

Teaching Notes, Parables 3

I. Advanced organizer.

- A. Starbucks cups controversy. On November 1 Starbucks revealed a new cup. Green with a variety of people drawn with one stroke. "Unity Cup." (Slide with tweeted announcement.)
- B. Instead of bringing the country together...we got this on Twitter. (slide)
- C. Are we really this sensitive that everything must be interpreted as an assault on us?
- D. How do we move forward after this election? As followers of Jesus, what might our role be here?
- E. In a short series on the Parables, stories Jesus told to provoke a response.
- F. Looking this week at a story that I think might speak into what's going on today

II. **24 Here is another story Jesus told: "The Kingdom of Heaven is like a farmer who planted good seed in his field. 25 But that night as the workers slept, his enemy came and planted weeds among the wheat, then slipped away. 26 When the crop began to grow and produce grain, the weeds also grew.**

27 "The farmer's workers went to him and said, 'Sir, the field where you planted that good seed is full of weeds! Where did they come from?'

28 "'An enemy has done this!' the farmer exclaimed.

"Should we pull out the weeds?' they asked.

29 "'No,' he replied, 'you'll uproot the wheat if you do. 30 Let both grow together until the harvest. Then I will tell the harvesters to sort out the weeds, tie them into bundles, and burn them, and to put the wheat in the barn.'"...

A. Understanding the agricultural world this story references.

1. The weeds in the wheat. *Darnel*. A particular kind of weed that grew amongst wheat in Palestine.
 - a) Tricky because it looks just like wheat while it's growing. It's camouflaged. Can be hard to tell it's actually Darnel until it's done growing. The wheat would bow it's head while the darnel would stand straight up.
 - b) Now darnel grows naturally, but in this story someone plants it specifically. "An enemy" the landowner calls them.
 - c) Darnel was not good for eating. It was poisonous. If you ground it up with the wheat and made flour, it would be spoiled; inedible. But the darnel was useful for fuel. You could burn it without wasting a more precious resource; that was something it was good for. So darnel was pulled out and used to fuel fire.
 - d) And while farmers in their day would have tried to get rid of darnel as they found it, Jesus is advocating a different approach in this story. "Let both grow together until the harvest."
 - e) There will be a sorting, but it's not now. Be patient.

B. A bit later, Jesus' closest followers ask for some interpretation. This is what he says.

36 Then, leaving the crowds outside, Jesus went into the house. His disciples said, "Please explain to us the story of the weeds in the field."

37 Jesus replied, "The Son of Man is the farmer who plants the good seed. 38 The field is the world, and the good seed represents the people of the Kingdom. The weeds are

the people who belong to the evil one. 39 The enemy who planted the weeds among the wheat is the devil. The harvest is the end of the world, and the harvesters are the angels.

40 “Just as the weeds are sorted out and burned in the fire, so it will be at the end of the world. 41 The Son of Man will send his angels, and they will remove from his Kingdom everything that causes sin and all who do evil. 42 And the angels will throw them into the fiery furnace, where there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth. 43 Then the righteous will shine like the sun in their Father’s Kingdom. Anyone with ears to hear should listen and understand!

1. Story is an allegory. Gives a number of correspondences - seeds of wheat and weeds are people. The farmer is Jesus, the Son of Man. The “devil” or the “accuser” is the enemy who sows the bad seed. The reapers are the angels. The fuel for the metaphoric fire is that which causes sin; of disconnection of separation from God.

2. The word here in Greek that is translated “everything that causes sin” is *skandalon*. Interestingly, this means literally “stumbling block”. The thing that causes someone to stumble.

3. The origin for this image actually comes back from the Hebrew Bible, in Leviticus. It comes in a passage about justice and care for the vulnerable.

“13 “Do not defraud or rob your neighbor.

““Do not hold back the wages of a hired worker overnight.

14 ““Do not curse the deaf or put a stumbling block in front of the blind, but fear your God. I am the Lord.”

a) stumbling block hurts the vulnerable. Causes the person who cannot see to fall. We should be clearing the way for those who cannot see, not putting up barriers that hurt them.

4. Jesus uses very strong hyperbolic language to get his followers to take this seriously, particularly in Matthew. A few chapters later he riffs on this idea. Here he’s talking about how they think about children:

a) **4 “Whoever becomes humble like this child is the greatest in the kingdom of heaven. 5 Whoever welcomes one such child in my name welcomes me. 6 If any of you put a *stumbling block* before one of these little ones who believe in me, it would be better for you if a great millstone were fastened around your neck and you were drowned in the depth of the sea. 7 Woe to the world because of *stumbling blocks*! Occasions for *stumbling* are bound to come, but woe to the one by whom the *stumbling block* comes!**

8 “If your hand or your foot causes you to *stumble*, cut it off and throw it away; it is better for you to enter life maimed or lame than to have two hands or two feet and to be thrown into the eternal fire. 9 And if your eye causes you to stumble, tear it out and throw it away; it is better for you to enter life with one eye than to have two eyes and to be thrown into the hell of fire.

