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Immanuel Lutheran Church, New York, NY
The Midweek Liturgy, Wednesday, January 10, 2024
Matthew 13:24-43

The Parable of the Tares and the Parable of the Mustard Seed

HOLY GOSPELMatthew 13:24-43, RSV
Last week Jesus told the Parable of the Sower. Now, he tells a series of parables, including the Parable of the Tares and the Parable of the Mustard Seed.

²⁴Another parable he put before them, saying, “The kingdom of heaven may be compared to a man who sowed good seed in his field; ²⁵but while men were sleeping, his enemy came and sowed weeds¹ among the wheat, and went away. ²⁶So when the plants came up and bore grain, then the weeds appeared also. ²⁷And the servants of the householder came and said to him, ‘Sir, did you not sow good seed in your field? How then has it weeds?’ ²⁸He said to them, ‘An enemy has done this.’ The servants said to him, ‘Then do you want us to go and gather them?’ ²⁹But he said, ‘No; lest in gathering the weeds you root up the wheat along with them. ³⁰Let 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.’”

³¹Another parable he put before them, saying, “The kingdom of heaven is like a grain of mustard seed which a man took and sowed in his field; ³²it is the smallest of all seeds, but when it has grown it is the greatest of shrubs and becomes a tree, so that the birds of the air come and make nests in its branches.”

³³He told them another parable. “The kingdom of heaven is like leaven which a woman took and hid in three measures of flour, till it was all leavened.”

³⁴All this Jesus said to the crowds in parables; indeed he said nothing to them without a parable. ³⁵This was to fulfil what was spoken by the prophet:

“I will open my mouth in parables,
I will utter what has been hidden since the foundation of the world.”

³⁶Then 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.” ³⁷He answered, “He who sows the good seed is the Son of man; ³⁸the field is the world, and the good seed means the sons of the kingdom; the weeds are the sons of the evil one, ³⁹and the enemy who sowed them is the devil; the harvest is the close of the age, and the reapers are angels. ⁴⁰Just as the weeds

¹ζιζάνιον zizanion {dziz-an'-ee-on} — a kind of darnel, resembling wheat except the grains are black

are gathered and burned with fire, so will it be at the close of the age. ⁴¹The Son of man will send his angels, and they will gather out of his kingdom all causes of sin and all evildoers, ⁴²and throw them into the furnace of fire; there men will weep and gnash their teeth. ⁴³Then the righteous will shine like the sun in the kingdom of their Father. He who has ears, let him hear.

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

Last week we heard about the seed sown on good ground — the way it yielded sometimes a hundredfold, sometime sixty, and sometimes thirty (Matthew 13:8). All that sounds good. Yet in this evening's reading, we learn that there is danger for these one hundred, these sixty, and these thirty. Until Jesus comes again, there will *always* be danger. The danger is the heretic. The danger is the one in the church who looks like everyone else... who looks like a follower of Jesus, yet who is not really like them. The heretic has a different spirit. The heretic teaches false doctrine and misleads many a soul. The heretic might have a good heart. He or she might be *trying* to serve Jesus and to serve others. But the heretic departs from the ways of Jesus as we find them in the Bible. Perhaps this departure is innocent and merely reflects confusion or lack of learning. Perhaps this departure is deliberate, as if the heretic counts the ways of Jesus as we find them in the Bible to be simply wrong. Either way... either when the heretic is accidentally teaching false ways or deliberately doing so... either way, the heretic is a danger to others in the church.

My old Reformation History professor back in Seminary days was Dr. Eric Gritsch. Dr. Gritsch had an interesting saying about the devil. He referred to an old German saying, "Wherever God builds a church, the devil builds a chapel." Dr. Gritsch's theory about that is that any self-respecting devil wants to be where the action is, and the action is in the church. Jesus teaches the same thing. "An enemy has done this," he says (Matthew 13:28). His enemy, the devil, is full of strength and energy and does the best he can to sow confusion in the church and to mislead Christians. Hence, heretics. In the *midst* of the one hundred, the sixty, and the thirty there are tares. There is graining grow that looks like wheat, but is not.

So, the servants figure they should remove the weeds. Likewise, the apostles might be inclined to deal harshly with the heretics. But here is where I think things become interesting. The owner of the field asks the servants to bear with the tares. Why? Here is the answer:

²⁹But he said, "No; lest in gathering the weeds you root up the wheat along with them." (Matthew 13:29, RSV)

Let there be no violence against the tares. Let there be no violence against the heretics, lest we harm the faithful along the way. After all, the heretic is often our friend. Perhaps we recognize that the heretic is teaching false doctrine, but we think to ourselves that that one is *trying* to be faithful, *trying* to be helpful, and so we ignore the false teaching, but love our friend.

