

Stop Pulling the Weeds!

Discovering the Heart of God through Jesus' Parables

Matthew 13: 24-30

November 4, 2018

He put another parable before them, saying, "The kingdom of heaven may be compared to a man who sowed good seed in his field,²⁵ but while his men were sleeping, his enemy came and sowed weeds among the wheat and went away.²⁶ So when the plants came up and bore grain, then the weeds appeared also.²⁷ And the servants of the master of the house came and said to him, 'Master, did you not sow good seed in your field? How then does it have weeds?'²⁸ He said to them, 'An enemy has done this.' So the servants said to him, 'Then do you want us to go and gather them?'²⁹ But he said, 'No, lest in gathering the weeds you root up the wheat along with them.³⁰ Let both grow together until the harvest, and at harvest time I will tell the reapers, "Gather the weeds first and bind them in bundles to be burned, but gather the wheat into my barn."'"

Matthew 13:24-30 (ESV)

When Mary & I moved to West Liberty 16 years ago one of the things we liked about the house we bought was the large garden that the previous owner had in the back yard. I'm not a great estimator of measurement but I would guess it was about 20 feet by 40-50 feet. I thought about how nice it would be to have a garden that size. We had a small garden in New York with tomatoes, zucchini, peppers, but to have one that size! So that first year we moved to West Liberty I planted flowers around the outside, tomatoes, zucchini, peppers, cucumbers, even tried pumpkins. We were going to have a nice garden. But it was a pretty rainy summer and the weeds started to come, and then come some more, and come some more. I tried to keep up with pulling them out but it was no use. So the next year I tried again. The weather wasn't that much better, so the weeds came again. I discovered that big gardens are nice but they take a lot of work and you better have enough time to keep up on pulling the weeds. We might have tried the garden again a third year but once again the weeds took over. So, I thought to myself I know how to take care of this, I got the lawn mower out and I cut it all down. I sold the roto-tiller to my next door neighbor. Mary took it pretty hard at first but eventually she got over it. I don't even think I planted grass seed, but eventually the weeds and the grass filled our garden in. So much so, ten years later you can't even tell where the garden was. It's a nice mix of grass and weeds, much like the rest of my yard. From a distance you can't tell what is what. And it so much easier to take care of. Fortunately the neighbor who I sold the roto-tiller to has a nice large garden and he brings his extras over and Thoman's has a nice produce section where we can get all the fresh vegetables we need with a lot less work!

Jesus' parable this morning which we are looking at is known as the Parable of the Weeds. The nice thing about the Parable of the Weeds is that it is one of the parables that we find Jesus' explanation of its meaning:

³⁶ Then he left the crowds and went into the house. And his disciples came to him, saying, "Explain to us the parable of the weeds of the field."³⁷ He answered, "The one who sows the good seed is the Son of Man.³⁸ The field is the world, and the good seed is the sons of the kingdom. The weeds are the sons of the evil one,³⁹ and the enemy who sowed them is the devil. The harvest is the end of the age, and the reapers are angels.⁴⁰ Just as the weeds are

gathered and burned with fire, so will it be at the end of the age. ⁴¹ *The Son of Man will send his angels, and they will gather out of his kingdom all causes of sin and all law-breakers,* ⁴² *and throw them into the fiery furnace. In that place there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth.* ⁴³ *Then the righteous will shine like the sun in the kingdom of their Father. He who has ears, let him hear.*
Matthew 13:36-43 (ESV)

The Greek word that is used there for weed in the parable of the weeds is what is known as darnel. Darnel is a weed but it looks amazingly similar to wheat. There are some weeds that when one looks at them, you know they are weeds. There are others that are hard to tell from the plants themselves. Which is exactly why Mary doesn't let me weed her flower gardens or even go near them with the week wacker ☺

The main point of Jesus' Parable of the Weeds is that often it is hard to tell who really are God's people and who are not and it is not our responsibility to do the weeding.

Yet, throughout the history of the church we have often taken that responsibility on ourselves. For us Mennonites and Anabaptists we even have words for it, "shunning," or "the ban." When that doesn't work we even have a stronger word and action, "ex-communication." The theological principal of "the ban," "shunning" or "ex-communication" was present in our earliest confession of faith and just about every confession of faith since.

