

### **“Smoking Craters In The Pews” Matthew 13:24-30 & 36-43**

You may have heard me say that I believe the Church has more ways to offend and drive away people than any other organization I know. I understand that the intent is not to drive others away – quite the opposite the intent most often is to exercise a purity of faith, a practice of righteousness. However, and sadly, too often the result is a prickly and hurtful presence that comes across as an intolerant arrogance that causes a lot of people to leave and not return. Our denomination is right now experiencing this as we wrestle with issues of sexuality, inclusion, and rejection.

What is perhaps even more surprising is that such moves to purify the church by excluding people deemed unrighteous are completely against what is being taught in Scripture. Our reading from Matthew’s gospel deals with this subject via a parable, and just as with the first parable in this section (the one we looked at last Sunday, with the sower sowing seeds on the pathway, on rocks and even in good soil) this parable is paired with an explanation. As we heard, after Jesus told these parables to the assembled crowds, the confused disciples had to ask him to explain the parable in private.

The parable itself seems straightforward enough, although recall my comments last week on the difficulties and dangers of agricultural parables. In the illustration seeds are sown and weeds grow among the wheat. Usually in farming practices of the day the weeds were periodically culled and burned. The wheat, when harvested, was stored in barns and stone silos. However, even though this is a simple story familiar even to the original hearers, at the same time there are unusual things happening in the parable, unusual enough to catch the ears of those who heard it, especially those who were familiar with the farming practices. Unusual enough even to cause the listeners to raise an eyebrow and listen for an explanation.

The first unusual thing that should catch our attention is that it was the owner who sowed the seed. Now no owner worth his favorite seat at the local auction or city gate would perform such a task, unless it was a tiny one-person operation with no workers or servants. But we know from the parable that the owner did indeed have slaves doing his work, so it is doubly unusual for him to have sown his own seed. And the extra emphasis that it was “good” seed that was sown is also a bit curious ... duh, what other kind of seed would he sow? Yes, seed does need to be cleaned, but with a coterie of slaves available it’s a pretty good bet that his seed was well-cleaned both at last year’s harvest and before this year’s seeding! And with such a relatively large operation, they would have held back the very best of the wheat to use as seed.

Next, the statement that one of his enemies had sown the weeds while everyone was asleep really should catch our attention. Sowing weeds is pretty much in the same category as deliberately poisoning a well, the kind of thing that not too long ago would have resulted in a lynching party. Even today, the very act of failing to perform weed control is considered in farm country to be highly anti-social and the deliberate act of spreading the weeds is downright illegal. This claim of sowing weeds jolts us into recognizing there is a great and powerful tension being talked about here: a tension between good and evil.

Naturally enough the slaves of the householder react with understandable confusion and angst, asking where the weeds could have come from and whether they should do anything about it. Can you remember as a kid, when something went massively wrong, looking around and asking “what happened?” hoping that the answer would not involve you? Fortunately the master lets them off the hook, telling them that “an enemy has done this”. You can almost hear the sigh of relief from the slaves and their eagerness to go fix the problem before the master changes his mind! “What about the weeds?” they ask. “Should we go and remove them?” And in the most

unusual part of all, surprisingly the master says “no, wait until the harvest. That’s the appropriate time to separate the good from the bad.”

That’s the parable. The interpretation provides both an explanation and, not surprisingly, some extra confusion – an explanation not only of the elements but of the unusual answer from the master. The interpretation is allegorical, assigning a meaning to each of the elements in the parable itself. It also suggests the existence of a church situation in which Jesus’ disciples are tempted to become involved in purging evil. Because “the field is the world” (v.38) it is a bit unclear as to whether the desire of Jesus’ followers is to remove evil from the whole world, or as is more likely, only from the church itself. Matthew’s church certainly contained undesirable elements (7:21-23 – not everyone who says ...)(18:15-20 – if anyone sins ...) and in that church, as in others even today, the desire to achieve purity and perfection seems to rise up to overwhelm the obligations to accept, forgive and restore. Why is it that we move so quickly to the “tossing in the fire, where there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth?”

