

“Innies and Outies”

Matthew 13:24-30, 36-43, Genesis 28:10-19a, Psalm 139:1-2, 23-24

The Rev. Dr. William R. Nirote
Preacher

July 23, 2023

From the Pulpit

The First Congregational Church, United Church of Christ
444 East Broad Street, Columbus, OH 43215

Phone: 614.228.1741 Fax: 614.461.1741

Email: home@first-church.org

Website: <http://www.first-church.org>

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*Let us pray: Come, Holy Spirit, move our heads with your word,
move our hearts with your Spirit, and move our souls with the
words of Jesus. Amen*

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If you want to raise my anger and make my blood boil, it is not hard. All you have to do is let me see another report of government whitewashing our history. We have all seen the reports. Don't say "gay." Banning of books. College professors told what they can't teach. Oh, we don't want to offend anyone. We don't want to hurt anyone's feelings with telling the truth. Perhaps you get a little angry, too.

I have a three-year-old granddaughter who, on some days, is fascinated with her belly button. She has a voracious appetite for food. Sometimes her belly button is an innie. After she eats, sometimes her belly button is an outie. If you think this sermon title is about "Innie and Outies" belly buttons, it's not.

Today's Gospel Reading is the second of seven parables about the kingdom of heaven. Like last week's reading, Jesus is speaking to an audience that was in an agrarian society. The people have heard about seeds planted in good soil, that is, faithful followers of Jesus. Ones who exemplify the rule of God on earth as is in heaven. Matthew's Gospel is speaking to primarily a Jewish audience, so he does not use the name of God when teaching about the kingdom of God. Instead, Matthew writes about the kingdom of heaven. Some might call the author of Matthew politically correct, or sensitive, or woke.

Jesus said the kingdom of heaven may be compared to someone who sowed good seed in a field. While everyone was asleep, the enemy came and sowed weeds among the wheat. The enemy doesn't stick around. The weeds and the wheat grow up together with the wheat producing grain. The servants question their master asking, did you not sow good seed in this field? The master says the enemy has done this. The slaves offer to uproot the weeds. The master stops them saying they will uproot the wheat with the weeds. Let them grow together until the harvest. The master continues, at the harvest the reapers will collect the weeds and bundle them to be burned. Jesus says, the wheat will be put into my barn.

This is the point in this story the cliché is true. We take the Bible seriously, but not literally. This parable of Jesus directs us to the reality of God's reign. God's reign is a mystery that has been hidden in plain sight since "the foundation of the world" (verse 35). Jesus is speaking in parables, storytelling, to change the minds of his followers.

Jesus leaves the people on the beach and they return to their homes. Jesus and his disciples go into a house. In this house the disciples want Jesus to explain the parable of the wheat and weeds. Bluntly put, the disciples are slow to understand what Jesus was saying.

I can almost hear Jesus saying, "Listen up boys and girls! The one who sows the seed is the Son of Man," (which was Jesus favorite title for himself). Jesus continued saying, "The field represents the world. The good seed are the children of the kingdom. The weeds are the children of the evil one. The enemy who sowed the weeds is the devil. The harvest is the end of the age. The reapers are the angels. The weeds find their doom with fire, weeping, and gnashing of teeth. The righteous will shine in the kingdom of their Father." Finally, Jesus says, "Let anyone with ears listen!"

As I read this parable of Jesus, I come away with several takeaways.

First is compliancy. The Southern Poverty Law Center has named Mom's for Liberty an extreme group because they work to infiltrate local school boards

with their bigotry by banning books, and trying to shape curriculum. The Southern Poverty Law Center writes, “Mom’s for Liberty is an anti-student inclusion group that presents itself as a modern parents’ rights organization that seeks to ‘unify, educate, and empower parents to defend and protect their parental rights at every level of government.’” That sounds appealing to many parents. However, social media accounts and real-world activity of the national organization and its chapters are antigovernment, conspiracy propagandist, anti-LGBTQ+, anti-gender identity, and anti-inclusive curriculum (*Liberating Word*).

