

Pastor Gregory P. Fryer  
Immanuel Lutheran Church, New York, NY  
7/13/2014, Pentecost 5A  
Matthew 13:1-9, 18-23  
Thorns and the Cares of Life

In the name of the Father and of the ✠ Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

My opening text for this morning's sermon is from our Gospel Lesson, Matthew 13. Jesus is speaking about the thorns that choke the word of God:

<sup>22</sup>As for what was sown among thorns, this is the one who hears the word, but the cares of the world and the lure of wealth choke the word, and it yields nothing. (Matthew 13:22, NRSV)

I hate briars — those thorny things! Shame on them! That's my theory. If you grew up in the city or in the civilized suburbs, you might not know much about briars. But I grew up in the countryside, on the Eastern Shore of Maryland, along the river, and briars were a miserable part of life there. Our home sat on a bit of an overlook of the Choptank River. Our lawn swept down a gentle slope toward the river and the warf. That was the left side of our lawn. But the right side led to what was almost a cliff plunging down to the river. But it was not a rocky cliff. Rather, it was a briar cliff. It descended steeply to the water. If you worked at it, you could get down to the water along that cliff. But you'd have to fight your way through the briars to get there. And if the basketball or kickball fell into that briar cliff, it was pretty awful trying to get it out.

It is amazing how tough briars are! They are like thick wires. Along the edges of the river, there are reeds growing in the water. Those reeds are delicate. Hit them with your paddle or oar, and they plop on over, broken by the merest touch. But briars are tough. If could grab hold of them and pull them, they would not likely break, they are so strong, and it is even hard to uproot them. But you would not *want* to grab hold them because of their thorns. Those thorns are strong and sharp. For anyone who knows thorns, it is indeed a sorrowful image to think of that crown of thorns pressed into the head of our Lord Jesus.

Jesus is right about thorns that they can choke things. Why, those mean briars along the Choptank River would even try to choke the mighty walnut trees that grew there. They wrap themselves around the tree, embed themselves in the bark. I bet they'd squeeze those beautiful trees to death if they could.

Notice that in our Lord's parable, the thorns do not somehow destroy the seeds.<sup>1</sup> Thorns do not cause the seeds to vanish. Instead, the seeds remain, and

---

<sup>1</sup> A nice point made by Charles Spurgeon in his sermon "Sown Among Thorns."

they grow, but the thorns choke the growing wheat. If you or I were being choked by some outlaw, we'd thrash around with growing desperation. You can't do much if you are being choked. You don't have much hope until you can get another breath of air.

So it is with the Christian, Jesus cautions us. Thorns can choke us. The cares of life and love of money can take our spiritual breath away. And we are not going to be much good in life until we can free ourselves of those thorns.

The parable is calmly told. The Bible calmly records our Lord's parable about the seeds and the thorns, but the Bible does not record how moved Jesus might have been by that image. He knew his disciples. He knew that before long, he would be abandoned by those he counted as his friends. They would all forsake him and flee away. Why? One way to put it is that the thorns would be choking them. The "cares of life," that is, fear for the lives, and in the case of Judas, the love of money, would distract them, choke them, and cause them to stray from Jesus.

Jesus knew the human heart. He could look ahead, surveying the centuries all the way up to this very moment and see how vulnerable and barren we might have let ourselves become. We were blessed with the very Word of God, but have we let the cares of this life choke that Word in our lives? We still have the Word, but if we are not careful, the Word will bear little fruit in our lives because the cares of life and the love of money will choke that Word in us.

## The Word is certain, but are we?

Today's First Lesson and Gospel Lesson are beautifully linked. Both use the imagery of nature and God's good creation to speak of the holy Word of God. Our reading from Isaiah 55 praises something *certain*. Much is doubtful in life, but Isaiah is entirely persuaded that this much is certain: in the end, the Word of God will triumph. It is a lovely passage, one that could well be knit onto a pillow and rested upon. Isaiah says this, referring to the ways of nature and of God's good creation:

<sup>10</sup>For as the rain and the snow come down from heaven, and return not thither but water the earth, making it bring forth and sprout, giving seed to the sower and bread to the eater,  
<sup>11</sup>so shall my word be that goes forth from my mouth; it shall not return to me empty, but it shall accomplish that which I purpose, and prosper in the thing for which I sent it.

If something ails us, then, it is not the Word of God, but rather our distraction from that Word. It is that we have permitted the thorns to rise up too much and they are choking us, they are squeezing the life of faith and piety right out of us.

In the end, our Lord Jesus is going to triumph. Why, there is nothing in the world that can stop him. Not even death anymore. His will and his ways are going

to conquer the world. That is certain. He is the very Word of God and he shall prosper in what he sets out to do. The challenge of this morning's text is not about him, but about us! Are we going to be earnest in serving him, or not?

