

# Trinity United Methodist Church

July 19, 2020

## “Harvesting in the Midst of Hostility”

Rev. Greg West

### Scripture

*Matthew 13:24-30*  
& *Matthew 13:36-43 (NRSV)*

Matthew 13:24-30 (NRSV)

**24** He put before them another parable: “The kingdom of heaven may be compared to someone who sowed good seed in his field; **25** but while everybody was asleep, an enemy came and sowed weeds among the wheat, and then went away. **26** So when the plants came up and bore grain, then the weeds appeared as well. **27** And the slaves of the householder came and said to him, ‘Master, did you not sow good seed in your field? Where, then, did these weeds come from?’ **28** He answered, ‘An enemy has done this.’ The slaves said to him, ‘Then do you want us to go and gather them?’ **29** But he replied, ‘No; for in gathering the weeds you would uproot the wheat along with them. **30** Let both of them grow together until the harvest; and at harvest time I will tell the reapers, Collect the weeds first and bind them in bundles to be burned, but gather the wheat into my barn.’”

Matthew 13:36-43 (NRSV)

**36** Then he left the crowds and went into the house. And his disciples approached him, saying, “Explain to us the parable of the weeds of the field.” **37** He answered, “The one who sows the good seed is the Son of Man; **38** the field is the world, and the good seed are the children of the kingdom; the weeds are the children of the evil one, **39** and the enemy who sowed them is the devil; the harvest is the end of the age, and the reapers are angels. **40** Just as the weeds are collected and burned up with fire, so will it be at the end of the age. **41** The Son of Man will send his angels, and they will collect out of his kingdom all causes of sin and all evildoers, **42** and they will throw them into the furnace of fire, where there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth. **43** Then the

righteous will shine like the sun in the kingdom of their Father. Let anyone with ears listen!”

## Sermon

Well, let me say I’m grateful to be back here at Trinity with you all. Pastor Dan called me and said, “Hey, Greg, this might be a good fit for you, and it would be a good fit for us.” The last time I preached here, I was serving as the Chaplain at Virginia Wesleyan University, and I just finished 10 years there, but I am no longer serving in that capacity. I am one of the Conference Evangelists now. I’m very excited about that new ministry that God has called me to.

As we enter into the Word, let’s clear up the question that I know is on everybody’s mind: *Is that a quarantine haircut?* It is, and I’m sorry. I apologize to all of you. I did the clippers myself, and if you were closer, you’d be horrified. But as you know, the difference between a good haircut and a bad haircut is about two weeks, as they say. So we’re praying for that to go quickly.

As we enter into the text, as we consider the Word of God, I have some questions for you to ask of yourselves:

- Are you spiritually alive?
- Are you abiding in Christ?
- Are you willing to let the Word of God search your hearts?
- Will you trust this preacher for six weeks that I’m with you, to bring the Word of God?

I’m not merely filling in for Pastor Dan. Just like Dan, I have a calling from God to preach the Word. We take it very seriously. It’s not just “going through the motions.” But the Living God is at work on planet Earth, and the Living God is at work in Smithfield, Virginia, and you don’t want to miss out on what He has for you. Sometimes it’s a lot of work for me just to keep my heart open to God. But we fight for it, and there’s always good things that come when we open ourselves to Christ. So I hope during this time you’ll trust that God is going to do something in your life. He is pursuing you with love. He is pursuing you with truth at all times.

I’ll also say while Pastor Dan is gone, if in preaching the Word or spiritually, if there’s something that I can help you so that you might grow more Christlike, reach out to me. Richard has my email. I want to help this body to be edified, built up, grow during the six

weeks that I'm with you. I would suggest that a good strategy for that is: If the Word of God says it and it's clear, I *will* apply it to my life. Not, "eh, I'll think about it and consider it." But, "I'm going to be obedient to Christ. My life is not my own." It has been bought. We have been bought with a price, and that is the life of Christ.

So the scripture that was read this evening opens with Jesus saying, "The kingdom of heaven can be compared to..." Church, you have to know that in Matthew's gospel, the phrase "kingdom of heaven" appears 31 times. And four times, "kingdom of God" is in the gospel of Matthew. And "the good news of the kingdom," an additional two times. And so, 37 times Jesus is talking about this *kingdom*. It is Jesus' main theme in His teaching. If you don't have an understanding of what the kingdom of heaven or the kingdom of God is, I'd love to help you tonight. But it's His main theme. It is the rule. The reign of God on planet Earth. It's already happening in heaven, and He's bringing it here. It started when He showed up on planet Earth, and it's becoming more and more and more, and one day it will come in its complete fullness, and all the kingdoms of the world will become the kingdoms of our Lord and of his Christ.

