

“The Great Divide”

Matthew 13:24-30

Dr. Randy Working
Christ Presbyterian Church
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When I was about six years old, I was into rocks and minerals and fossils. I also tried my hand at panning for gold, when my parents bought a special miner’s pan for each of us. We’d go down to the creek behind our house and do it like you’re supposed to—you know, fill the pan with mud and gravel, then wash water over it. Then you try to sift out grains or nuggets of gold that are heavier and sink to the bottom. The problem is, we never found gold. I’d get frustrated and dump the mud and rocks out.

That reminds me a little of the parable for today. The theme is sorting the good from the bad, and trusting

Jesus’ preaching is about the kingdom.

Matthew has told us that the theme of Jesus’ preaching ministry was the kingdom of God, that is, that God is putting in place his kingly reign, bringing the “up there” down here. It’s like we pray every week, “Thy kingdom come, thy will be done, on earth as it is in heaven.”

Chapter 13 fleshes out his teaching on the kingdom. The chapter is made up of a series of parables that show what it’s like when the kingdom comes. Now, it would be natural for the people hearing Jesus talk about the kingdom to say, “Wait a minute! If God’s kingdom is at hand, then what about the fact of evil in the world? Why are the ungodly Romans still ruling over us? For that matter, why is there still evil even within the people of God?” And so, Jesus tells a story to explain why judgment is taking so long.

Matthew says Jesus “sets before” his people another parable, just like Moses had “set before” the Israelites the commands God had given him. It’s a way of saying that what Jesus says, goes. In these kingdom parables, it’s like Jesus is drafting a constitution for God’s people.

Let’s look at four observations from the text for us today.

First, Jesus Christ himself interprets his word to us. (v. 36)

Later in the chapter, the disciples went to Jesus for understanding. That prompts Jesus to explain the parable he’s just told them.

Do you ever have a hard time understanding God’s Word? Ask Jesus to open its meaning to you. That’s what Jesus’ disciples did. Understanding isn’t easy. It takes work. You can’t just sit back and say, “Okay, fill me up!” As you study your Bible, engage with it, take notes. As you look forward to Sunday morning, read the passage ahead of time, get together with your small group ahead of time. We have a Wednesday morning Bible study that helps prepare for Sunday worship by studying the passage ahead of time. Pray for your Bible study leaders, and pray for me and your other preachers, that we might faithfully open up God’s word. Take notes as you listen.

After all, God wants us to grow into the full stature of Christ. Listen to how the Apostle Paul writes to one particular church:

Brothers, I could not address you as spiritual but as worldly—mere infants in Christ. I gave you milk, not solid food, for you were not yet ready for it. Indeed, you are still not ready. You are still worldly. For since there is jealousy and quarreling among you, are you not worldly? (1 Corinthians 3:1-3)

That's challenging! But if we want to grow up as spiritual persons, we need to hear God's word, and to understand it, we need to go to Jesus Christ himself.

Later in the chapter, in verses 36-43, Jesus explains the parable. Let me read it for you:

Then he left the crowd and went into the house. His disciples came to him and said, "Explain to us the parable of the weeds in the field."

He answered, "The one who sowed the good seed is the Son of Man. The field is the world, and the good seed stands for the sons of the kingdom. The weeds are the sons of the evil one, and the enemy who sows them is the devil. The harvest is the end of the age, and the harvesters are angels.

"As the weeds are pulled up and burned in the fire, so it will be at the end of the age. The Son of Man will send out his angels, and they will weed out of his kingdom everything that causes sin and all who do evil. They will throw them into the fiery furnace, where there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth. 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)

Second, children of the kingdom of heaven are sown in the world.

God comes into the real world, not an ideal world. It's one of the truths of the Incarnation that Jesus became human and came into our world. And in this parable, Jesus is not only talking about heaven, he's talking about earth, too. Christians always have to live the faith in a compromised world. The children and the works of the evil one are in the world, too, and that's why Jesus said we have to be "in the world, but not of it." In the Gospel of John, Jesus told his disciples:

If you belonged to the world, it would love you as its own. As it is, you do not belong to the world, but I have chosen you out of the world. (John 15:19)

Later, Jesus prayed this prayer for his disciples:

My prayer is not that you take them out of the world but that you protect them from the evil one. (John 17:15)

The parable tells us that weeds aren't here by accident, but design. We have to live out our Christian faith in a world where evil tries to destroy the work of the master who plants good seeds. That leads to the next observation about the text:

Third, we grow in less than ideal circumstances.