For some us, sermons have been washing over us since we were babies in our mothers' arms. Hymns of the church have been uplifting us and finding their place in our hearts. We studied the Catechism. We are fairly well versed in the doctrines of the church. But can onlookers conclude that we are Christians? Can colleagues, neighbors, friends — do they have reason to know that we are followers of Christ? Are we walking the walk? Or are thorns choking the faith right out of us?

## Again, thorns are tough

Do you remember that I said that thorns are tough, like thick wires? So they are. Thorns are never to be underestimated. Nor do I want to be unsympathetic to those who are under the assault of the thorns.

Especially I am sympathetic to that form of thorns Jesus calls “the cares of life.” Some of you sitting here in church, for example, might be listening with only half an ear to this sermon. It is not that you do not care about sermons. Other factors are involved. For some of you, you might be nigh exhausted. The cares of life are working you to the bone, and by the time Sunday morning comes along, you can hardly help but become drowsy if you sit still for a while.

Or the preacher might be dull. Many of us are.

Some of you might listen with only half an ear because worries have followed you from your place of work or your home right here into the church. The doctor has told you bad news. Maybe it concerns yourself, maybe it concerns a loved one. Or your might be feeling insecure in your job. After many, many years of faithful work, you now wonder whether you are dispensable -- the odd one out. Your children might be straying and you worry for them. Your spouse might be straying and it is breaking your heart. Having cares does not mean you are a bad person. It simply means that you are a human being. Sometimes the cares of life follow you right into the church, right into the pew. If so, do not worry about it overmuch. At least you are here and at least Jesus can speak a few good words to you in the Blessed Sacrament, even if you have been sleepy so far in the liturgy: This is my body, this is my blood.

The more worrisome case is not that you should listen with only half an ear to the sermon, but rather that the cares of life should so weigh you down that you simply stop going to church. You give up. You surrender the good fight of faith. Then the thorns are really choking you. You know the Word of God, and perhaps you will never forget it. But it is a Word that has become so faint in your life it hardly moves you anymore. You might as well be an unbeliever as far as your life in Christ goes.

The cares of life are too various and too numerous for me to give any particular advice about them from the pulpit. Private Confession is available. Legal and financial advisers, therapists, and friends are available to help you with your

particular case. But there is one *general* thing I can say about the cares of life: It is when the cares of life are weighing us down that we should perhaps more than ever seek the company of Christ in his church. Come to church, though your heart is heavy and your mind is distracted. In the season of turmoil, seek the One who can still the storms of life with a mere word: Peace, be still. When the lion prowls and wolf howls and the dark clouds threaten, then turn with most determined step toward your Good Shepherd. He is the One who can lead you in due time to the green pastures by still water. He is the One who will lay down his very life for you, and indeed has already done it. As an ache or a pain can drive you to the physician, even though you are not feeling well, so let the cares of life drive you to Jesus Christ, your Great Physician of soul and body. Be like the little chicks that gather under the mother hen's feathers. You do not need to understand the world. You just need to know to run to the One who loves you when the cares of life are getting you down.

## Spurgeon

Last week, I had a birthday. I am sixty-three years old now. I am mindful of the passing of the years. One part of my preparation for this sermon was that I read a sermon by Charles Spurgeon that he preached on Sunday, August 19, 1888. Spurgeon died at age fifty-eight. This particular sermon was one he preached when he was fifty-four years old — four years before his mighty voice was stilled here on earth and joined the heavenly chorus above.

At the start of his sermon, Spurgeon mentions that if his preaching does not actually produce fruit in his people, then it has been useless preaching. Spurgeon is called the “Prince of the Preachers in the English language,” but he cares nothing for his preaching if it does not actually work toward the saving and sanctifying of his people:

If you do not bring forth fruit to holiness, [he says] and the end is not everlasting life, I would be better employed in breaking stones on the road-side than in preaching to you.<sup>2</sup>

He admits to his congregation that he is ill and that he fears he will not be able to preach strongly to them that day:

I cannot speak with any degree of physical vigor to you by reason of the infirmity under which I struggle; but what I do say to you is steeped in earnest desire that the Lord may bless it to you.

---

<sup>2</sup> Charles Spurgeon, June 19, 1834 – January 31, 1892, English Baptist preacher.

Then he goes on preaching for about sixteen pages and he ends with this summertime conclusion to his sermon:

May we meet in heaven! Oh, may we all meet in heaven!  
What a congregation I have addressed this morning! I feel overawed as I look at you. From the ends of the earth have many of you come. The Lord bless you! Strangers are here in vast numbers, for the most of our regular hearers are at the seaside. I may never see you again on earth. May we all meet in heaven, where thorns will never grow! May we be gathered by the angels in that day when the Lord shall say, "Gather the wheat into my barn"! Amen. So let it be.

Yes, someday let us meet in heaven "where thorns will never grow!" But till then, let us wrestle against those thorns. Let us seek some freedom from them, some precious gasps of air that renew our strength and renew our ability to set those thorns aside and recommit ourselves to our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ, to whom belongs the glory, with the Father and the Holy Spirit now and forever. Amen.