The kingdom of heaven is an invasion. It is God working, sometimes covertly and subtly. And working through humanity, like the leaven through the dough. But the kingdom of heaven is His main theme.

And in this parable, it's a very simple parable. Kindergarteners can grasp this parable. And yet, there's depths to it that I want us to explore.

The parable of the weeds. Church, we know we are in a time of reckoning. We are in a time of reckoning in this world. The truth is, God is *always* asking humanity, "Who do you trust? Where is your security and your hope? Who will you follow?" God is always asking those questions of humanity. But God is raising his voice, I believe, in these crisis times. In the midst of pandemic, in the midst of racial injustice, in the midst of an economic crisis and political crisis. Who do we trust? Where is our hope? Where is our security? And who will we follow? We have to take these things very, very seriously.

Jesus talks about the farmer who sows good seed. He doesn't say "farmer," but we know, somebody going out there sowing seed is a farmer. Back in Jesus' day everybody was doing that. Everybody was a farmer. It's something that they all could relate to. So the farmer sows the good seed. But then, while people are asleep, the enemy comes and sows the weeds into the field, and they grow up at the same time, and the servants see this and let it be known. We're told, because Jesus interprets His own parable, that the one sowing the good seed is the Son of Man. "Son of Man" is Jesus' favorite self-reference. We often are more comfortable with "Son of God," but if you count the

number of times Jesus said “Son of Man” versus “Son of God” -- “Son of Man” many more times. And the reason was, the phrase “Son of God” had been corrupted in the culture. That’s because all of the Caesars on the thrones in Rome referred to themselves as Son of God. And so “Son of Man” is Jesus’ favorite self-reference. It goes back to the book of Daniel, where it’s crystal clear. He’s not talking about somebody who’s merely human. He is divine. He has authority with the Father.

And so the Son of Man is sowing good seeds. That’s His nature. He’s out there making it available to us. Growing things that are good. And Jesus makes it very clear: The enemy is the devil, who sows the weeds to mess up the harvest, to mess up the crops, to cause trouble and strife. And Jesus says then that the good seed or the good crop are the children of the kingdom, and the weeds are the children of the evil one.

I wonder if you’re comfortable with that as your worldview, that there’s a God who’s good, and He’s in the world doing good, and then there’s an enemy, the devil. I’ve been in academia for ten years, and people in academia don’t like talking about the devil in any literal way. They mock it. They make a caricature of the forked tail and the pitchfork and the horns, and, “*That’s* what you believe in?” No. But I believe that God created an angel, and that angel did rebel, and that angel is real. For me, it makes the most sense, church, as I try to understand evil in the history of the world, evil presently in the world. Evil has a personality and a force behind it, and the demonic realm is real. It’s impossible to read the Gospels and not see that that was Jesus’ worldview. If you have another suggestion I’m open to it, but I’ve seen a lot, and I’m convinced there is an enemy of every one of us that desires to sow trouble and strife and bad seed and wickedness among us, luring us in.

So in the parable, the master is asked: “Should we pull up the weeds so that we can have a good harvest?” And the master says, “No, don’t do it, because if you pull up those weeds now, their roots have gone and intertwined with the roots of the good seed, the good crop, and they’ll pull all of them up. So just wait. Harvest is coming.”

As I looked at this passage, it’s exactly as it is in Jesus’ time, and even today, farmers in that land will tell you, that’s exactly how it goes there with this wheat and what they call a darnel plant. It’s a weed. And they look the same at the beginning, but then when the buds come up, they start to look very different.

And so it is, church. We can make outward observations of people around us and they can make them of ourselves, and we can say he’s a good person, she’s a good gal. But we don’t know all the things. Sometimes there’s evidence. We’ll know them by their fruits. But the truth is, in every human heart, there’s a pull toward evil and a pull toward

wickedness. And until you yield to Christ and surrender and say, “Cure that sickness. Cure that disease. Make me like You, Lord Jesus,” then we’re going to be at a loss. We’ll lose the tug-of-war most of the time. I don’t know if you can relate, but church, I have some stories of my life before Christ, where even when I wanted to do good, I headed into darkness and enjoyed it for a season, but never for any long season, because it always, *always* brings a negative harvest.

And so, “wait for the harvest. The harvest is coming. Don’t pull them up. They’re out there together.” And so it is in the world, in your workplace, in the school. Maybe even in your family. There might be good crops and bad crops right next to each other. The only One that can make us good, truly good, is Christ. He comes to give us a new nature, to dwell within us.

