

Judgment

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Matthew 13:24-30, 36-43

"...the righteous will shine like the sun in the kingdom of their Father."

Movement 1 – It is a Messed Up World

The world is a mess. This is nothing new. This is not a revelatory statement, but one that I am sure you have heard time and time again. It is an easy way to start any address, oration, speech or sermon because it catches your attention, sparks your imagination, and offers a common idea that most of us can agree with. The world is a mess.

Just in case there are a few folks wearing rose colored glasses out there, let's think about this statement. Let's think about the idea that the world is a mess. In Zimbabwe, just a few weeks ago, elections were just held for the office of president, and some may say that this is a good thing. It is a good thing to see democracy in progress, to see people making a free choice about who they would like their leader to be. Yet Robert Mugabe, the presumed victor of the elections, supported the use of scare tactics, beatings, and murders towards any and all of his opponents and their supporters to the point where his main opponent pulled out of the race for his safety and for the safety of his followers. Mugabe then declared that the elections were fair and just. This is a messed up world.

It is a messed up world. Amsterdam, known for its freedoms and casual living is trying to clean up its act; especially in the red light district (reference the siren call of Sting – Roxanne!). You may say this is a good thing for the town and for the world overall for such an industry is degrading towards women, is not safe and immoral. Yet remember that many of those who work as "ladies of the night," in the world's oldest profession are there because they either felt they had no other choice, or because they are a part of the sex slave industry. They are victims and as Amsterdam is cleaning up its colorful district they are getting nothing. The brothel owners, in many cases those responsible for the trafficking of young women are receiving vast amounts of money so they will leave and never come back and their brothels will close. Yes, this is one way to do away with the sex industry, but what of the young women who were stuck in this industry. They are not receiving any money, any help and left on the street. The real perpetrators are getting paid and the victims are left to continue to suffer. It is a messed up world.

It is a messed up world when we expect our politicians, our leaders to lie and to fall back on their promises. It is a messed up world when we are cautious around our neighbors and we cannot trust the stranger on the street. It is a messed up world when schools, day care institutions and summer camps have to work with an assumption that they will be sued by some parent for some reason and always be on the vigilant offensive. It is a messed up world when, no matter how hard we try not to look, the color of someone's skin will always be an issue in one way or another. It is a messed up world when someone can receive better health care if they are homeless then if they are working a minimum wage job.

It is a messed up world when the attitude of apathy towards others is the expected and accepted attitude. We are taught not to care about others if we really want to take

care of ourselves. In the beginning of the movie *Spiderman* Peter Parker just finished a wrestling match and went to collect his money so he could buy a flashy car and impress the girl next door. The owner of the establishment would not give Parker the money due to a technicality and responded to Parker's pleas with, "not my problem." As Parker was leaving the building, a gunman who had just robbed the owner ran past towards the elevator. The owner asked for some help to which Parker replied, "not my problem." What is messed up in this world is that this is often the response that is expected and accepted. It is not my problem, so I do not have to get involved. This is not my problem so I do not have to care. It is not my problem. It is a messed up world.

With such an image of the world in mind, perhaps Jesus' parable makes a lot of sense. Does it not feel like we are surrounded by weeds in the world? Does it not seem that someone must be sowing the evil, the apathy and the malcontent in the world? This cannot be the world that God intended. We hear the parable and the explanation of the parable and maybe we arrive at the seemingly obvious conclusion that, we, the church, the followers of Christ, must be the wheat, the good seed sown in the world. We are the shining light in the world and we only need wait for that great and glorious day when the angels will come, send the wicked to the place of suffering and burning and bring us to glory. You can imagine the members of Matthew's community, living in the coastal town of Antioch feeling the same thing. It was a cosmopolitan city that had many different types and kinds of people. They were surrounded by Roman rule and oppression, surrounded by many people from many different cultures and saw themselves as wheat surrounded by weeds. Perhaps they felt besieged in a climate of inequity and Jesus' words gave them vision and hope. They were the good seeds and they only need wait for the glory of the Lord.

It is a messed up world, and we, the church, the followers of Christ are the ones who will be saved.

Movement 2 – It is a Messed Up Church

Yet the church is not above reproach. The church is not a place of purity, a place of holiness and a collection of only saints. Augustine said that the church is a mix of sinners and saints, it is not above reproach and we should take such an observation to heart. The church is a mess. How many stories have you heard of church treasures embezzling, of deacons who are heavy drinkers, and of pastors who are involved in one vice or another? The great novel *The Scarlet Letter* is a story about a woman who has an affair with the pastor of the local puritan church, and such a thought is not mere fantasy. The church is a mess. Every church you go to is struggling with some kind of neurosis or issue. When I have worked with churches that are struggling with problems, one of the first things I tell them is that they are not unique or alone. Pastors go to churches expecting to find problems, issues and challenges. We expect to find a mess and it is rare when the church does not meet the expectations. The church is a mess. Think of the sexual abuse scandal in the Roman Catholic church exposing not only the pathology of many priests (but not all), but also the brokenness of the institution itself that allowed such atrocities to occur. Think of the Baptist movement which accepted slavery as a normal part of Christian living, which would not allow blacks to worship with whites. Think of the Lutheran churches in Germany which supported and praised the rhetoric of

Hitler. People have been burned in the name of Christ, individuals have been spurned, and wars have been waged within the religious walls of the church. The church is a mess.

