

Sunday: Seventh Sunday after Pentecost

Date: July 19, 2020

Text: Matthew 13:24-30, 36-43

Title: "Not So Fast"

Grace and peace to you from God our Father and our Lord Jesus Christ.

Please pray with me.

I have a confession to make to you today. I am not a master gardener. I don't have a brown thumb, but it certainly is not a bright green thumb. BJ and I planted a garden this year and have seen some pretty good growth. In fact, the tomato plants are casting a shadow on the beans, beets, and peas. The cucumber plant has engulfed the peas, peppers and is now cascading over the edge of the raised garden we have. The first crop of radishes were chewed on by something that left most of them unfit for human consumption. We have plenty of growth but nothing to show for our efforts yet.

We have been spared the plight of the farmer in the parable of Jesus today. We don't have many weeds in the garden. The ones that have popped up were easily identified and pulled. Thankfully, we did not harm the good plants in the process. Fortunately, we don't have enemies like the one found in the parable of the "Wheat and the Weeds."

The parable is pretty straight forward as told by Jesus, the cast of characters are easy to comprehend and the setting is relatable, but the scenario is a little odd. Who has ever heard of an enemy sowing weed seeds in the freshly sown field of wheat?

In the parable, when the wheat sprouts the owner and his servants are happy with the progress, but then the weeds start to spring up. Incredulous, the servants go their master and confirm that the seed that was sown was good. The Master confirms it and he identifies the problem. The enemy has attempted to destroy all that he is growing by spreading weed seeds over top of the good seeds.

As the crowds, who were hanging on Jesus' every word, heard this parable they pondered the events and came away with their own interpretations. As a parable about the kingdom of heaven, the hearers probably thought that Jesus was talking about the present time where people would need to endure the Roman occupiers for a while longer. God had planted them, the children of Abraham, in

the Promised Land and now God's enemy has sown the invasive weed of the Roman Empire among them as weeds among the wheat. The day for payback was coming though. God was allowing them to continue to rule, but that would soon be coming to an end. When he came to establish his reign on earth, he would gather up the vile Roman soldiers and bind up the Roman Empire and destroy them with fire.

The Pharisees probably heard the parable as another indictment against them. Jesus must have been referring to them as the weeds. They detested Jesus and his ministry and all that he stood for. He upset all that they have built up over the years. Though they probably thought they were faithful to the Mosaic Code and honorable members of the Abrahamic lineage, Jesus kept pointing out their departure from the will of God. He hammered on their distortion of God's Law to make themselves appear righteous. He warned people of the bad yeast that ruined the loaf. Was Jesus saying that they would be gathered by the reapers and burned? Would they be excluded from the eternal reign of God in the new age? Jesus parable once again stirred them up against him as the implication of the Pharisees being the weeds would be considered a supreme insult. As religious leaders of the day they could not let this insult go "unpunished." The Pharisees and other religious leaders of the day are an early example of what we call today, the "cancel culture." They plan, plot and pursue discrediting and ultimately eliminating Jesus.

Both interpretations appear to be appropriate to the situation in the first century region of Israel. Both interpretations would make people pause and consider where they were in the grand scheme of things from God's perspective. Yet it leaves significant question as to what Jesus' intention was in telling the parable.

Even the disciples were flummoxed by the parable. What was Jesus' intended message for his hearers. As the crowds depart the disciples came to Jesus and said, "Explain to us the parable of the weeds of the field."

Jesus begins his explanation with a listing of the players in the parable and who they represent. His identification still leaves some room for application to various situations. In fact, over the millenniums since Jesus told the parable a couple of interpretations have vied for prominence.

First, there was the idea that the field is the world meant that the field was the world at large and the cultural setting for each individual. This would mean that people had to live in a world along the lines of what the crowds would have thought. Christians had to live among the pagan and heathen hordes. For early

Christianity that meant being subject to Roman rulers and followers of the pantheon of gods they worshiped. This meant attempting to live at peace with non-believers and believers alike. Christians were not to root out unbelief or false belief and cancel the offender(s).

The other interpretation is more in line with the perception of the Pharisees. The world is thought to be the Christian Church and the weeds are those who were not true believers. This is implicated in the identification of the invisible church and the visible church.

The visible church is defined in Christianity as the people who call themselves followers of Jesus, true Christians and those who are not. This would include those who attend church each week, as well as those who attend infrequently. It includes “Christians” who embrace a message that is contrary to the Word of God given to us in the Scriptures. Like the Pharisees, who had good intention, they demand that people obey their idea of what worship looks like, and what true obedience is, even if it is in conflict with what God had given us in the Scriptures and at times adding things that do not appear in the Word. This has manifested itself in the church through the years as “legalism,” “Pietism,” “Gospel reductionism,” “antinomianism,” and a number of other “isms.”