10 “Take care that you do not despise one of these little ones; for, I tell you, in heaven their angels continually see the face of my Father in heaven.”

b) Every instance of stumbling or stumbling block is “*skandalon*”. Jesus cares intensely about the things that work in life to separate us from him and experience real connection with God and with others. He wants them to take these things seriously, to try to eliminate them in themselves. It’s hyperbole, he doesn’t actually expect them to

gauge out their eyes or cut off their feet, but he does expect them to be proactive. To recognize that this is a big deal.

- c) And particularly he wants them to be concerned for the innocent who are entrusted to them. That they don't put any roadblocks up that would make it harder for them to connect with Jesus.
- d) If you haven't figured it out yet, this Greek word "skandalon", stumbling block, obstacle, is the origin of our contemporary word scandal. A scandal offends us. It puts up an obstacle that keeps us from trusting someone, it causes disconnection. We've had a ton of scandals in this election season, which is likely at least part of why our two candidates for president are regarded as largely untrustworthy by much of the country.
- e) Back to our parable. Jesus is clear that the *skandalon* in life will be dealt with. There will be a time when there will be *no more scandals*. There will be justice for the vulnerable and purification of that which separates people from God and from experiencing the goodness of connection with God and with others. That is coming. **But the story isn't actually about that time. It's about how we live while we wait for it.**

C. At the heart of the story itself stands **the confusion of the servants when they discover the weeds in their midst.**

- a) **"The farmer's workers went to him and said, 'Sir, the field where you planted that good seed is full of weeds! Where did they come from?'**

28 "An enemy has done this!" the farmer exclaimed.

"Should we pull out the weeds?" they asked.

29 "No," he replied, 'you'll uproot the wheat if you do. 30 Let both grow together until the harvest.

- b) **The one group that Jesus doesn't directly describe is the slaves in the story.** He doesn't say who they correspond to, but it seems reasonable to infer that it's those who are giving themselves to serve Jesus, the farmer in this story. His followers, those who listen to him and who want to participate in his work of sowing good seed and harvesting it, **realize before too long that there is good and bad among them.**
- c) **"Where did these weeds come from?"** Can you relate to this question?

(1) Jesus, I think I'm doing everything right. I'm going to church regularly. I'm trying to live a life of faith informed by teachings from the Bible and Jesus-centered tradition on what it means to live well before Jesus. I'm connected in community, and yet crappy stuff is still happening. My family member still got cancer. I got passed over for that job. My marriage is falling apart. How can that be? Where did these weeds come from?

2. Jesus is reminding his followers that even when God's Kingdom (his good reign) is coming, it's messy.

- (1) there's good and bad mixed together. Wheat and weeds tangled up. That makes for a messy field of crops.
- (2) In a sense, this provides some reassurance when things are hard: it doesn't mean God's not still at work, but as long as the kingdom is in process, we should expect some mess. The presence of evil is expected until the end of the story.
- (3) We live in the middle of the story. The time between the times. The good reign of God, the subversive campaign to renew all things has broken in to the world round us, but it has not taken over. It's working its way through creation slowly but surely,

like yeast working through dough. It started small but is progressively growing, like a mustard seed turning into a giant tree.