Even those who have good intentions still make messes and mistakes. At Colorado we heard one speaker, Emmett Dunn, the head of the youth for the Baptist World Alliance. He critiqued the good intentioned mission trips as a waste of resources and as an example, he shared about a church in Mexico City which had the same wall painted four times in one year by good intentioned churches from the United States. It seems that we often cannot even get our missions straight. The church is a mess.

So maybe the parable is not only about the world, but is also about the church. Maybe this parable does not only speak to the weeds of the world but also to the weeds in the church. Perhaps you can imagine that the Matthean community was a mix of dedicated Christians following Christ and Christians considering Christ. Maybe there were some in the Christian community who wanted to bring the community back to Judaism or under the control of Rome. Maybe there were some who wanted power and control of the community, and the early Christians could hear this parable and understand. They heard Jesus' words of wheat and weeds and saw themselves as stalks of wheat surrounded by weeds in the church. The church was not pure, even though Christ had only sown good seeds. The church was not separate from the mess of the world, but complicit in many ways.

Are we not the same? Can we not look at the church (maybe even this church) and see a combination of wheat and weeds. Could we not walk into a church, observe for a month and then point at the members who are disruptive and destructive and those who are true to Christ? Call on us to purify the church, to winnow out the weeds and make the church the guiding light for the world we cry. Call on us to bring the moral righteousness that you demand we ask. For this has been the response of many to the mess of the church. Creeds and confessions are issued to bring members to a moral standard. Moral codes are issued so that expectations are set. Wednesday night meetings are held so that those who are perhaps drinking to much, staying out to late, or cavorting in one way or another can be called to task (a well practiced technique of the Baptists and of this church). Churches even separate themselves from other churches claiming that other churches are only a collection of sinners, while they are a collection of saints so that the world can gaze upon their purity. Heretics have been cast out or even burned in an excited anticipation of the weeping and gnashing promised by our Lord. Judgment is cast in the church so that we can be the pure, guiding light to the rest of the world. Mike Yaconelli once said, "We're attempting to convince the world how good Jesus is by how great we are." We do this as we strive to purge our impurities, just as a metal smith purges out the impurities of silver, so often members take other members to the fire so as to make the church pure. The church is a mess so judgment is cast. The church is a mess and we will clean it up. The church is a mess.

Movement 3 – We are a Messed Up People

Perhaps the reality is that we are a mess. Perhaps the reality is that we are a mixture of wheat and weeds. Think about it. How many of you are perfect? How many of you are without sin? How many of you go by day after day without straying, even a little bit, from the path of the Lord? Maybe it is true that we are a mess.

One of the main characters from the now cancelled show, *The Wire* is an Irish police detective in Baltimore, who has a real heart from doing good police work, for being a positive influence in the community but who tends to drink heavily and sleeps around. Every time he drinks he tends to hurt someone. He tends to become so focused on his objective that he spurns his supervisors and his friends. He has a flaw, a major flaw despite all of his good intentions and work. He is a mess.

We all have a dark side, a shadow side that is often pulling and leading us away from the Lord. Carl G. Jung described this as that unconscious, repressed and denied aspect of ourselves that rejects what we see as good and decent. It is a jealous urge that comes out again and again. It is a pang of greed that causes us to hold onto more of our money than perhaps we should. It is that twinge of anger that leads us to strike out verbally or even physically. It is that critical look that leads us to judge and condemn. We all have our vices, our addictions, our flaws. Can any of us claim to be a stalk of wheat in the church or the world? Can any of us claim to be a beacon of light, pure light in the church or the world? We are all flawed.

With such a thought this parable should be scary. With the truth of ourselves, the reality of ourselves on our hearts and minds, this parable should terrify us. For we will be judged. For we should be judged and condemned for we all are guilty of sin. We are all guilty of fallenness. We all are a mess and perhaps we need to wonder if, on that judgment day, we will be the ones sent out to weeping and gnashing. We must wonder if we will be judged.

We all have our flaws our faults and our failings. We all have our issues and none of us can claim to be pure, holy and beyond judgments. This parable should terrify us, should strike us as dangerous and scary. We are a mess.

Movement 4 – Patience and Humility

Yet listen closely to the parable. Listen closely to this parable, for Christ, the sower, the owner does something that is not expected or common practice. When his servants come to him and point out the weeds and ask if they should pick them out, this is all expected. For when we are planting almost anywhere, we would take time each day or every other day to pull out the weeds so that the good plants would be able to grow and flourish. This was the practice in the first century and is still the practice today. To wait is not normal, not expected. Yet Christ says, wait until the pruning time. Christ calls his servants to wait and let the weeds grow with the wheat and he is not worried about the health of his beloved.

