

July 12th, 2020

Matthew 13:1-9, 18-23 “Reclaiming the High Ground Part 1”

Since June, we have been reclaiming words and teachings of Jesus. We've been doing this because lately it seems that the church has lost its way. And understand when I say, “the church,” I'm not talking about a single congregation or a denomination or anything like that. I'm including everyone. Catholic, Protestant, Orthodox, High Church, Low Church, Independent Church ... you name it. Even though it's called “the Bride of Christ” throughout the New Testament, even though it was divinely commissioned as the hands and feet of Christ on earth, at the end of the day, the church is a human institution. In Romans 3:23 Paul says that all humans have sinned and fallen short of God's glory. Every last one of us. The church is made up entirely of humans. Yes, we are guided by the Holy Spirit, or at least it's our goal to be guided by the Holy Spirit, but we are humans and as such, we are often led by human impulses and desires rather than divine impulses and desires. One of our biggest sins is hypocrisy. Why else would Jesus tell his disciples, “Why do you see the speck that is in your brother's eye, but do not notice the log that is in your own eye? You hypocrite, first take the log out of your own eye, and then you will see clearly to take the speck out of your brother's eye.” That's in Matthew 7 and Luke 6 by the way. For you Bible geeks out there, it's also number 27 of 114 “famous sayings of Jesus” in the Gospel of Thomas. We are hypocrites. We always have been, and always will be. Makes me very thankful that God is infinitely patient and loving.

One of the consequences of the church's hypocrisy is how we are perceived by the world. And you might think, “Why should we care about what the world thinks of the church? We are subjects of God's reign, not the world's. Didn't Jesus say that the kingdoms of the world would always push back against the followers of Jesus and would even hate and persecute us?” For sure. This is true. Here's the twist though ... we have *also* been commissioned to go into the world and bear

witness to the Good News that God is reconciling the world to God through Christ. We have been commissioned to actively demonstrate God's love and mercy and to live out Jesus' teachings so that others in the world might become followers of Jesus! "Go ye therefore into all the world and teach!" "The harvest is plentiful!" Be light and salt. Make a difference. Be like the Apostle Paul who became all things to all people so that some might be saved. This is where I think the church has fallen short. This is where I think we've lost credibility. Throughout history, the church has held a certain amount of influence ... a "moral high ground" if you will. This high ground that has helped us in our mission and witness. But there have also been times in our history when we've been out of alignment with God and have lost that moral high ground. That's when reformers step up to the plate and say, "Let's get back in line with God." I believe we are in the midst of a shift where the Kingdom of God has the potential of breaking through and bringing us into a higher alignment with God. The question is, though, are *we* ready to step up to the plate and help this happen? Are *we* willing to be the reformers? That's why we've been spending so much time reclaiming Jesus' words and teachings.

Let's go back to that question, "Why should we care about what the world thinks of the church?" Joe Rogers shared something with me this past week that addresses this question rather ... bluntly. I'm going to show you a video clip for a smart phone video game app called "Church Tycoon." Buckle up. I promise, you will not be judged for your reaction to this ad. It is funny and disgusting all at the same time. [Show clip and summary].

When I saw this, I got a sick feeling in my stomach and thought, "*This* is what people think the church is all about? Making money? Holding fist-fulls of dollars while they worship God?" My stomach dropped a little more when I realized that the developers of this game may even be Christians. And I have to confess, I hated myself a little when I thought, "Huh, I wonder how I'd do at this game?" Because I love resource management games! Mind you, they're usually in the "Build a UFO

defense network to protect the earth” category, but good grief ... what is wrong with me for thinking this game is anything other than blasphemous?