Our compliancy, is much like the workers sleeping. While the workers slept, the field was sown with weeds. Compliancy allowed this to happen. In our lives the weeds are there and so they grow with us in our lives.

The second takeaway is the struggle. The weed common to wheat fields is something called the bearded darnel. In its early stages this weed is similar to wheat, but later it is known as a cheat weed, nothing like the grain produced by wheat. It is a wolf in sheep’s clothing. It is, in this parable, the acknowledgment that evil exist. That evil is wanting to vine its way into our minds, hearts, and souls.

Weeds are found with the middle manager who is glad for the company’s big profits, but she is not so sure about the bookkeeping behind those numbers. It’s a school board saying things have to be taught a particular way, stifling the teacher’s creativity with his students. It’s a lawyer who’s asked to turn his head away from a questionable situation “for the good of the firm.” My grandson’s soccer team plays Sunday mornings during this worship service time. My six-year-old grandson gets it. He said to me, “Papa, you’re never going to get to church.” Following Jesus is a struggle.

The first takeaway is compliancy. The second takeaway is struggle. The third takeaway is eschatology. Eschatology is a theological term you need not fear. Eschatology simply means a study of last things. I’ll circle back to that in a moment.

We live in a deeply divided country. Racism, sexism, misogyny, and divisive politics are the weeds that grow up right next to those who desire to be the true wheat yielding grain. It's not only in our work places, it's in the wider church. In recent days the Southern Baptist denomination moved toward having male-only clergy in that denomination. I would suggest they read the Christian Scriptures more closely and see the contributions of women, or just come and hear the Rev. Joanna Samuelson preach. The United Methodist Church is anything but united. They are slowly splitting over LGBTQ+ issues. I suggest they look at the loving kindness and fruitfulness of this community and how Jesus welcomed all. Sometimes these divisions are caused by people or groups not wanting to be contaminated by the touch of someone or some other group different from them. Sometimes it is countries or religious groups that want to be pure and not like the infidels. Sometimes it is a power struggle, keeping the power and making sure the other does not get their power. Jesus tells us not to uproot the wheat with the weeds.

Think of modern world history. Nothing good comes with this weeding. Jesus is right. Hitler and the Nazis tried to weed the garden of all sorts of God's people they deemed undesirable. It didn't work. Senator Joe McCarthy tried to root out those he considered to be pinkos or communist sympathizers. It didn't work. The Ku Klux Klan tried to weed out their undesirables called Jews, Roman Catholics and people of color. It didn't work.

In Bosnia there was ethnic cleansing and in Africa there were tribal wars, and everyone was hurt because it doesn't work. There have been vigilante groups and militias claiming they were going to do what the government didn't do to get rid of the undesirables. When will they learn. It does not work.

In the predecessor denominations and now in the United Church of Christ we have often been on the right side of history. I'm thinking of the abolitionist that started this church and so many others. I'm thinking about those that nonviolently fought for civil rights. I'm thinking about our denomination's stand for marriage equality. I'm also thinking about those ready to vote "No" on Issue #1 on August 8th. This is where we must be

careful. If we are not careful, we can become just like those people, I mean the weeds. That is when we think we can be deciding who is “in” and who is “out.”

This is where eschatology comes into play, when we think we can decide who is “in” and who is “out.” Jesus teaches us to not bother with uprooting the weeds. Instead let them grow until the wheat bears the fruit of the grain. In time it will become obvious which are the weeds and which are the wheat bearing fruit. Finally, in the end, the angels will sort out the weeds from the wheat for God, not us.

If, in the end, God is the judge, not us, what are we to make of this parable? It is like a book without the last chapter. We vaguely know how it will end but we are not completely sure. Our calling is to be the faithful wheat. Our God tolerates good and evil, faith and unfaithfulness. In God’s good timing God will be the God who will judge and redeem.

Amen.

Resources:

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The Christian Century, August 2023, Volume 140, No. 8

Liberating Word, michael@h4pj.org June 21, 2023.