

Sermon

The 7th Sunday after Pentecost | Matthew 13:24-30, 36-43 | Peter Lane

Look at the person to your left. Look at the person to your right. By the end of this sermon we will have ascertained who among you is a stalk of wheat and who is a weed. A pure church can be ours and so we will pull out the weeds, and bind them together, and throw them into... Wow. Sorry. Wrong sermon.

Any passage that speaks about a furnace of fire alongside weeping and gnashing of teeth is a challenge to preach in a progressive parish. But Jesus told parables to tease the imagination and challenge accepted values. So, let's do it. What I am going to do is look at our parable in three contexts: the context of Jesus and the story (the year 30 context), the context of the community Matthew was writing for (the year 90 context), and our context. When I get to our context, I'll ask the two questions this parable seems to ask. Who is in? and What happens to those who are out? Purity and Judgement.

1st: the context of Jesus and the story (year 30 context)

At the beginning of his ministry in Matthew Jesus proclaims that the Kingdom of God has come near. Crowds flock to him and he heals. An amazing beginning. But by chapter 13, things have changed. Jesus is now being rejected by some. The Pharisees being conspiring about how to destroy him and describe Jesus as Beelzebul, the ruler of demons. Not everybody accepts Jesus' message and his followers are wondering why. The leader they were hoping for would have gained more power and would have been able to do something about evil. And so Jesus tells parables using stories from agriculture to help them better understand the Kingdom of Heaven. Jesus is using parables like ours to let his disciples know that this Kingdom is not what they might have been expecting. Jesus will not be getting rid of the weeds during his ministry. And, as we know, the rejection of Jesus gets worse and worse in Matthew till it seems no one is left on the inside--everything is weeds--when Jesus hangs on the cross.

2nd: the context of the community Matthew was writing for (year 90 context)

Matthew was written around the year 80 or 90 by a Jewish Christian to a group of Jewish Christians who are no longer in communion with the Pharisee-led Judaism that came after the destruction of the Jerusalem temple in the year 70. So there is a split now between Christians and Jews. And there is a divide among the Christians themselves too. Matthew speaks of "false prophets" and of Christians who want complete freedom from obedience to the laws of the Torah which angers the more serious minded followers. Matthew is the only gospel to include our parable of the Wheat and the Weeds. And it seems aimed at the situation of the year 90, reassuring the morally and ascetically serious Christians that judgement will come to those who do not do the will of God and urging them to leave that cleansing to God.

3rd: Our Context

Should we seek a pure church? And what about judgment for evil? We'll get some help from church history in answering those questions.

Should we have a pure church? Only allow true believers who follow the strict ethical code of the Sermon on the Mount? Let's jump to the 4th Century for an answer. In 303 Diocletian, Emperor of Rome, began the Great Persecution. In North Africa, Christians were asked to give their scriptures to be burned. Those who did so were called "traditores" or one who hands over. It is where we get our word "Traitor." After the persecution ended, some Christians thought that the sacrament (Bread and Wine) consecrated by any priest who had been a "traditore" was invalid. "Get 'em out. Out!" These Donatists thought the church must remain holy and not be corrupted by these traitors. The broader Catholic church, led in part by St. Augustine, differed saying that the holiness of the minister did not affect the validity of the sacrament. Augustine said, "I tell you of a truth, my Beloved, even in these high seats there is both wheat, and tares (weeds), and among the laity there is wheat, and tares (weeds). Let the

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good tolerate the bad; let the bad change themselves, and imitate the good." Augustine's wisdom did not keep arguments about whether the church ought to be pure from popping up. John Cotton, in colonial Boston, argued for a very pure church. Roger Williams who founded colonial Providence argued for a tiny bit more inclusive church. In the Episcopal church today, the official doctrine says that only the baptized should receive communion and only the confirmed can serve on the Vestry. Some parishes, including ours, invite all to communion and any called to leadership onto the Vestry. And our parable could be read to support either position. The rigorists, the ones who think the church must maintain holiness, read our parable about being just about the church. While it might be hard to distinguish between the wheat and the weeds in the church, it is easy to distinguish between those who are traitors and those who are not, those who have been baptized and those who have not. For that group, the parable allows separation between church and world. Another reading sees this parable about being about the whole world. I align myself with these folks. (Does the explanation not say, "the field is the world?") In this reading, it is very difficult to discern who is good and who is evil. Or as it seems to me, since we all are some mix of good and evil, since the line between the two runs through our hearts, it is nearly impossible to decide who is more moved by good and who more by evil. In this case, we must welcome all. It is not our business to judge. God is God and we are not. Purity is not our business.

But what then. We can follow St. Augustine and Roger Williams and be ok with a mixed community because we know in the end the evildoers will be burned in the furnace of fire? We can say, "all, without exception, are invited" because the bad ones will eventually experience weeping and gnashing of teeth? I can't be the only one in this room uncomfortable with that judgement. But let me put it a different way. Would we be ok with a parent who had no consequences for a child's misbehavior? A society that took no recourse against evil? Would we approve of a God who

made peace with oppression? A God who stood idly by in the face of evil? I don't think so. We preach a loving God here. As we ought. But love not sufficiently steeped in justice is weak tea. How can we not wonder what God's relation is to the evil in our world. That was certainly on Abraham Lincoln's mind at the end of the Civil War, when evil seemed to abound. In his 2nd Inaugural Address, Lincoln did not speak of a gently loving God but rather reached for a God well-steeped in justice. Did God's justice require that the Civil War go on, Lincoln wondered, "until every drop of blood drawn with the lash shall be paid by another drawn with the sword"?

Both Matthew's imagery of gnashing teeth and Lincoln's imagery of sword drawn blood draw me up short. But let me not be the preacher who only preaches a squishy love and lets evil run rampant while we sing. There is one more brutal image to set alongside gnashing teeth and drops of blood: the Cross of Christ. I have spent enough time with that brutal image to have become comfortable with it. One powerful understanding of the cross is that on it God himself bore all of the retributive justice necessary for God to be a God of justice. God knows what is wheat and what is weed but instead of requiring future gnashing of teeth, Jesus gnashed his teeth on the cross. God knows who is driven by evil, but instead of throwing that one into the furnace of fire, Jesus entered that hell from the Cross.

As we pray together at the conclusion of each Good Friday liturgy, "Lord Jesus Christ, Son of the living God, we pray you to set your passion, cross, and death between your judgment and our souls, now and in the hour of our death."

Such is the Kingdom of Heaven.

Amen.
