to do it, but the doctor says in a low voice, "He wants you. Don't refuse the old gentleman...This minute is another instance of the 'here-and-now'. You have to live in this very minute, and you don't want to. A man asks you for help. Don't think of the market. It won't run away. Show your respect to the old boy. Go ahead. That may be more valuable."^{xii} So, Tommy very reluctantly complies, while Dr. Tamkin goes on ahead to the brokerage office.

By the time Tommy gets back to the broker's himself, lard has dropped twenty points and wheat futures have sunk back to their earlier position. Not only had they lost their chance to sell, but also with a new margin call, all of Tommy's investments had been wiped out. Tamkin was gone -- nowhere to be found at the brokerage firm. So Tommy rushes out to look for him at his room in the residence hotel where his father also lives. Dr. Tamkin not there, nor in the lobby, nor anywhere else. Tommy does find his father having a massage, though. All his father does is chastise him for having been taken by Dr. Tamkin: "I won't remind you how often I warned you. It must be very painful...I don't know how many times you have to be burned in order to learn something. The same mistakes, over and over again." His father goes on to say, "I don't want to

listen to the details. And I want you to understand that I'm too old to take on new burdens." Dr. Adler refuses to give his son any money, even to tide him over on this month's rent. They get into an argument and things go from bad to worse, until Dr. Adler ends by shouting these words: "You want to make yourself into my cross. But I am not going to pick up a cross. I'll see you dead ... before I let you do that to me... Go away from me now. It's torture for me to look at you, you slob!"^{xiii}

So where's the good seed and where are the weeds in Saul Bellow's characters? It doesn't take much to see Tommy's father, Dr. Adler, as a weed. But how about Tommy and Dr. Tamkin? Perhaps Tommy's character flaws are vast enough that he could be seen as one of the sinful ones who would be cast into the fire when the angels come at the end of the age. He's irresponsible, profligate, and lacking in compassion. He probably suffers from all of the seven deadly sins: sloth, gluttony, lust, covetousness, envy, anger and pride. However, there are a number of other qualities of his that come out throughout the novel. He loves his two sons deeply. We see that he even loves his father with "a great pull at the very center of his soul." We're told at one point that from his deceased mother "he had gotten sensitive feelings [and] a soft heart." He can see his own faults and wants to make amends, as when he prays to God at one point, "Let me out of my thoughts, and let me do something better with myself. For all the time I have wasted I am very sorry. Let me out of this clutch and into a different life. For I am all balled up. Have mercy."^{xiv}

Dr. Tamkin, on the other hand, now appears to be a complete charlatan, who's misled Tommy, taken his money, and disappeared, while claiming to have been providing professional counseling and exercising fiduciary responsibilities with his power of attorney. He spouts spiritual advice about seizing the day, while all he's seizing is other's assets, hearts, and trust. Tommy had suspicions along the way, but the problem is how good seed and weeds are intertwined at their

roots, hard to be distinguished and separated early on. For example, at one point Dr. Tamkin says to Tommy, "I get so worked up and tormented and restless, so restless! I haven't even been able to practice my profession. With all this money around you don't want to be a fool while everyone else is making." At the same time he advises Tommy, "You want to avoid catching the money fever."^{xv} Tamkin had put considerably less money into their partnership than Tommy, claiming that cash was tied up for a week or so with one of his patents.^{xvi} He explained that he couldn't tell Tommy details about his medical patients for reasons of professional ethics, but then he went ahead and told him everything he said he couldn't.^{xvii} A lot of Dr. Tamkin's ideas, Tommy would sometimes say to himself, are just mishmash and claptrap.^{xviii} But other ideas were very helpful to Tommy, as when Dr. Tamkin told him not to marry suffering.^{xix} How can the good seeds and the weeds really be distinguished, and which do Tommy and Dr. Tamkin represent?