And then, there is another side to this: It might also be that, by God's grace, the tare becomes wheat. That cannot happen out there in the field, but it can happen among humanity. It might be that as time goes by, the heretic gets more on track, that life in the Church works its holy wonders even on the heretic so that bit by bit, the heretic changes and becomes orthodox. That would be great! So, let there be no violence against the heretic. Let the false teaching be opposed, gently and straightforwardly. Let the Church be true, but also try to win even the heretic to Christ.

However, this shall not go on forever. Notice the grim remainder of the landowner's judgment:

²⁹But he said, 'No; lest in gathering the weeds you root up the wheat along with them. ³⁰Let 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 13:29-30, RSV)

Then Jesus pins this down by speaking of the angels:

⁴⁰Just as the weeds are gathered and burned with fire, so will it be at the close of the age. ⁴¹The Son of man will send his angels, and they will gather out of his kingdom all causes of sin and all evildoers, ⁴²and throw them into the furnace of fire; there men will weep and gnash their teeth. (Matthew 13:40-42, RSV)

The heretic, then, is playing with fire — indeed, the heretic is playing with hellfire! It is a terrible thing to preach false doctrine from *within* the field, from within the Church. All preachers, Sunday School teachers, and brothers and sisters in the Lord should take note: When we try to influence one another through doctrine, we should strive with all our might to make sure the doctrine is true.

Let us move on to one more of this evening's parables. Let us speak of the Parable of the Mustard Seed. It is our Lord's word of encouragement to the disciples that the beginning days of their movement might be insignificant, yet the Christian faith shall grow and in the growing, shall provide shelter for the world. The words of Jesus go this way:

“The kingdom of heaven is like a grain of mustard seed which a man took and sowed in his field; ³²it is the smallest of all seeds, but when it has grown it is the greatest of shrubs and becomes a tree, so that the birds of the air come and make nests in its branches.” (Matthew 13:31-32, RSV)

My hero from the early Church, St. John Chrysostom, points out that this growth of the Church from small beginnings reflects the holy lives of the apostles, and he wants us to imitate the apostles. He wants us to make the Church grow too, along with the apostles. It is a marvelous quote. Let me read for you the words of the ancient preacher:

Now if twelve men leavened the whole world, imagine how great our baseness, in that when we being so many are not able to amend them that remain; we, who ought to be enough for ten thousand worlds, and to become leaven to them. “But they,” one may say, “were apostles.” And what then? Were they not partakers with thee [I think he means, partakers with thee of the holy sacraments]? Were they not brought up in cities? Did they not enjoy the same benefits? Did they not practise trades? What, were they angels? What, came they down from Heaven? “But they had signs,” it will be said. It was not the signs that made them admirable. How long shall we use those miracles as cloaks for our own remissness?...And Himself too, when He was making laws for His own disciples, what said He? “Do miracles, that men may see you”? By no means. But what? “Let your light shine before men, that they may see your good works, and glorify your Father which is in Heaven.” ...Bearing in mind then all this, let us imitate those things whereby the apostles became great. And whereby did they become great? Hear Peter, saying, “Behold we have forsaken all, and followed Thee; what shall we have therefore?” Hear also Christ saying to them, “Ye shall sit upon twelve thrones,” and, “every one that hath forsaken houses, or brethren, or father, or mother, shall receive an hundredfold in this world, and shall inherit everlasting life.” From all worldly things, therefore, let us withdraw ourselves, and dedicate ourselves to Christ, that we may both be made equal to the apostles

according to His declaration, and may enjoy eternal life...
(Chrysostom, Homily XLVI. Matt. XIII. 24-30)

I love Chrysostom's democracy here. He argues for our equality with the apostles. We have the same Jesus they had. We are human beings, like them. If we bear a difference from them, Chrysostom says, it is that we permit the pleasures and worries of this world to loosen our attachment to Jesus. The old preacher wants us to dedicate ourselves more to Christ. This modern preacher wants us to do that too for us, that we may help the church and enjoy eternal life through Jesus Christ our Lord, to whom belongs the glory, with the Father and the Holy Spirit now and forever. Amen.