

Kingdom Secrets: Growing Patiently

Sermon preached at Foundry United Methodist Church
on Sunday, July 21, 2002
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Matthew 13: 24-30

Foundry Church received a letter this week from someone who had come to our Friday Walk-In Ministry for help. One of the services Rev. Jennifer Knutsen and our volunteers provide is to help people get copies of their birth certificates so that they can qualify for services from governmental and other agencies.

The letter we received this week says (I will read it the way it is written):

"Dear Church Members: I do thank very much for your support and gift of \$15.00 [the birth certificate fee]. This meant to me a great solution to my needs, because without an ID, I am lost. Now more than ever are asking for one everywhere. May the good Lord bless you and prosper richly for your good deed. Prayerfully yours."

And then the letter is signed.

Sometimes what seems a little to us can make all the difference in the world to someone else. We can give \$15 and hardly miss it. The same \$15 can change someone's life. Thank you for supporting this ministry.

Jane and I are gratified to be part of a church that would receive a note like this.

For several Sundays this summer, I am preaching a sermon miniseries on the topic "Kingdom Secrets." All the sermons are taken from the 13th chapter of Matthew and the overall text is a portion of Matthew 13: 11, where Jesus tells his disciples: "To you it has been given to know the secrets of the kingdom of heaven."

If we are disciples, it is given to us to know the secrets of heaven. Kingdom Secrets.

Let us pray: "O Thou in whose presence our souls take delight, whom in affliction we call. Be especially present to us today in this service and in the words I am about to speak. In Christ's name. Amen.

God plants seeds of love in our hearts. They fall on hard places and among thorns, but God sows extravagantly until some seed find tender places and take root and grow.

Then the enemy plants weeds in our wheat field. We have weeds growing in the wheat fields of our lives. I don't imagine that I have to explain or defend this metaphor this morning.

I am convinced that most of us are much more aware of the weeds in our lives than we of the good wheat. Years ago I used to use a trust-building exercise in small groups. I would ask participants to write down three of their weaknesses and then three of their strengths. Generally people came up with three weaknesses in about 30 seconds and they were often unbelievably cruel to themselves. They would write down things like: inveterate procrastination, poor money management, selfishness ... very self-critical things.

Then when it was time to write down three strengths, it would take people forever to come up with them. People would think and think to try to come up with three good things to say about themselves. Usually they only came up with one or two and they would often damn themselves with faint praise. Their strength might be: "pretty good in math." An inveterate procrastinator, poor money manager and selfish, on one hand, but, hey, on the other hand, I'm good in math.

I finally stopped doing the exercise because it was too painful. We tend, in my experience, to be much more critical of ourselves than we are self-affirming. We are much more aware of the weeds growing in the wheat fields of our lives than we are the good grain.

As a pastor, I try to remember that you are probably already well aware of the weeds in your life, and there is no need for me to point them out to you, although I confess I may be tempted to do so from time to time.

In the church, it is hard for us not to be irritated by each other's weeds. I've discovered, during the last seven or eight years when I have been serving on conference staff and sitting in the pew as an honorary lay person, that the pastor's weeds are particularly irritating. You'd think if anyone could get rid of the weeds out of their life, it would be the pastor. But apparently pastors have as much trouble with weeds in our wheat fields as everybody else, sometimes more.

James Glasse, when he was president of Lancaster Theological Seminary, used to say that being a pastor didn't necessarily make you spiritual; in fact, the very opposite tendency might be true.

Look at it this way, he said, being a lawyer doesn't necessarily make you honest. In fact, lawyers face a larger temptation than the rest of us to be dishonest because they are better at figuring out how to get away with it.

Being a doctor, he said, doesn't necessarily make you healthy. In fact, doctors face a larger temptation than the rest of us to abuse their bodies because they know how to keep going without really living healthy lifestyles.

In the same way, he said, pastors know how to act pious without really being spiritual.

You will discover I have as many weeds in my wheat field as anybody and some of them may really irritate you.

So, what do we do about the weeds in the wheat fields of our lives? What do we do about the unwanted,

undesirable things about us that ought not be part of who we are, but are.

We might ask the question more forcefully in the first person singular: What do I do about the unwanted, undesirable things in me that really ought not be part of who I am, and that I wish weren't there, and that you wish weren't there in me (and the better you get to know me, the more you wish they were not part of me), but that still are.

What do we do about the weeds? Jesus' answer staggers me. It amazes me. But here it is: "Let them alone. Let the weeds and the wheat grow together, until the harvest. Because if you try to pull the weeds, you might inadvertently uproot the good grain at the same time." I find it hard to believe Jesus said that, but here it is in Matthew 13.

