

July 19th, 2020

Matthew 13:24-30, 36-43 “Reclaiming the High Ground 2”

I don't like ending sermons with, “to be continued next week,” but we had a lot to tackle last week as we're bringing this “Reclaiming the teachings of Jesus” series to a close. You know the drill by now. I believe we are currently in a shift where the Kingdom of God is breaking through, and we as the church have a chance to help bring it into being, “on earth as it is in heaven” as Jesus taught us to pray. But the church has lost its way, so it's time to re-claim Jesus' teachings and win back some of the “moral high ground” that we've lost by following the kingdoms of the earth instead of the Kingdom of God.

Last week we looked at a ridiculous smart phone simulation game called “Church Tycoon.” The point of this game is to see how much money you can make building and managing a virtual church. If you weren't here last week, I encourage you to look this game up ... because I want you to see that I don't make this stuff up. To succeed at this game, you've got to carefully manage your resources and only go after people who have money. Yeah. Really. So last week we compared the game's strategy to Jesus' Parable of the Sower which teaches us that we're supposed to scatter the seeds of faith generously and indiscriminately *all over the place*. Not just in the places where we think they're going to sprout up. We're supposed to be generous with our seeds and not treat them like scarce commodities. Why? Because under God's reign, we are called to be extravagant in our proclamation of the good news. It needs to be proclaimed to *everyone*, not just those who can guarantee a “Return on Investment.” The problem is that every time we try to live with an attitude of abundance and align ourselves with God's teachings, the enemy pushes back. The question we ended with last week was, “Who is the enemy?” To quote Saturday Night Live's Church Lady – “Could it be ... Satan?” Well ... let's see.

This week Jesus gives us another parable to address this question. Remember - Jesus started this whole section out with the statement: “The harvest is plentiful, but the laborers are few.” We haven’t left the farm since. This week, we move from the parable of the sower to the parable of the seed. The main character in last week’s parable apparently flunked Intro to Agriculture in college. The main character in this week’s parable seems to know considerably more about how to scope out a fertile field and plant a crop. Maybe Jesus’ audience was thinking, “Okay, here we go. Jesus isn’t completely clueless about farming.” So the owner of this field goes out and plants good seeds in a good field, which is a little strange because he has laborers to do this, but in the passage he plants the seeds himself. Where things go awry is when an enemy comes along and scatters “weed seed” in the field. Later, after the plants grew and started bearing grain, the workers came to him and said, “We’ve got a problem boss ... we’ve got weeds sprouting up in the field! You want us to start tearing them out?” The owner said, “No, because if you do, you’re going to tear up the roots of the good stuff and ruin the whole crop. Let’s let them grow together until it’s time to harvest. Then we’ll have the reapers collect the weeds and burn them, then we’ll have them bind up the wheat and store it in the barn.”

Then Jesus takes a break and tells a couple of parables about how the Kingdom of God spreads before he gets back to the parable of the seeds which we’ll come back to next week. After he tells those parables, his disciples come to him and say, “Umm, could you go back to the parable about the wheat and the weeds again? We didn’t quite get the meaning of that one.” Jesus said, “Sure” and then told them what the parable symbolized. The one who sows the good seed? That’s the Son of Man. That’s me. The field? That’s the world. The good seed? That’s the children of the kingdom. The weeds? That’s the children of the evil one, and the enemy who sowed them is the devil. Okay, there’s the answer to the question we ended with last week. “Could it be ... Satan?” Yup! For sure. Now let’s look at how this relates to our current situation as we face the challenges of this shift we’re in now.

So what are we to take from these words from Jesus if our job is to recover them? Well, it sounds like we need to invite Satan back into the church! Or at least, we need to start preaching about Satan more. I actually heard a preacher say that out loud to a crowd of people in North Carolina once. “We need to preach about Satan more.” Get some hellfire and brimstone back into our pulpits. Start dividing people up into weeds and wheat, and make sure the weeds know that fire awaits them at the end of the age! That always works out pretty well for the church, right? Plus it seems pretty apropos for the times we’re living in now since folks are eager and ready to divide up into polarized camps anyway. We really don’t have that much work to do if that’s the case. We’ve already got the reds versus the blues, the anti-maskers versus the maskers, the pro-confederate statue folks versus the anti-confederate statue folks ... and the list goes on for longer than we have time for this morning. It would take very little effort to take this a step further and say, “Well ... the parable *does* say that the weeds will go in the fire ...” and suddenly we’re back to Salem Witch Trial territory. Oh, you’re being ridiculous, Jesse, we’re much smarter and more civilized than that. Are we? I don’t know. It seems like Margaret Atwood and George Orwell are in a dead heat for the “whose dystopian future crosses the finish line first” race. Any time we run into a passage like this where we’re tempted to travel into potentially dangerous territory, we need to do some Bible study, which means we need to first and foremost ask, “What was happening in Jesus’ time and place and how was this message received by his audience?”

