

## Itchy

By Ben Roberts

Parable of the Fishing Net (Matt. 13: 47-52)

*“Again, the kingdom of heaven is like a net that people threw into the lake and gathered all kinds of fish. When it was full, they pulled it to the shore, where they sat down and put the good fish together into containers. But the bad fish they threw away. That’s the way it will be at the end of the present age. The angels will go out and separate the evil people from the righteous people, and will throw the evil ones into a burning furnace. People there will be weeping and grinding their teeth. “Have you understood all these things?” Jesus asked. They said to him, “Yes.” Then he said to them, “Therefore, every legal expert who has been trained as a disciple for the kingdom of heaven is like the head of a household who brings old and new things out of their treasure chest.”*

The Lenten season is a time of reflection, a time to focus on our faith. Today’s scripture can be a tool aid in that reflection.

This scripture is challenging. To be honest, this is my second crack at crafting a devotional around it. My first attempt was codswallop (can you tell we subscribe to Brit box?). No scripture that ends with weeping and gnashing of teeth is an easy read.

But as I struggled over its meaning overnight, I noticed it churned up a lot of different thoughts. By morning, I decided it was a very handy tool for our current moment in time. Let me explain.

I follow the news. By which I mean, I read the paper and watch the evening news. Some days, I just can’t deal with all the change in our world. Whether it is foreign wars, or domestic squabbles, I have a strong initial reaction, which does not always reflect my Christian faith. Sometimes, I just need to unplug and give myself space to help find meaning and measure my response. My first reaction is not always the right response.

Similarly, I needed reflection to find a deeper meaning in today’s scripture. Now, I have read the book of Matthew many times in my life. At least twice, I have studied it deeply. And yet, when I read this parable, it did not register. It is a

familiar setting with familiar imagery, but my recall was almost nil. I think I just brushed over it in the past. When I read it this time, it made me... itchy. If it were an article of clothing, it would pass, but it would not be comfortable.

This passage is probably not on Jesus' greatest hits list. At first glance it is not a typical gospel passage of love and forgiveness. It evokes images of judgement and Hell, more typical of Old Testament themes. Which is probably why I have glossed over it in the past. It's... itchy.

But in the early hours of the morning, I had a personal insight. My reaction to this passage said more about me than it did about final judgement. Over the course of my faith journey, my views have changed. My younger self would imagine a small to medium-sized basket and a huge furnace. I was brash and judgmental. I was a "basket" person and most of the world was furnace fuel. I had the secret knowledge; I had said the special words. This passage would have confirmed what I already knew and I would not give it a second thought.

Today, that basket would be much bigger, almost bigger than the net and the furnace would be an Easy-bake oven.

Of course neither version measures up to the truth. Jesus does not exactly elaborate on this parable. Which is why it is such a great story for Lent. It requires reflection. It's itchy. Who is chosen and who is discarded. And how does that make me feel. Do I relish my chosen-ness and gloat at the condemned? Or do I doubt my own standing and fear the repercussions? These are uncomfortable questions and there are no definitive answers. My only course of action is to reflect and pray. Which is kind of the whole point of this season.

Prayer:

Lord make me uncomfortable. Help me to see the world as you see it and act accordingly.