The Master’s answer to ‘wait’, to ‘let them grow together’ is at complete odds with the gleeful anticipation of a huge bonfire, if not a burning at the stake, so it helps a bit that the explanation gives three concrete reasons for the master’s injunction against efforts to wade in and sort out the weeds.

First, that kind of identifying and plucking out is premature. It’s not time yet, he says. Wait it out; let them grow together until the harvest. There will be time enough to sort it out later.

Secondly and more important, attempts to cull the weeds result in uprooting and discarding the wheat as well. In this era of superpower ‘intervention’ and in a time of unbounded political speaking with forked tongues, this has come to be called “collateral damage”, a euphemism for the accidental killing of civilians who happened to be living next door to where the anti-aircraft gun used to be situated, before it and ten houses around it and the occupants of those houses were transformed into a smoking crater. We have smoking craters in pews in our churches also – they are those empty spots in the pews resulting from a similar overzealous application of spiritual weapons against perceived impurity. The message in the parable and in the interpretation is clear: the danger of driving away the faithful in purity-seeking pogroms is not worth the benefit. “Leave them grow together”, the master says.

“But what about the weeds?” people still ask. How quickly we all want to rush into rules and regulations and proscriptions against this and that. I guess it’s because having rules is easier than having to think. It’s so much easier to set up a list of “don’ts” than it is to explore how the love of God in Christ can be displayed in any particular situation or to any particular person. It’s so much easier to exclude those we think are weeds, isn’t it, even if it does reveal a gaping lack of trust in God in our own faith? The only plausible reason I can think of for culling the ‘weeds’ from a congregation is a fear that somehow their ‘evilness’ will rub off on us and we will fall prey to their wiles and guiles, but that is an implicit statement that we do not believe that God will support, sustain and protect us in our faith and even an implicit denial of the effectiveness of God’s grace in us. To be sure, there are rare occasions when we need to protect ourselves and the church from deliberately divisive or dangerous behaviour by individuals, but all too often the drive for perceived purity causes many who are really wheat to be uprooted and burnt by exclusive and hurtful behaviour from people of faith within the church.

And if the injunction from the master to let the wheat and the weeds grow together to avoid collateral damage isn’t enough reason, the third and final reason certainly should be. “The Son of Man will send his angels and **they** (emphasis mine – **the angels**) will do the weeding” –

in short, “it’s not your job”, says the Son of Man. Both in the parable and in the interpretation it is abundantly clear that the job of sorting out who is wheat and who is weed is not ours, but is reserved for Christ himself. (Thank God!) If half the effort that people put into trying to justify arbitrary definitions of what makes someone a weed would instead go into sowing the good seed, the church and the kingdom would be a fuller and more robust crop.

But again the message is clear here: it’s not our job to impose judgment. The message to Matthew’s church and to our church is not to fret about evildoers. More than that, our job is to provide a living example of love and acceptance. Unlike plants, which cannot change from a weed to wheat, people touched by the love of God in Christ can indeed change. We are called in our faith to help that change occur and that can only happen with positive encouragement instead of negative discouragement. Only when the weeds grow together with the wheat can they see and emulate the wheat. Far from the fearful images of fire and brimstone, the root message here is not a threatening word, but a comforting word.

And in that understanding, there is another subtle word of comfort as well. So many people within the faith, good saints all, worry about being themselves weeds instead of wheat. They inflict a kind of collateral damage upon themselves, worrying that they are not totally effectively disguised in the wheat field and that someone will soon come along to point them out and uproot them. To all you who worry that you are weeds instead of wheat, hear the message of grace and acceptance here. The decision is not yours – the decision is Christ’s, in whose love you are indeed wheat; the same Christ who not only sowed the good seed but died that you might spring up with abundant life. The same Christ who declares with the full authority of the Father who sent him that you are his. The same Christ whose blood filled the cup of the new covenant, sealing forever your status with him before God.

So, what about the weeds? Don’t fret about them – it’s not your job. God will take care of it all in good time. In the meantime, celebrate your acceptance in Christ, grow together as tall and as productive as you can and look forward to being brought in as part of God’s harvest.