

## The Wheat and the Chaff

January 9, 2022 at First Church in Cambridge, Congregational, UCC

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*Texts: Luke 3: 15-17, 21-22*

This past Thursday, I participated in a press conference hosted by several Boston Black pastors and staged just outside the Moakley Federal Courthouse near the Seaport. Broadly, we were there as faith leaders, on the anniversary of the insurrection, to take a stand *for* our democracy, *for* a more civil public discourse, and *against* any violence that would threaten the basic institutions of our government. More specifically, we were there to celebrate the historic nomination and confirmation of Rachael Rollins as the next US Attorney for the District of Massachusetts. Rollins has been a staunch advocate for communities of color and for criminal justice reform which has sometimes put her at odds with law enforcement. And so, we were also there to express our profound dismay *with* and to demand further action *from* the US Marshal Service who have thus far refused to offer Rollins a security detail despite her receiving repeated racist and life-threatening messages since her nomination. To name just one example, on December 9, her office was sent a chilling email that said: “Someone, somewhere is plotting to put one in your face or head!” Imagine trying to do your job, especially one so important, and starting your day with that in your inbox. On December 18, the Marshals refused her request for security despite offering protection for over 30,000 other federal employees, including Marty Walsh. Rollins, who is the first Black woman to hold this position, will be sworn into office tomorrow.

The event offered a small but poignant window into our current, frankly dismal, state of affairs. As if we needed more evidence. This week, our hearts, minds, and media were utterly saturated with warning signs and blaring alarms that our democracy, including its bedrock features of voting rights for all and equal protection under the law, are at the brink of failure. A Jewish colleague at the press conference shared something that rang especially true, perhaps *because* of all the coverage of our polarized politics. We were there representing a diverse group of almost 60 communities of faith, Christian, Jewish, Muslim, Black, Brown, white, urban, suburban, socially conservative, socially liberal. Usually, that display of diversity, given the fact that we don't always agree, would be a thing to tout. But the Jewish leader said: yes, we gather from diverse communities but more importantly, today we stand as one community, in support of our one US Attorney, in support of our one Law! Hearing that image of unity lifted up, however aspirational, cut me to the core probably because I've been so hungry for it. One community, one law, and yes even one nation, however torn and fractured, however deeply and tragically divided we've become. Yes, at some level, we are still one nation even as we are wrestling mightily with how we can reclaim and restore that sense of Unum, as in our national motto - E Pluribus Unum –Out of Many, One. After this week's barrage of headlines revealing all the more how polarized we've become, I begin today with an invitation to pause and hold this thought of one community, one law, one nation. How does it land for you? Does it disturb? Does it refresh? Maybe both.

Thursday the 6th was also Epiphany, the beginning of a new liturgical season, given to themes of wise ones following stars in the east, a dove descending from the heavens, and Christ's light of truth and justice, of peace and mercy, being revealed for all to see. Indeed, today, the church writ large remembers Jesus baptism, not as a tiny baby, mind you, but instead like you and me and everyone, as a beloved child of God!

Luke's telling echoes Mathew's here. Both feature a supporting role from John the Baptist, who at first glance seems to introduce Jesus as a divisive, exclusive leader. To be honest, when I've preached this passage before, I've skipped right over the imagery John uses to describe how Jesus will baptize and instead cut to the good stuff at the end where the Spirit who descends upon the newly baptized Jesus and says: You Are My Beloved Son, with you, I am well pleased." Clarence Jordan's "Cotton Patch" translation puts it this way: "You are my dear Son, I'm proud of you!" We'll come back to this. But first, what do we with this seemingly nasty business of separating the wheat and chaff, and the burning by unquenchable fire? Talk about polarization!

We might wonder if lines like these are fueling some of the fiery rise of Christian Nationalism. It's no stretch to imagine that there are some who believe that it is their job, as Christians, to go and do likewise, to be divisive forces, called to winnow, separate, and burn the chaff. I mean what could be a more powerful playbook than the Bible! And it says it right there, just as Jesus is coming on the scene! "He will baptize you with Spirit and Holy Fire, His winnowing fork in his hand, to clear his threshing floor and to gather the wheat into his granary and the chaff he will burn with unquenchable fire. Is there a baptismal-like effort afoot in our country today to cleanse and purify our nation, to exclude non-believers and blow them away, like chaff? What we saw at the capitol last year as a violent mess of shattered glass, others may see as the cost of cleaning the House of the People! I don't know. Truly I don't but I'm trying to understand, and I wonder if coming back to how we read and read differently our one Bible may offer some clues if not a clearer path forward.