These are human problems we all struggle with. The Christian Church is populated with many and various ideas that Satan has place in the heads of people in the church. You must do this or that to please God and to be numbered with the elect. On the other side of the coin are those who show up occasionally to check a box on the religion checklist. Maybe they show up on Christmas and Easter, maybe not even that often. And then there are people who love to express their condition as “spiritual but not religious” who don’t associate with any worshiping church body but identify themselves as “Christians.” There are all sorts of people who identify as Christian that Jesus identifies as weeds spread among the wheat. These are the sons of the evil one whose lives are intertwined with the children of the kingdom.

Both of these interpretations and applications fit our world today. However, Jesus explanation to the disciples appears to point to life in the church. God has sowed the good seed of faithful Christians in the church. Into the worshiping assembly, Satan has planted the weeds of his followers. These sons of the evil one seek to deceive faithful Christians and choke their faith.

The servants of the master in the parable have a solution for the weeds. They propose to pull the weeds before they can do any more damage to the good plants. Thinking they can identify the weeds and rid the fertile field of these pests. But the master, in his wisdom says “No.” Jesus, identified as the sower of the seed, directs his servants to leave the weeds to grow with the wheat. In terms of modern farming this seems counterintuitive. Won’t the weeds take nutrients from the good plants. Won’t the weeds choke out the wheat. Won’t the minions of evil lure good Christians away from the faith? Our Lord rejects the idea of “canceling” the weeds.

We like the servants in the parable have a desire to rid the body of Christ of the noxious invaders in the assembly. We can become like the Pharisees and compare everyone to our standard Christian standards and seek to be rid of the ones who could make us unclean. Pietism is alive and well in the Church. When others do not live up to our standards, we want be rid of them or push them to conform to our ideas. The pietist seeks to shun those who do not demonstrate their commitment to the faith. They seek to uproot the weed, taking on the work Jesus gives to the angels at the time of his return.

But Jesus, the Lord of Creation, has a different solution. He says Let them be”. Let them stay in the worshiping community. As the great Physician, Jesus demonstrated many times that what man thought was impossible was possible through him. Jesus in his authority caused people born blind, lame, and mute to be recreated in him with sight, the ability to walk and the gift of speech. Jesus healed the people he encountered. More than just healing though, he gave them life; he gave them hope; he forgave their sins. This Jesus is able to change the weed, the minion of evil, into a son of the kingdom. We fear the corruption of the faithful, Jesus sees the redemption of the lost.

This is a powerful message to us who live in a world marked by its propensity to be a “cancel culture.” Every day we are bombarded with demands to enact “social justice” on someone for something they did. Actors and actresses are removed from TV shows and movies for comments they made decades ago. Jokes told by people in their teens are dredged up to ruin careers and lives of people who held no ill will toward a group or individual. People live in fear of being “cancelled” for past actions that were innocuous at the time. Of recent note are all the calls to support one cause or another. If you do not support “Black Lives Matter” you are deemed a racist and calls to cancel you begin to ring out. If you

remain silent, negative intentions are imputed to you and the calls to cancel you begin. If you support the reality that all lives matter and are valuable in the eyes of God, you are part of the problem, not a part of the solution.

This behavior has impacted the church both inside and out. When people do not act as someone thinks they should, the inclination has become to be rid of them. When sin is discovered, a pound of flesh is demanded. If you don't agree with me on how things should be done, you need to change. We do not have the ability of God to look into the human heart and see the working of the Spirit. What we dislike and consider "weedy" behavior, may in fact not be contrary to God's Will. Our pietistic tendencies cloud our vision in many ways. I thank God I am not the judge of people's motives and behaviors.

Jesus tells us today to let the wayward, the ones who don't agree with our ideas, and the sinner grow along side everyone else in the church. It is true, sin does require punishment. Thanks be to God that the pound of flesh demanded has been paid by Jesus. No one is perfect. None of us can properly be the judge to decide who gets cast out. That decision is far above our pay grade. That is the decision of God, and his plan is to gather the sons of the evil one when Jesus returns. Jesus, the sower of the good seed, the master of the sons of the kingdom, will come again to judge both the living and the dead, whose kingdom will have no end.

This parable does not tell us to gloss over sinful behavior or to accept the choking activities of the weeds but calls us to be watchful for those things that could lead us astray. We do not ignore the erring brother or sister but encourage them to hear the true Gospel of salvation. Christ died for you. Christ desires your presence, in person, in the worshiping community with the sons of the kingdom. God has established the church to provide a place for His people to gather around Word and Sacrament. This is the place where he delivers grace without reservation even on those who are "weedy."

May the Gospel of hope found in our Savior keep us faithful, even though weeds are present, through the gifts of faith planted and nurtured by the Holy Spirit, until we are gathered into the barn with the other sons of the kingdom.

Amen.