First of all, let’s talk about weeds and wheat in the ancient Middle East. Why in the world would anyone let weeds grow among the wheat? The weed in this parable is likely darnel or cockle, which is a noxious weed that looks an awful lot like wheat until it matures and ears appear. The ears of the real wheat get heavy and will sag and droop. The ears of the darnel stand straight up. In other words, it takes a while before you can distinguish the weeds from the wheat, so you let them grow together until the time is right ... until it’s time to harvest. Now ... here’s where it’s important to remember that the folks on the receiving end of the

gospels were specific communities of faith ... churches. So if this parable was for the church, let's look at it this way – It is the risen Christ who sows good seed in the world and thus creates the church. Into the midst of this church the devil, or the evil powers and forces in this world, sows people who do not belong in the Kingdom of God because they can't see beyond the ways of the Kingdoms of the Earth. And the gospel writer, in this case Matthew, is greatly disturbed by the mixed state of the church. On one hand, you've got folks who "get it" and understand the Kingdom of God. Their first priority is to follow Jesus and his teachings in order to communicate the Good News that God is reconciling the world to God through Christ. But at the same time, you've got folks who don't "get it." Which means you've got folks in the church who may enthusiastically call Jesus Lord, but ... they refuse to follow his ethics and teaching. So what do you do with these folks? According to the parable, *you* don't do *anything*. What? That's crazy! These people have more invested into keeping the Kingdom's of the World in power! They don't want to have anything to do with God's Kingdom. They don't belong here. We've got to take them out! Okay. Who are they? Do you think you know? Yes? Are you 100% sure? Can you *really* tell the weeds from the wheat before the grain shows? Funny how we're all about raising our hands when we think God's saying, "Okay, who wants to throw some bad weeds in the fire?" "Oooh! Oooh! Me! Me!" But when God says, "Who wants to go out into the field and bring in a harvest of good wheat?" how do you think we respond? Well ... remember, this whole section started out with Jesus declaring, "The harvest is plentiful, but the laborers are few."

Still, why would God allow weeds to grow among the wheat in the first place?! Barbara Brown-Taylor, author of *Holy Envy*, the book that our elders are studying this year once wrote, "The growth interests God more than perfection. It shows that God is willing to risk fat weeds for fat wheat. When we try to help God out a little, to improve on God's plan, God lets us know that our timing is off, not to mention our judgment, and that God does, after all, own the field."

So does this mean we simply stand by ignoring the weeds or injustice or sin? Of course not. The challenge is determining how to embrace our calling for prophetic witness while resisting the temptation to weed the garden. “Lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from evil.” There’s that prayer again! Our job is to *tend to the garden’s growth*, not weed it. Reclaiming our moral high ground does not mean embracing our “judgy-bits.” One of the questions we need to ask as we think about reclaiming that high ground is, “Are we able to tend the garden and reserve self-righteous judgement until the fruits of the wheat or the weeds presents themselves?” Tolerating weeds is frustrating for sure. Especially when dealing with the weeds within ourselves.

Right now, in the middle of this shift we’re in, there’s a lot of shenanigans going on around this world. Be assured that God recognizes this too and will be victorious. Remember, in the end, the darkness cannot overcome the light. In the end, evil cannot overcome good. Yes, there will be a lot of pushback from the forces of evil in the world. But the space that evil takes up in this world is about ready to get squeezed out. Do not expect that evil to go down without a fight, but also know that in the end, God’s kingdom ... God’s realm ... God’s reign is the one that will be left. Next week we’ll wrap this series up with a parable about how this will all take place, and what we can do to make it so.