

Sermon July 19, 2020
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Redeemer, Ramsey

Grace mercy and peace from God our father and from our lord and savior Jesus Christ. Amen.

I want to start this morning by thanking our staff, Diane McGregor, Stephanie Doyle and Fran Morton, for their excellent work preparing for last week's service and this week's service. I also want to thank Bruce Whitaker for stepping in to preach last Sunday. And I want to thank Melinda Conti and Jim Van Duzer for singing these past few Sundays. I do apologize for our technical difficulties last week, but our staff and volunteers worked calmly and creatively to finish the service. I am so grateful for their dedication, patience and flexibility. Redeemer is very fortunate to have such a dedicated staff, and for the presence of so many willing members, who can step into various roles to help out from week to week.

Today, my heart is filled with gratitude for our congregation, and the many ways you continue to pursue the path of Christian discipleship in these challenging times. Even as the constraints on our gatherings continue, I marvel at how resilient we are as a family of faith. We gather for worship, we speak of and act on God's grace during a time of deep division and political acrimony, we pray for each other and the world around us, and we point to Christ's life, death and resurrection as God's gift and promise to a world in turmoil.

There is a saying popular in the ELCA, which is meant as a teaching tool. It is, "we are church", and indeed, in these trying times, we are still church together. The phrase is intentionally awkward, with no indefinite or definite article for the word, church. Not "we are a church" or "we are the church," just, "we are church." The phrase highlights how our relationship to Christ transcends all our other incidental identities. It also manifests the corporate nature of our Christian identity. We are church together, with other people, not alone, or as individuals. We share this Churchness, this identity, with other Christians around the world because of our faith in Christ's life, death and resurrection. The phrase provides a way of prioritizing our common identity over our particular identities. We may be identified with one congregation, in one location and culture, associated with others in one denomination, but we are church together above all else.

Wherever it may be situated, the church is called out from among the peoples of the world to live by the rule of Christ's righteousness. In this respect, we are unique, because Christ is unique. Yet we are called to do so IN the world. We are called out from the world to be different, to go against the grain, to live in faith hope and love, and to pursue justice and peace in a way that points to the meakness and gentleness that Jesus' own ministry embodies. That bit of disconnect you feel from the ways of the world, that tension that comes from looking out for those who are vulnerable or weak, instead of just going along with the world to see how big a piece of the pie you can get before you check out, well, that disconnect is part of the bargain. Yet, we are also called to live in the world, as opposed to outside of it. Christians are part of the world, not removed from it. By living as Christians in the world, we witness to the love of God in Christ Jesus for the whole world. As we live out this witness, others see and are called into faith in Jesus and the kingdom of God by our testimony. Our living is imperfect and burdened by our sin, and thus our witness is too. Even as church, we stand in constant need of reform and repentance. Yet by the grace of God, our witness points to Jesus, his righteousness, and the steadfast love of God, who sent Jesus in the first place, to reveal the kingdom, call his church out from the world, and then lead it back into the world in faith, hope and love.

The call to faith goes out to "anyone who has ears", as Jesus says at the end of our Gospel lesson today. However, we know that only a portion of those who hear the call of Christ respond in faith to it. This is the point of Jesus' parable of the sower from last week, on which Bruce so ably preached. The call of the Gospel, or the seed which is sown, is sown all around, and that call goes out to all types of hearts, represented by the different types of soil. Bruce reminded us to be that willing hearer of the Gospel, and respond so that it might take root in our hearts, that we might be found with a harvest of faith in the end.

The fact that this calling brings us into conflict, or tension with the world poses a twofold problem for us. On the one hand, we may fall away from the faith, and on the other, we may fall into pride or self-righteousness. On the one hand, we can be tempted away from tension and toward ease. We face the temptation all the time to become that soil of the path, or of the rocky ground, or that which lies among thorns. Indeed, I submit to you that we all fall prey to this temptation, even those of us who count ourselves dedicated and faithful Christians. In all

these cases, the word of Christ coming to us in the proclamation of the Gospel may take root, but sooner or later, either the devil snatches it away, or the challenge of persecution, hardship or the cares of the world kill the small seed of faith within us. Regardless of our sincerity or desire, faith may not always find a foothold in our hearts, and we fall away. Especially if you see the times calling for activism and forthright advocacy, but sense the danger of an emboldened opposition, it may seem easier to just forget about faith in Christ's coming kingdom and simply try to live a quiet, if ethical life.