1 Timothy 6:10 outlines how the love of money is the *root of all evil*. Jesus overturned merchant's tables at the Jerusalem Temple because he believed they were making a cheap shopping mall out of a holy place. So what the heck is up with this game? This is exactly the kind of thing that has been hurting the church for centuries! Just about every major reform movement in the church has been inspired by faithful people who have rejected the notion that the church exists to make money. According to a recent poll by the Barna institute, only 27% of Americans believe the church has a positive impact in the world. Another 27% believe that the church has *no* positive impact at all. 39% are indifferent to the church's contribution to the world, and 8% believe the church's impact is *negative*. A Pew research poll says that 74% of the US Population believes that the church is losing influence in society.

As far as the issues are concerned, people who hold a negative view of the church believe that the church is too concerned with personal health and wealth, that we are selfishly obsessive about avoiding eternal damnation, that we are more concerned about political influence than following Jesus, that we are excessively concerned with issues related to sex and sexuality, and not concerned enough with issues like poverty and matters related to justice. In other words, we spend too much time and energy on things that the Bible has *very little* to say about, and *not enough time* on major themes and issues that are all throughout the Bible. Rev. Dr. William Barbour, one of the most influential Disciples pastors of our time, says that we have lost our moral high ground and that we need to reclaim it if we are to be the light and salt in this world that Jesus calls us to be.

So, how do we reclaim this high ground? Well, this is going to take two Sundays, so let's get cracking. Our scripture for this morning is commonly known as the Parable of the Sower. What is a sower? A

sower is one who plants or scatters seeds. Typically, a sower goes to a lot of trouble to scout ahead and pick out a field so that he or she can carefully sow the seeds. The sower in this parable seems to carelessly scatter seeds all over the place. But according to Jesus, this is the point. Some of the seeds that were carelessly scattered fall into rocky ground where they sprang up quickly, but were unable able to take root, so they burned up in the sun. These are the people who hear the word about God's Kingdom, but they don't take the time to understand it, so evil takes root and the next thing you know, they're dropping the ball when their journey of faith gets hard. Other seeds fell among the thorns and weeds, and were not able to grow because the weeds choked them out. These are the ones who hear the good news, but the cares of the world and the lure of wealth choke the word out and they end up living for themselves. But then some of the seeds fell on good soil and they brought in a huge harvest which means they were able to bear good fruits ... love, joy, peace, patience, kindness ... all of those fruits of the spirit, and in the end, others decided to spread the good news too.

So the question most people ask is, "Okay, but why didn't the sower do the research and test the soil before they just went out and threw it all over the place?" Because God wants us to be extravagant seed-sowers. Elizabeth Johnson, theologian and writer for *The Working Preacher* said, "Too often we play it safe sowing the word only where we're confident that it will be well received. And only where those who receive it are likely to become contributing members of our congregations." Think about what kind of sower Jesus was. He went out and sowed seeds *everywhere* ... even among those who disagreed with him! The point of this parable is that we, as sowers of God's message, are not responsible for the outcome. We're only responsible for sowing the seeds ... for being the living, breathing examples of Jesus' values and teachings on earth. Where the seed take and what kind of harvest the seed yields is entirely up to God. But if we aren't sowing the right seeds, we aren't going to see any results.

Elizabeth Johnson goes on to say – “In our stewardship we hold tightly on to our resources wanting to make sure that nothing is wasted. So we stifle creativity and the energy for mission resisting new ideas for the fear they may not work. As though mistakes or failure should be avoided at all costs. Jesus’ approach to mission is quite at odds with our play it safe instincts.” In other words, that silly phone game where you’re supposed to carefully manage your resources and only go after the people who can add to your church’s bank account is the very opposite of what Jesus wants us to do! But that’s what a lot of people outside the church think that we’re all about! And for good reason too, because that’s the way a lot of churches do ministry. Which is why we need to change our attitudes and practices - so that we can re-claim the higher ground and help usher in God’s reign. 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.” Sound easy? I wish I could say it was. What makes our mission difficult is the push-back we receive from the enemy. And that’s a barrier we need to learn to overcome if we are to reclaim that higher ground and be in alignment with God. But that’s a lesson for next week.