The point of this sermon series about Matthew 13, "Kingdom Secrets," is that the Gospel of Matthew teaches that there are things we can not know about God and the way God works in the world based on conventional thinking, popular piety or civil religion. The god we assume in my minds and hearts based on our own thinking and feeling - the god at the bottom of the cellar stairs of our psyches - may not really be the real God whom we come to know as disciples of Jesus Christ.

So, as followers of Jesus, we come to understand God in ways that may be different from conventional or popular understandings of God.

The (small-g) god who lives at the bottom of the cellar steps of my psyche would not tell me to let weeds grow in the wheat field of my life.

My mother (from whom I learned more about God, good and bad, than anyone else) could no more allow a weed to grow in her garden than she could tolerate me saying a bad word without washing my mouth out with soap.

After she was done weeding her own garden, if you didn't get around to it soon enough to please her, my mother would weed yours, too. And if pulling up the weeds meant the whole crop came with it, so be it. In the final analysis, if you had to choose, it was more important to have a garden that would not make the neighbors think you were too lazy to pull the weeds out of it than to actually have a crop.

But the God of Matthew's Gospel says to let the weeds alone until the day of harvest. Then the weeds and the wheat will both be harvested. The weeds will be burned away, and the wheat will be gathered into my barn.

What does this kingdom secret parable tell us about God and the way God works in our world?

The parable suggests that God is patient with us. God is probably much more patient with us than we are with ourselves.

God gives us time to grow. A friend who is a pastoral counselor says that, as important as his work is, life really is the best pastoral counselor. Life is the best teacher.

Mark Gibbard uses an image I like. God is patient with us because God wants a relationship with us. "If you want your little girl to hold your hand and walk with you," he says, "no matter how much you have to do and how urgent your business is, you've got to slow down."

God wants to hold our hand and walk with us, and so God is willing to be patient and walk with us. This parable is trying to suggest that God is unbelievably patient.

And, of course, since we are called to be like God, we ought to be patient with one another, too. Anyone here have somebody in your life with whom you are running out of patience? If God chooses to be patient with us, despite the weeds in our lives, how ought we then to be patient with one another?

The parable also suggests that God cares more about the harvest than about the purity of the crop. God is more concerned that we grow and produce a harvest for the sake of the kingdom than that we become pure.

Which is not to say that God is unconcerned about purity. The weeds in our lives are eventually thrown on the fire and burned. They don't make God happy.

But in the final analysis, God is more concerned that we grow and bear a harvest for the kingdom of heaven than that we become perfect. At the very least, we shouldn't ought to wait until we've cleared all the weeds out of our lives to begin serving God.

The kingdom of heaven is a kingdom of love. It is not a kingdom of perfect people; it is a kingdom of perfect love. The psychotherapist, Rollo May, a student of Paul Tillich says, in his book *Power and Innocence*, that virtue can not be gained merely by leaving behind vices. Our humanity is not defined by personal righteousness, but by the capacity for compassion and charity and solidarity.

Rollo May says a very interesting thing in the final chapter of *Power and Innocence*. In the final chapter of *Power and Innocence*, Rollo May discusses, of all things, tithing. Rollo may published *Power and Innocence* in 1972. He says there was a time in the history of our country when business owners and managers ruthlessly sought wealth while treating their employees badly. (This was a long time ago in our county's history, he said.) The church made an unofficial deal with wealthy business people that if they tithed, they would not be held accountable in the weightier matters of justice and righteousness.

Tithing, Rollo May said, was an example of psuedo-virtue that circumvented the deeper biblical claim to be in solidarity with the poor and marginalized in the struggle for justice.

While we all ought to seek for personal holiness, personal holiness is no substitute for compassion, caring and solidarity. We do not need to be perfect to enter the kingdom of heaven, but we do need to grow in our

capacity to love.

I would like to be perfect. Because it seems less and less likely that I will achieve perfection in this lifetime, I am attracted to the idea of something like purgatory.

I have a Catholic friend, now in her 70s, who gets furious at me when I say this. She grew up in the Catholic Church, became dissident, was born again, joined the Episcopalian Church, and now recently has just started attending the Catholic Church again ... except she says she's not going to believe everything she's told anymore.

She doesn't believe in purgatory. She says Jesus Christ will wrap his arms around us just the way we are and that to suppose we need something purged from us before we can be in God's presence does a disservice to the love revealed in Jesus Christ.

I tell her that, when I meet God, I would rather be wearing a new suit with a recent haircut and polished shoes, holding an updated resume in my hand.

She answers, "Nothing in my hands I bring; only to the cross I cling."

She answers, "Just as I am without one plea, but that thy blood was shed for me."

The point, my Catholic friend says, is to learn how to love like Christ loves. The goal is not our perfection but perfect love.