Think of this. If we were to try to exorcise the flaws in ourselves what would happen? If we were to try to purge ourselves of all of our sins and failings we would go crazy with repression or with an overcritical self reflection. If an alcoholic goes to AA he or she does not look to be cured of alcoholism. No, instead he or she looks to learn how to live with this affliction in a way that is not destructive. If someone has an issue with overeating, he or she does not avoid food, but learns how to live with this urge. The response is different for each person, but we learn how to live in a positive way with our afflictions.

It reminds me of Paul and his thorn in the flesh. No one really knows what this thorn was, but think of it as some kind of affliction. Maybe it was a sense of arrogance, or a jealous spirit. Remember that Paul prayed three times for this affliction to be taken

away and God's response was, "no." God said instead, "my grace is sufficient." Our weeds are not taken away, or faults are not taken away, instead we are called to lean on the grace of God and work to live with our faults and failings in a positive way; led by the Lord.

Think of the church. What if we were to purge the church of all sinners? What if we were to purge the church of all the weeds, who would be left? We would have a church of one person and a lot of empty pews. We would have vast, empty sanctuaries and this would be the testament to Christ. One commentator claimed that the work towards a pure church would be detrimental to the church itself. Instead we are to be a place that welcomes the sinner, works with the sinner and loves the sinner for we are all cut of that cloth. We are to be a place of the limping, failing and the hurting, and then to lift each other up, resting on the grace of God. The church is not a place free of sin, but where sin is addressed and where we are called to slowly work out of our sin.

What of the world. There is evil in the world, there will always be evil in the world. As a church we can, like the Amish, like many Baptists, close our doors to the evils of the world, judge the world and let the weeds grow. Yet if we are weeds just as much as others are, we should reach out to the world and invite others into the church, the grace of Jesus Christ. We are not to ignore the sins of the world, but to work with those who have been afflicted by the sins the weeds of the world. We are to speak truth to power, to call a weed a weed, and then to call the world to a different kind of growth. Remembering all the time that it is not our calling to pull the weeds but to help the wheat to grow and all to come to know the redeeming love of Christ and the grace offered to all of us by the Lord. Not to judge but to love. Not to condemn but to invite. Not to criticize but to speak with a prophetic and a pastoral voice to the world.

What we are called to do is to be patient and humble. What we are called to do, before we leap to judgment is to realize that we can also be judged. "Judge not, lest you be judge," we are reminded. Rather approach your brother and sister with the humility knowing that we can be seen as weeds just as much as others can, and it is only the grace of God which allows us to go forward. Adopt the humility of this parable, and also the patience. Have the patience that there will be a time, there will be a day that will lead to the glory of the kingdom.

Movement 5 – Redeeming Judgment

That day will come. That day will come when the weeds will be pulled. That day will come when we will be redeemed. That day will come when the angels of the Lord will pull the weeds of the world and cherish the wheat. We are called to be patience, but what do we do as we wait? What do we do as we wait, patiently and humbly? We are to be the good seeds that we have been made to be by Jesus Christ. We all have been planted by our Lord. We all have been made good by our Lord, and yet the weeds of the world choke us, restrict us and pull us down. Rest on the grace of God and call others to rest. Support each other and call others to be supported. Look to the cross. For it is through the cross that we are seen not as a mess but as redeemed. It is through the cross that we are judged not as sinners but as saints. It is through the cross that we are cleansed and made holy. Look to the cross as we grow into the people we have been called, shaped and formed to be.

Call the world not to be judged but to be redeemed. Call the world not to be condemned but to be loved. Call the world to the cross where all can be redeemed. I am sure you know of those churches that are quick to condemn. In the play and movie *Inherit the Wind* the local pastor of the town of Dayton Tennessee (the location of the Scopes, monkey trial) is seen as a judgmental, holier-than-thou kind of person. He is ready to condemn his own daughter because of her love and support of the teacher who taught the “evils” of Darwin in his class. He is ready not to love but to condemn all that is secular. Yet the character who is portraying William Jennings Bryan quotes, “he that troubles his own house shall inherit the wind,” and that is what a judgmental approach shall do trouble our house the church or even our house the world. Call people to judgment, but a redeeming judgment through the cross. Call people to judgment, but a judgment made by Christ through the grace of the Lord. Call all, show all how to fall on your knees and say, “just as I am” I place myself before you. “Just as I am” I am here to be judged and fall on the grace of the cross. Wait and rest in the grace. Wait and rest in the glory. Wait and rest in the Lord.

Movement 6 – Glory

There will be that day of glory. There will be that day of redemption. There will be that day when we all will shine with righteousness in the kingdom of God. That day when we fall before the cross and say here I am may I be judged through the love of Christ. And your weeds will then be pulled and you will be made pure. On that day, that glorious day you will be purged and shine in the righteousness of the Lord. On that day, that glorious day you will sing of the glory of the Lord.

In the sweet, by and by, we shall all meet on that beautiful shore. The melodious songs of the blest, and our spirits will sorrow no more. It will be a time of blessing and of rest.

In the sweet by and by...

AMEN