Turns out there's a different way of reading this foundational text, not as a metaphor of division and nor of some blustery, fiery purification, such that we get locked in or out, by us/them, good/bad thinking and polarization! I'm indebted to an old friend and Divinity School roommate of mine, Matt Boulton, for the following commentary that casts new light. He writes: "What should we make of John's remark that Jesus will come with "his winnowing fork in his hand"? Is this an image of including some but excluding others? On the contrary, the metaphor points in the other direction: every grain of wheat has a husk, and farmers (even today) use wind to separate these husks — collectively known as "chaff" — from the grain itself, the goal being, of course, to save every grain, not to separate the good grain from the bad grain."<sup>1</sup> When I first read this, it was a facepalm moment! Wow! Yes, of course! How did I miss it? How did we all miss it? The goal is to save every grain! His commentary continues: "This is a metaphor of preservation and sanctification, not division. Like an expert restoring a work of art, what the wind and fire remove are the impurities: the anxieties, self-absorption, apathy, or greed that make us less generous, less fair, or less respectful of others. Each of us requires restoration, liberation from whatever "husks" are holding us back." Amen! The question for us all isn't who's the wheat and chaff! We are all wheat! The question, for all of us, is what are our husks? What anxiety, fear, greed, exhaustion, excuses are holding us back from being part of this collective restoration and liberation?

And then, at our most stripped down and vulnerable, when we realize we are just like every other grain of humanity, we are ready for the good stuff, that profound, life-giving, courage and confidence building affirmation: You are my dear, beautiful, beloved child, I'm proud of you!

I wonder if the Proud Boys have ever heard this message, or if they have ever tried to share it with others, especially with those with whom they may disagree? And the same goes for us! We surely have

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<sup>1</sup> <https://www.saltproject.org/progressive-christian-blog/2019/1/7/jesus-also-salts-lectionary-commentary-for-epiphany-week-two>

our husks, too and be honest: whatever your politics, have you not wished that those on “the other side” would somehow get swept up and threshed away from our country! Have you never had the thought, however momentary or lasting, that they should be ashamed of themselves, or to hell with them, as in they aren’t even a grain of wheat?

How can we come back to sharing a sense of one community?! How unless the goal is that every grain, every person be saved! Not saved as in saved by Christ and Christ alone. I mean saved as in each person having their and our God-given dignity preserved and restored, saved so we can see the magnificent artwork of God that each and every one of us truly is, at heart, beneath whatever chaff, even the Proud Boys!

How do we get there from here? I don’t know. But we could start by reconceiving all the great polarizing headwinds and political dumpster fires of this moment as an Epiphany moment of God’s revealing and reckoning, of God’s winnowing, threshing, and burning, not with an eye towards exclusion, division or destruction but towards restoring and preserving and saving every grain! After all, throughout scripture, this is how the wind and fire of the Spirit work: not to divide or destroy, but to connect, sanctify, challenge, restore, and empower.

My sense is we all need to slow way down! Take a beat! Take a moment to sit with a vision of one community, one nation, under one blazing star, under one God! Pause, center down in this new year. Remember your baptism and Jesus, our coming to the that same river together, our becoming all the more who we already are as beloved of God, each and every precious grain of us, coming together.

I leave you with a new poem I came across late in the day by National Youth Poet Laureate Amanda Gorman. She posted it just a few days ago on her Instagram page. It’s called “New Day’s Lyric”<sup>2</sup> and it offers a powerful reflection on 2021 and looks to the year ahead. If I could share it in her voice without concern of livestream or copyright infringement I would. Please, later today or this week, search for it, read or watch the video. Hear and share it’s hope again and again:

May this be the day  
We come together.  
Mourning, we come to mend,  
Withered, we come to weather,  
Torn, we come to tend,  
Battered, we come to better.  
Tethered by this year of yearning,  
We are learning  
That though we weren’t ready for this,  
We have been readied by it.  
We steadily vow that no matter  
How we are weighed down,  
We must always pave a way forward.

This hope is our door, our portal.  
Even if we never get back to normal,

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<sup>2</sup> <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=WBERVCT44J4>

Someday we can venture beyond it,  
To leave the known and take the first steps.  
So let us not return to what was normal,  
But reach toward what is next.

What was cursed, we will cure.  
What was plagued, we will prove pure.  
Where we tend to argue, we will try to agree,  
Those fortunes we forswore, now the future we foresee,  
Where we weren't aware, we're now awake;  
Those moments we missed  
Are now these moments we make,  
The moments we meet,  
And our hearts, once all together beaten,  
Now all together beat.

Come, look up with kindness yet,  
For even solace can be sourced from sorrow.  
We remember, not just for the sake of yesterday,  
But to take on tomorrow.

We heed this old spirit,  
In a new day's lyric,  
In our hearts, we hear it:  
For auld lang syne, my dear,  
For auld lang syne.

Be bold, sang Time this year,  
Be bold, sang Time,  
For when you honor yesterday,  
Tomorrow ye will find.  
Know what we've fought  
Need not be forgot nor for none.  
It defines us, binds us as one,  
Come over, join this day just begun.  
For wherever we come together,  
We will forever overcome.