- (4) Jesus knew the people he was speaking to would see plenty of scandal around them. They had plenty of stumbling blocks to impede their experience of God's blessing and presence having full reign in their lives. They lived under the oppression of Rome, they became a hunted people. There were lots of reasons for doubt that God's work was really among them, because even when visible things of God took place, they took place alongside painful things that were not of God. It was messy.
3. **Jesus is asking his followers to refrain from weeding now, refrain from trying to clean up the mess.** Why? Because he wants the maximum amount of wheat at harvest time.
- (a) Jesus knows that the effort to try to be proactive with the weeding is actually detrimental to the crop in this case. It's keeping out that which could be harvested. Think about that passage we looked at a bit ago about the stumbling blocks. That passage is saying, deal with your own - deal with the things in you that cause you to separate from God and others - but be careful when it comes to others. Don't put up roadblocks between others and God.
 - (b) Unfortunately, historically, the church, like most other social groups, has a hard time with tension. We have a hard time with mess. **We tend to do one of two things: to either withdraw from places of tension and mess and try to establish our own neatly tended weed-less gardens, or we get sucked into the power game, the empire game,** if we can just get enough control, we can tamp down on all these weeds for everyone. We can weed out that which doesn't seem like wheat to us.
 - (c) And that's exactly what we do when we get power. **We weed others out of our groups, of our social bases, of our churches** based on their race, their cultural background, their level of education, or who they're voting for. We make policies about who can and can't become members in a church or take communion and we weed out folks who are gay, folks whose parents are gay, folks who are transgender, folks who are divorced and remarried. We talk about certain portions of the Bible like the first chapters of Genesis as giving final answers on the creation of the cosmos and we weed out scientists. We talk about racism as a sin that individuals need to repent of but refuse to acknowledge structural and cultural sin that must be addressed for true justice and freedom to take place, and we weed out our brothers and sisters of color. Or maybe we simply weed others out for their perceived messiness; because they're brave enough to say out loud that they have doubts, they have questions, that their stories don't square with how we think God is supposed to work.
 - (d) **But as the parable points out, our need to draw lines in the sand, to say this is wheat, and this is weed, add then toss out the weeds, often leads to graven mistakes.** Because we can't always tell. The darnel looks like grain. Our ability to discern who is right and who is wrong is far from perfect, and when we try, we often yank up and throw out that which God wants to harvest.
 - (e) But God isn't like that. He not too hasty. **God wants as much wheat as possible in the end. He is patient.** And he's willing to endure the mess for as long as it takes to get the most wheat. 2nd Peter 3:9, ***"The Lord is not slow in keeping his promise, as some understand slowness. Instead he is patient***

with you, not wanting anyone to perish, but everyone to come to repentance.

- (f) Isn't it interesting that the master isn't particularly worried about the presence of evil? He's not worried that the bad seed is going to corrupt the crop. He's aware that the enemy has sown bad among the good, but he's fine letting it be. It's as if he knows that the wheat is more powerful than the weeds. The good won't be corrupted. But the most good will come, the biggest harvest will come, from not being overzealous too soon. Don't be afraid of evil. Goodness is stronger. The wheat has more power than the weeds.

III. If this is true, it has implications for us.

A. My friend Ken Wilson hears from this parable this pointed question Jesus invites us to consider **"Am I willing to weed less knowing my master doesn't trust me to weed well?"**

(a) **Life would be neater and tidier if we could get rid of the weeds among us;** if we could eliminate the sources of tension in our lives, or the people who drive us batty. But our view of justice is imperfect. God is the only right judge. We are called to let the weeds, those things we see as evil among us, be. To let God sort them out. To accept all in our midst, with an openness to the reality that we are surrounded by wheat even where we think we only see weeds. We just can't discern that well.

(b) **The landowner said, "let them grow together" of the wheat and the weeds.** The word translated here "let it" is also connected to the word forgiveness. You can use it to say let go of the need to judge or to hold in contempt. It's the same word Jesus uses of his followers on the cross, when he says, "Father, forgive them, for they know not what they're doing." Let them be, Father. Release them. Perhaps Jesus is inviting us to let go and forgive our brothers and sisters in the same way he is imploring the Father to let go and forgive, as well.

IV. So practically, **how do we move forward? A few tips for Election Day and beyond.**

A. **Vote with conviction.**

- 1. follow Jesus into the voting booth. Voting on behalf of the marginalized, disempowered, excluded; to make straight the path, to clear away the stumbling blocks that all might experience God's blessing.

B. **Regard others, particularly those with whom you disagree, with the same generosity of spirit that you'd desire to be regarded.**

- 1. So easy to paint others in broad strokes. To make assumptions.
- 2. Golden rule: do unto others as you'd have them to do unto you.

C. **Look to Jesus to bring ultimate justice.**

- 1. Pray "let your kingdom come...", invite God's work to be unfolding in this event as in all events. Seek God's unfolding reign in these current events, and participate in that coming however you can. Call upon God for his justice to reign.
- 2. Remember that he is the ultimate judge. That Jesus will bring true justice in his time. Stand in the hope and expectation that it is coming and we will see that glorious dawn.
- 3. Isaiah 55: ***"3 Many peoples will come and say,
"Come, let us go up to the mountain of the Lord,
to the temple of the God of Jacob.
He will teach us his ways,
so that we may walk in his paths."
The law will go out from Zion,
the word of the Lord from Jerusalem.***

***4 He will judge between the nations
and will settle disputes for many peoples.
They will beat their swords into plowshares
and their spears into pruning hooks.
Nation will not take up sword against nation,
nor will they train for war anymore.”***