On the other hand, if we feel we are that seed which was sown on good soil, the more secure we may become in our feeling that we have responded properly to the call of the Gospel. We start to see ourselves like the wheat in today's parable, and we start to see those who won't join us, who won't agree with us, like the weeds. The temptation arises to become self-righteous and believe that we are indeed special, or just smarter, chosen above others to be the good seed that grows in good soil and yields a plentiful harvest. To the other sorry souls in the world, who either lack faith or even embrace evil, oh well, too bad.

In some ways, we might say that in the parable of today's Gospel lesson, the parable of the wheat and the tares, as it is known in English, encourages this second temptation I've just described, the temptation to pride and self-righteousness. But I should point out that Matthew, the writer of this Gospel, really did see the church of his day in this way. There were evil forces and influences afoot in his church, and those who were trying to maintain the teaching of the original apostles had their hands full. Scholars tend to agree that Matthew's church was riven with divisions based on tension between Jewish Christians and their original Jewish synagogue community, as well as tension between these Jewish Christians and the Gentile, non-Jewish people who were converting to Christian faith and joining the church. On top of that, there were also false teachers and prophets, who tried to lead the church in ways that Matthew thinks are foreign to the Gospel tradition of Jesus Christ.

This is why Matthew uses an "explanation", the second half of our lesson today, to point out the good seed, the righteous ones who respond in faith, versus the bad seed, the "children of the evil one," who have the wrong faith. The explanation is Matthew's alone, and less dependent on the tradition of Jesus' own teaching, because of the terms and grammar he uses, and because its focus is just

a little different than that of the parable it claims to explain. Matthew feels it a point of consolation that in the final judgement, the bad, and all the causes of sin and evil, are destroyed, and the good shine like the sun in the kingdom of their father. In this explanation, Matthew is singularly focused on the issue of judgement. Matthew wants to teach his church, and all the competing factions within it, that salvation will hinge on one's righteousness alone. One's ethnic, linguistic, national, geographical or even religious background, has nothing to do with one's salvation. It all hinges on the proper response to the Gospel manifested in a life lived righteously by faith.

Yet, the original parable, in the first half of our Gospel lesson today, focuses on the patience of the sower. The sower's work has been compromised by the work of an enemy, who has sown weeds among the wheat. When the sower's workers suggest culling the weeds, the sower disagrees. He points out that tearing out the weeds will uproot the wheat as well. Let them grow together until the time of harvest, and then harvest the lot and separate them at the end. This is a gracious allowance of time, more time to influence and be influenced, and indeed, more time to repent, reform, and return in righteous living to the God of grace who called the church together in the first place.

We are Church, and church is that assembly of people who count themselves ready, if not always willing, to receive the proclamation of the Gospel of Jesus Christ. Instead of becoming complacent that our righteousness secures our position within the kingdom of God, we are church when we humble ourselves before the king of righteousness and receive the promise of his grace towards us. Indeed, our righteousness does not save us, but His righteousness is credited to us in faith. Thus, as church, we inspect ourselves every Sunday in the confession at the beginning of the service. Have we fallen away from the Gospel, are we choked by the cares of the world? Are we cut off from the Gospel because of fear of persecution? Yes, but by the righteousness of Christ, and the grace of time given to us by the sower, we are forgiven and continually called back to a life of faith in God's salvation. Are we tempted by the devil, are we tempted to try to weed out of the church or out of our lives those other people who we think are undeserving, unrighteous, unredeemed? Yes, but by the patience of our loving God, we are told that the wheat must grow with the weeds until the end. And God we know, is very patient. Grace for the weeds is also grace for the wheat. Maybe grace for the wheat is also grace for the weeds. May God's grace claim and

save us all in the end. Amen. May the peace of God which passes all understanding keep your hearts and minds in Christ Jesus. Amen.