The kingdom of God has come indeed, but it's not yet the Day of Judgment. It's not yet here in all its fullness. That means it's a time of challenge for followers of Jesus. Our life in Christ is a mixture in this world—of joy and sadness, of triumph and tragedy, of success and failure, a life in a field that's not idea but instead is a contradiction of good and bad.

That's because God has an enemy, the devil, the adversary of everything God does. When God is doing a new thing in your life or in the church, the adversary will oppose it and try to compromise it.

The enemy's first goal is to keep the seed of God's Word from taking root, just like the parable of the four soils tells us in the opening of chapter 13. If he can't do that, then he works to distract workers from their work by overwhelming them with evil. If the enemy can't strike the root, he tries to corrupt the fruit, the wheat.

When the wheat is full-grown, then you can clearly tell the weeds. For now, it's sometimes hard to tell them apart, but then you see their true colors. The master's servants ask him, "Isn't it true you just planted good seed in your field?" They know the answer, so they immediately ask the real question—"Then where did all these weeds come from?"

That's a classic question. If God is a God of love, then why is there so much evil in the world? In fact, if God is building a church in the world, why is there so much evil in the *church*? For that matter, maybe each of us could ask, "Why is there so much darkness in *me*?" The disciples want to know who's to blame, so they ask, "Where did all these weeds come from?" Jesus says, it's the work of the enemy.

But there are some things the enemy can't do. He can't root out the good seed sown by the farmer. It's like Jesus says about his "sheep," his followers, in John 10,

"I give them eternal life, and they shall never perish; no one can snatch them out of my hand." (John 10:28)

The enemy can only sow bad seed right in the middle of the wheat, and he can confuse the workers.

That means our life flourishes in less than ideal circumstances. We have to grow in faith, hope, and love, in a setting where we still do battle with evil. It's sometimes in the challenging places like an office or a factory or a public school that we grow to look more like Jesus. It's a process, for individual disciples of Jesus Christ and for the church as a whole.

Fourth, the Lord is training us to trust him.

The servants are troubled by the evil they see. And now, we reach the point of the parable. The servants ask the Master, "Then do you want us to go and pull them out?" If evil is opposed to God, then shouldn't it be the will of God to get rid of evil? How are we supposed to fight it?

But the Master says, "No, you might pull the wheat out, too." Sure, you can eliminate some evil by violence, but in the process you'll end up uprooting good, too. The

innocent get hurt. There's a lot of harm done by well-intentioned violence. The church can't be totally pure this side of heaven, and if you don't tolerate any weeds, you can't have any wheat, either.

Instead, we're just supposed to wait faithfully for glory, working in the field, telling people about both the comfort and the warning that come out in the gospel.

It's like in baseball—have you ever seen an argument with the umpire? The pitcher might be angry about a call, and maybe the catcher, and third-base coach, or the manager jumps in to argue the call. But in the end, only the umpire makes the call. That's the way the game is played.

God alone is able to judge. He alone knows the human heart

So, what's your standing in the Master's field? Where are you today? Are you good wheat, producing grain, growing in him? If you were to die today, do you know you'd go to heaven? If God were to say to you today, "Why should I let you into heaven?" What would you say? Or are you weeds? You can know right now where you're going to end up on the harvest day.

Here's how. Simply trust in Jesus Christ, the Lord of the harvest. Give your heart to him. Take him at his word. Because the fact is, we don't deserve to go to heaven, none of us, but he wants us there and paid the price for us by being our substitute on the cross.

Ira Stanphill was a gospel songwriter, and as a young man he became a singing evangelist. One of his songs says,

I don't know about tomorrow,
I just live from day to day.
And I don't borrow from the sunshine
'Cause the skies might turn to grey.

There are things about tomorrow
That I don't seem to understand
But I know who holds tomorrow
And I know who holds my hand.

Does evil seem awfully strong? Give it time. The Lord knows what he's doing. So, give it time, because Jesus says, "Trust me, I will take care of all the bad stuff now and at Judgment Day. You just concentrate on being faithful to the Good News today."