The Bible isn't necessarily a lot of help on this score. Take the patriarch Jacob, who we've been learning about in the Old Testament readings in the lectionary for the last two weeks. He cheats his brother Esau out of his birthright by refusing to give his famished brother any stew until Esau signs over his right to inheritance as the first-born son.^{xx} Then, later, Jacob deceives his blind father, Isaac, into blessing him, rather than Esau, by putting goatskin on his hands and neck so that he feels like his hairy brother. Talk about lying and cheating and stealing and betraying those closest to you! If Jacob isn't an evildoer, than who is? But in today's lectionary reading, Jacob dreams of angels ascending and descending a ladder and then God himself promising Jacob land and offspring who "shall spread abroad to the west and to the east and to the north and the south." Jacob will be blessed by God, who will be with him, and keep him, wherever he goes.^{xxi}

So, maybe the parable of the intertwined good seed and weeds is telling us that it's too early in life on earth to be able fully to distinguish the children of the kingdom of God from the children

of the evil one. Instead, we have to try to ferret out general propensities within mixed realities, in ourselves as well as others. We need to be both self-reflective with ourselves and vigilant in our dealings with other, because plenty of evil abounds. There's also still time for redemption before the end-time comes. From my less-than-divine perspective, Tommy Wilhelm ends up on side of the children of the kingdom by the end of Saul Bellow's novel, while Dr. Tamkin ends up with the children of the evil one. There's a beautiful scene of redemption for Tommy, too, as the book closes.

He thinks he sees Dr. Tamkin entering a funeral parlor on Broadway. He's wrong, but Tommy ends up inside, caught up in the line that's moving toward the coffin to look at the face of the deceased. Tommy catches his breath as he looks at the corpse, and instantly tears are flowing. He steps out of line, but remains near the coffin as his crying turns into deep sobs. All of his own losses -- human losses, including his father and his sons -- flow over him and "Soon he was past words, past reason, coherence. He could not stop...his efforts to collect himself were useless...[and] he cried with all his heart." Of course, "no one knew who he was," [but] one woman said, 'Is that perhaps the cousin from New Orleans they were expecting?' 'He must be somebody real close to carry on so.' ...'The man's brother, maybe?' Then, 'The flowers and lights fused ecstatically in [Tommy's]...blind, wet eyes; the heavy sea-like music came up to his ears. It poured into him...' The last line of the book is this: "He heard it and sank deeper than sorrow, through torn sobs and cries toward the consummation of his heart's ultimate need."^{xxii}

Washed clean in a kind of baptism, perhaps. Born again. Redeemed and saved. Freed perhaps. Free at last. And likely freed by love. A sense for Tommy that he can find solidarity "with the rest of society and become part of the 'larger body' of humanity, instead of always being

isolated in the crowd."^{xxiii} The God of Jacob becomes the eternal Sovereign who promises that our hearts will be set free when we love and serve each other in all times, until the end of time.

NOTES

ⁱ Matthew 13: 24-30, 36-43.

ⁱⁱ Matthew 13: 1-9, 18-23.

ⁱⁱⁱ Saul Bellow, *Seize the Day* (New York: Penguin Books, 2003), p. 92.

^{iv} Cynthia Ozick, "Introduction" to Bellow, *Seize the Day*, p. xvii.

^v Bellow, *Seize the Day*, p. 47.

^{vi} *Ibid.*, p. 6.

^{vii} *Ibid.*, p. 58.

^{viii} *Ibid.*, p. 62.

^{ix} *Ibid.*, p. 74.

^x *Ibid.*, pp. 84-85.

^{xi} *Ibid.*, p. 89.

^{xii} *Ibid.*, p. 96.

^{xiii} *Ibid.*, pp. 105-106.

^{xiv} *Ibid.*, p. 22.

^{xv} *Ibid.*, p. 7.

^{xvi} *Ibid.*, pp. 54-55.

^{xvii} *Ibid.*, p. 64.

^{xviii} *Ibid.*, p. 71.

^{xix} *Ibid.*, p. 94.

^{xx} Genesis 25: 29-34.

^{xxi} Genesis 28: 12-15.

^{xxii} Bellow, *Seize the Day*, pp. 113-114.

^{xxiii} Sparknotes, *Seize the Day*, www.sparknotes.com/lit/seize/summary.html