"The Schleithem Confession" (1527) –

II. We are agreed as follows on the ban: The ban shall be employed with all those who have given themselves to the Lord, to walk in His commandments, and with all those who are baptized into the one body of Christ and who are called brethren or sisters, and yet who slip sometimes and fall into error and sin, being inadvertently overtaken. The same shall be admonished twice in secret and the third time openly disciplined or banned according to the command of Christ, found in Matthew 18:

¹⁵ *"If your brother sins against you, go and tell him his fault, between you and him alone. If he listens to you, you have gained your brother."* ¹⁶ *But if he does not listen, take one or two others along with you, that every charge may be established by the evidence of two or three witnesses.* ¹⁷ *If he refuses to listen to them, tell it to the church. And if he refuses to listen even to the church, let him be to you as a Gentile and a tax collector.* ¹⁸ *Truly, I say to you, whatever you bind on earth shall be bound in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth shall be loosed in heaven.* ¹⁹ *Again I say to you, if two of you agree on earth about anything they ask, it will be done for them by my Father in heaven.* ²⁰ *For where two or three are gathered in my name, there am I among them."*
Matthew 18:15-20 (ESV)

Jesus' teaching in Matt. 18:15-20 is sandwiched in between his *Parable of the Lost Sheep*, where Jesus teaches that God the Father is not only concerned for the 99 sheep who are in the fold/flock, but also for the one who has distanced himself, wandered off, or maybe been sent off by the others, and his *Parable of the Unforgiving Servant*, where Jesus teaches that we need to forgive those who sin against us, over and over again, because that is what God the Father does for us. Most likely, Jesus' teaching found in Matthew 18, being sandwiched between those two parables by that gospel writer is not just a coincidence.

Throughout the centuries many have taken on that fourth step in the process listed in Matthew 18, ex-communicating the person from the church or the fellowship with the caveat saying, “the intent is not to keep the person from the fellowship for good, the intent is that by removing that person from the fellowship, hopefully that person will see his or her erring ways, confess, repent and want to be welcomed back in.

My question is “how has that worked out?” How has that worked for those throughout the years who were removed from the fellowship for serving in the military, or divorce, or sexual sin? The truth is very few ever came back to the church they were removed from and many never came back to any church. Why don’t we follow the process outlined there in Matthew 18 for those who hoard too much of their own money and don’t give to the poor, or those of us who might gossip, or are judgmental?

There is something more going on in Matthew 18:15-20 than just an outline of the process of how to remove people from the fellowship of a church. It is an outline of how we are to deal with conflict, differences and sin among us. Interestingly we often use the phrase “for where two or three are gathered in Jesus’ name, he is there among us” when we are talking about gathering together to pray and/or worship. When Jesus used the phrase “for where two or three are gathered in my name, there I am among them,” he was talking about gathering together to resolve conflict, differences, sin.

The phrase, *let him be to you as a Gentile and a tax collector*, was not meant to be so much as a strategy of punishment, but as a change in the community’s approach to the offender. In fact Jesus’ use of the words “Gentile and tax collector” was anything but a categorical rejection of them. Throughout his ministry Jesus was accused of being a “friend of tax collectors and sinners” (Matthew 11:19).

His phrase, *Truly, I say to you, whatever you bind on earth shall be bound in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth shall be loosed in heaven,* might just be saying “are you going to bind and loose people by the law or are you going to bind and loose them by grace? Similar to his earlier words found in his *Sermon on the Mount*, *“Judge not, that you be not judged. For with the judgment you pronounce you will be judged, and with the measure you use it will be measured to you”* (Matthew 7:1-2).

How do we deal with people whom we are in conflict with, those who we disagree with, those who are caught in besetting sin? That which really is all of us. We all have some besetting sin. We deal with it the same way that Jesus deals with us.

