

If you've ever shaken a bit of dry parmesan cheese from a can onto your spaghetti and meatballs and mused that it kind of looks like (and maybe even tastes like) sawdust, well, it turns out you might be more right about that than you think. The U.S. Food and Drug Administration recently busted a cheese manufacturer in Pennsylvania for marketing its product as "100% real parmesan" when it actually contained no parmesan at all. In reality, consumers were sprinkling a mixture of imitation cheese and trimmings of other cheaper cheeses like Swiss, white cheddar, Havarti, and mozzarella on their pasta. As if that weren't sneaky enough, however, the FDA discovered that Castle Cheese, Inc., was also adding filler material to the cheese, the bulk of which was cellulose -- better known as wood pulp. Talk about splintering consumer confidence!

Of course, this isn't the first time that we've seen potentially harmful or misleading ingredients mixed in with the real thing. "Extra virgin" olive oil is often mixed with not-so-virginal olive oil. Tea might contain lawn grass clippings, or chopped-up fern leaves. The FDA is constantly on the lookout for food manufacturers who cut corners. It also does its best to make sure that foods actually contain what their labels say they do -- no more and no less. Sometimes it takes an expert to tell the difference between what's real and what's fake.

Cheese making was a big deal in Jesus' day, so much so that the Jewish historian Josephus named the ravine between Mount Moriah and Mount Zion in Jerusalem the "Valley of the Cheese Makers." But Jesus didn't tell any parables about cheese. However, he *did* say in the Sermon on the Mount, "Blessed are the cheesemakers." Wait, that was Monty Python. Jesus said, "Blessed are the peacemakers."

The problem of contamination by alien ingredients could not be more serious than the threat it posed to a daily staple: their daily bread. And worse, wheat was one of the most susceptible of the staples of life, and to mess around with it was very serious business. So when Jesus wanted to illustrate the difficulty of separating those who would be part of the kingdom of heaven from those who would not, he turned to the wheat fields where the difference between the real and the fake (and harmful) ingredients was very subtle and took an expert to discern at the harvest.

Jesus sets the parable on a large commercial farm of the period, where wheat was the cash crop (v. 24). It was common during that time for rival landowners to mess with each other's crops in hopes of increasing their own profits at the market -- a problem common enough that Roman law specifically forbade the sowing of poisonous plants in another's field. The poisonous plant in question here is "darnel," a kind of ryegrass that looked like wheat in its early stages and could only be distinguished from it when the heads appeared on the stalk.

Slaves and field hands normally weeded the fields in the spring before the roots of the darnel became intertwined with the real wheat, but in the story that Jesus tells, a rival enemy snuck into the fields "while everybody was asleep" and intentionally sowed the weeds among the wheat (v. 25). By the time anyone realized the treachery, the fake wheat had already become entangled with the good stuff, which could lead to disaster for the crop and damage the reputation of the landowner (v. 26).

So much of the fake crop was present that the slaves were amazed at its proliferation and wondered from whence it came. After all, the master had focused on sowing only the best seed (v. 27). The landowner knew that this invasion of noxious weeds didn't happen by accident. "An enemy has done this," he told them (v. 28).

The landowner's staff volunteered to head out into the fields and pull up the counterfeit wheat by the root. But the farmer understood that this had the potential to do more harm than good. The real wheat could be damaged, given the intertwined nature of the roots (v. 29). It would be better to wait until the harvest when the real experts, the reapers, could separate the real wheat from the fake.

Actually, it would be fairly easy for the reapers to tell the difference at that point, because darnel doesn't grow as high as wheat when it matures. The harvesters could cut the wheat just below the head and leave the darnel to be cut separately. Even then, the darnel would serve a purpose. In a land where wood was scarce, the weeds would be bundled and used as fuel for actually baking the bread that the real wheat made possible (v. 30)!

In the case of the wheat and the weeds, the disciples ask for a specific explanation and Jesus gives them one in private (v. 36). We might imagine their confusion. Why wait to uproot evil from among us when we have the chance? Why would we not get rid of the harmful ingredients so that our daily ration of the real bread of life might be pure?

It was tempting for many in Jesus' day to take one of two approaches to the problem of evil in their midst. On the one hand, there were those like the Essenes, who went out into the desert to separate themselves from the culture and set up a "pure" community of faithful people. In their case, the idea was that "the cheese stands alone." On the other hand, there were those like the Pharisees, who saw it as their job to pluck evil by the root by pointing out those individuals who were obviously violating God's law and assigning them to the fire of judgment.

These approaches are still tempting to disciples of Jesus today. In a post-Christendom age, many want to separate themselves from a culture that is increasingly secular and at times even hostile to people of faith. They'd rather maintain a pure crop, so they'll wall off the field and watch for "enemies" who might sow bad seeds among the faithful wheat. Better to create their own culture rather than be corrupted by the evil around them. On the other hand, some Christians have taken the role of judge and jury, pointing out the evil in others and trying to root it out publicly.

Both approaches are destructive, however. Communities that try to wall themselves off from the world eventually atrophy in their mission and are not sustainable. The weeds still infiltrate and the sinful nature of humanity is hard to hold at bay. The Essenes eventually died out, as have many other sects that have tried the isolationist approach.

The Pharisaic approach is equally destructive because it can damage the good seed while rooting out the bad. Many are the people who have been harmed by well-meaning Christians on a moral crusade who have led with judgment rather than grace. What we might see as a deplorable orientation toward evil in another person might actually be an opportunity for God's grace to grow within them and change them. If we consign them to the fire before the harvest, we do more harm than good.

The point of the parable seems to be that it takes an expert to know the difference between real and fake ingredients, and that difference is only revealed at the time of the harvest the time of final reaping of both good and bad. Jesus warns the disciples that it is only at the harvest that the truth will be revealed about each one of us. Until then, the weeds grow with the wheat and some could go either way. It's not up to us to start acting as a spiritual FDA, but rather to be faithful in our own growth, share grace with our neighbors with whom, for good or ill, our roots are intertwined, and trust in the expertise of the master and his reapers to sort it all out in the end.

Jesus will actually demonstrate how this works. Notice that he spends much of his time with people whom the righteous might consider to be "weeds", while offering his critique of those who would go charging off into the fields on a moral crusade to uproot evil. Jesus understood that the harvest was "plentiful" but that the workers who would do the right thing and follow his example were "few" (9:37). The wheat and the weeds grow together until the harvest, but in the meantime, it is up to the workers to maintain the field, nurture the wheat, and offer transforming grace to even the worst of the weeds.

Castle Cheese filed for bankruptcy after it was found to be a manufacturer of fake cheese. Its factory stands empty and shuttered because what they claimed to be selling on the outside wasn't actually happening on the inside.

It's a cautionary tale that Jesus would have certainly embraced. Do our lives reflect the authenticity of a relationship with Christ, or are we harboring our own weed-like tendencies? Are we full of Christ or do we harbor a lot of religious filler that looks and tastes good to the rest of the faithful, but is ultimately not nutritious or satisfying to a world hungry for the gospel? Fake faith is far more dangerous than fake food.

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