

Provoked by the Parables

The Weeds

January 16, 2011

Psalm 40:1-11 & Matthew 13:24-29
(Hymns – 39, 726, 740, 746)

Here's another
'Kingdom of God is like this'
parable.

This is what life is really like
when we are increasingly aware
that we live in the caring power and presence
of the Creator, Redeemer, and Sanctifier
of the whole universe.

There are some similar themes in this parable
to the one we looked at last week.
It's a parable about seeds, and weeds, and growth.
It's a parable about the process of the coming of the kingdom
told to help people make sense
of the fact that the kingdom has not come in all its fullness.
If last week's parable focused on the process of growth,
this week's parable focuses on what's happening and what's not happening.
The kingdom is really present
through the ministry of Jesus and the ongoing work of the Spirit,
but evil still exists and the world has not been purified.
The sifting of the wheat and the weeds, which *will* come,
remains to be done.
We live in the in-between times,
when kingdom and anti-kingdom co-exist.
It causes considerable confusion and doubt.

I had lunch this week with an old friend
who has been travelling throughout the United States this past year.
He has become quite anti-church and anti-religion lately
because of what he sees to be their moral failures –
collusion in and support of wars, oppression, poverty, and exploitation.

It's a hard argument to counter
because he is right.

Various branches of Christ's church at various times in its history
in various places around the world
have failed to live up to kingdom standards
in their attitudes and behaviours.
The consequences have been disasterous.

And certainly the societies into which these branches of Christ's church
have been sent by God as witnesses to the presence and power of the kingdom
are filled with fear, hatred, brutality, and greed
that cause heart-rending suffering.

There is a deeply-rooted human tendency,
I suspect rooted ultimately in fear,
that wants to divide the world into the good guys and the bad guys,
into the Wheat and the Tares,
as this parable is often called.

Much of the anti-kingdom influences and activities
arise from people who consider themselves certain
that they know the ultimate difference between good and evil
and that they have the right and responsibility
to be judge and punisher in God's name and for God's sake.

These are the people who,
convinced of their rightness and goodness,
perpetrate holocausts, ethnic cleansings, and mass shootings.
They never allow themselves to be questioned or challenged.
You are for them or against them.
And they are unquestionably right.

This parable, I think, speaks directly to them
and says that they have usurped the role of God.
There should be no surprise
that evil still exists.

The wheat and the tares co-exist.
At some point, there will be an ultimate sifting,
but that is God's work in God's good time by God's agents of sifting,
not our work in this present moment.
We have been called to be ambassadors, not judges and executioners.

Our work is to discern the presence of the kingdom within ourselves
and live that essence out as a blessing in this world,
to witness to the presence and power of that kingdom for the good of all.
That will involve resisting evil and promoting good
in ways that are guided by the love that casts out fear.

The problem is not that we discern what is good and evil,
but that we set ourselves up as the final judges
who have the right to execute punishment.
That is not the service to the kingdom for which we have been created.

We are responsible for figuring out what serves the kingdom and what does not.
That is the ultimate test of good and evil that we have been taught.
To do that, we have the witness of the Holy Spirit,
speaking through a careful consideration
of the ways the Scriptures testify to the grace and truth of Jesus Christ,
interpreted through the civil deliberations of the Christian community,
resulting in humble conclusions
that continue to be examined for their faithfulness in helping the earth flourish.

This is an important principle of Presbyterianism
and one of the reasons I think preserving our tradition is worthwhile.
Jesus Christ speaks most fully and most clearly
through the hearts and minds of the people
who make up his body on earth.
All of our individual thoughts and convictions
are tested in the crucible of the community
for their faithfulness in serving the kingdom.
No one individual can claim the authority to speak for God.
They will always have the right to speak,
but their views are always subject to the testing of the Holy Spirit
through the deliberations of the community.

In a Presbyterian church that is being true to the best of its heritage,
you will always be welcomed and heard and challenged and loved.
You will be nourished to flourish in the grace of Jesus Christ.
You will find the space to grow into a hardy stock of healthy wheat
in the midst of tares and weeds,
not strangled or stunted in your growth by the evil around you.
You will learn how to serve the kingdom with civility and humility,
strong in the faith that God is in charge and will prevail.