We deal with it in the same way that Paul wrote to the early church –
I therefore, a prisoner for the Lord, urge you to walk in a manner worthy of the calling to which you have been called,² with all humility and gentleness, with patience, bearing with one another in love,³ eager to maintain the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace.⁴ There is one body and one Spirit—just as you were called to the one hope that belongs to your call—⁵ one Lord, one faith, one baptism,⁶ one God and Father of all, who is over all and through all and in all.⁷ But grace was given to each one of us according to the measure of Christ's gift.

Ephesians 4:1-7 (ESV)

What is the ministry to which we have all been called? The ministry to which we have all been called as Christians is the ministry of reconciliation:

¹⁷ Therefore, if anyone is in Christ, he is a new creation. The old has passed away; behold, the new has come. ¹⁸ All this is from God, who through Christ reconciled us to himself and gave us the ministry of reconciliation; ¹⁹ that is, in Christ God was reconciling the world to himself, not counting their trespasses against them, and entrusting to us the message of reconciliation.

2 Corinthians 5:17-19 (ESV)

Is it an easy ministry? Certainly not! It is much easier to pull the weeds than practice the ministry of reconciliation. This morning I have a confession to make – my natural human response to handling conflict and differences is much the same way as I handled the weeds in my garden. Just cut it all down, let them blend in with the grass so you really don't see them anymore and just pretend they are not there. I think it's the way most of us handle conflict and the differences among us. I think that is our natural human tendency.

Before I applied for the position of Conference Minister I had a few people approach me, people from Conference, but outside of Oak Grove, and they asked me, "have you even thought about putting in for the position of Conference Minister, you seem to do so well in handling conflict and differences?" Maybe it appears that way on the outside, but I can tell you I don't think I do so well on the inside. But since I have accepted the position I have heard God speaking to me saying "you better get this Ministry of Reconciliation down pretty quickly, you're going to need it."

I have been reading a very good book, entitled *Ambassadors of Reconciliation* by a Mennonite couple, Ched Myers and Elaine Enns. Well not good in the sense that it is an easy read, or that it is a happy feel good story, or not challenging, but good in the sense that it is about God and about God's intentions for this world.

"Reconciliation is not something accomplished *by* Christ *for* God, nor inflicted *on* Christ *by* God, but forged *by* God *in* Christ."

Last week Alex talked about "The Cost of Discipleship" or "Counting the Cost of Discipleship." Well, for those of us who are followers of Jesus, Jesus demonstrated for us and taught "Non-violent Discipleship." And non-violent discipleship isn't just about not taking up weapons and/or fighting in wars, it is also about how we talk with one another and about one another, it is about how we interact with those whom we disagree with, and even our enemies.

For Jesus, the cost of "non-violent discipleship" was as high as it gets. It cost him his life here on earth, in one of the most horrific ways possible.

Pulling weeds, excluding people from the kingdom of God is about as violent of an act as one can get. Some people even pull themselves thinking they are the wheat and all the rest are the weeds. So we pull ourselves and we go to another garden or field and plant ourselves there for a while, not really knowing who exactly is the weeds and who exactly is the wheat.// Only God knows that and only God knows when is the right time to separate the two.

Ched Myers and Elaine Enns go so far to say that:

“The pious misunderstanding of Jesus’ pledge of accompaniment [to be with us wherever two or three are gathered in his name trying to accomplish reconciliation] unwittingly reveals the greatest weakness among our contemporary churches: we are notoriously incompetent at facing conflict and abuse. Indeed, many church members would sooner start a new church or denomination than engage in the demanding work of resolving conflict or correcting oppressive behavior, as the history of our churches and denominations attest.”

If it makes you feel better this isn’t just a contemporary church problem, it is a 2,000 year church problem.

If Jesus were here in person addressing the church today, I think he would say “stop pulling the weeds, stop devouring one another, learn how to overcome your differences in a non-violent manner, learn how to love one another in the same way that I have loved you, the future of my kingdom depends on it.”

Let us Pray:

Lord God, we confess before you today, as your people, that we have been notoriously incompetent at facing conflict and abuse and for that we are really sorry. Help us to be the new creation you have called us to be – humble, gentle, patient and bearing with one another in love, for your glory, for your kingdom, and for the world. May we too be forged by you, In Christ!

In His Name we Pray, Amen.