And so, again, this parable is so simple a child can understand it. But will we apply it? Will we search our own hearts and say, “Lord, am I the good crop? I want to be. Search my heart, oh God. And if I’m not, change me. Change me. Change me. I’m willing to repent.” And church, if you see some of the negative in you – you need some friends. Most of us in this country have been taught to *do it on your own, be your own man, pull yourself up by your bootstraps. I am woman, hear me roar, I got this*. We need sisters. We need brothers who we can say, “I’m struggling with this. I am failing Christ. I’m failing my wife, I’m failing my friends. Help me. Pray for me.” The scripture is so clear. “Confess your sins one to another, that you may be healed.” Church, we have the diagnosis and we have the cure. It’s all right here, crystal-clear in God’s Word. Will we apply it?

I wonder if you’re grateful for the Word of God. I wonder if this is Life to you. Moses said to the people at some point: “These are not just idle words for you. They are your life. This is God revealing Himself and His ways to humanity. Treasure it. Immerse yourself in it.” David the king said, “Thy word I have hid within my heart so that I would not sin against you.” This is gold for us, church. Are you grateful for a God who gives you knowledge and wisdom from above? Practical guidance for living. A God that desires to share more with you.

In this chapter that was read – it wasn’t read in the text, but it’s in the chapter, chapter 13 of Matthew’s gospel – there’s some fascinating language. When you have a good friend, they’ll often share things with you that they don’t share with anybody else. A secret; a good secret, some good news that just can’t wait. *I’m going to propose to my fiancée in a week. Don’t tell anybody*. You get to have some inside information when you have a good, good friend. Listen to what Jesus says to His disciples: “The knowledge of the secrets of the kingdom of heaven have been given to you, but not to them.” The

knowledge of the secrets of the kingdom have been given to the disciples, and they've been given to us because we get to read that as well.

And then later in the chapter it says of Jesus' teaching, "So was fulfilled what was spoken through the prophet: 'I will open my mouth in parables, I will utter things hidden since the creation of the world.'" It's been revealed to us, church. If you're open to Christ and yield to Him, you will have some of the secrets of the kingdom of heaven. He will reveal them to you, that you might walk in His ways and honor Him.

I wonder if you have time with God alone. I'm wondering if you're opening yourself to the Living God. I'm wondering if you're walking in obedience and freedom, church. If you're not, He's calling you to that.

Let me just confess right here: There are days when I don't feel like praying. I got my Words with Friends going, and I'm doing good. I just got a 100-point word, right? I'm excited. I want to keep this going. And God's calling me to prayer, and I don't want to. And I do it anyway. And I can tell you, there's resistance in me some days. Some days I'm eager for it. But I have never regretted it. Never regretted saying, "I'm going to carve out this time." Because when I'm in His presence, when I open His Word, good things happen. Discipline yourself, church. It's not just for you. It's for those around you. They will benefit from your time with God.

The title of the message is, "*Harvesting in the Midst of Hostility*." This parable, again, so simple. Are we the good seed or the bad seed? Are we the good crop or the bad crop? But there's a larger picture here. Parables don't tell the full story, but they tell some intricacies of the story. Other parables by Jesus will reveal that we're to be laborers in the vineyard. We're called to harvest with Him. So it's not just "are we the good crop or are we the bad crop," but, "am I the good crop who is bringing more good crop into the world?" Are you a harvester with Christ? Are we sowing our own good seed out there? Are you letting your light shine before people so that they might see your good works and glorify your Father in heaven? That's the calling. We get to harvest with Him.

And we're in a culture right now where there is hostility, sometimes open hostility even against the church. If you identify with Christ, you will be persecuted, the Bible says. You will get resistance. Jesus was opposed; what makes us think we'll get away without opposition?

There's a ton of hostility when we take a stand for truth, and people will come at us – online or in person. And the whole cancel culture thing. Which is nuts. We're people of forgiveness. We're people of the second chance and the third chance. We're committed

to loving people even if they get things wrong and mess up. *Especially* if they get things wrong and mess up.

And so, church, with all this opposition and the division in our society, this is the chance for the church to shine. It's a chance to model the ministry of reconciliation. We might have different political views, but Jesus is Lord, and we're going to follow Him. We're brothers and sisters, and we're not going to let those things separate us from this countercultural movement called the church that brings the values of heaven to earth by embodying them, by living them out. We're not going to yield on that, because that is eternal. The kingdom is here and it's coming in its fullness, and if you want to be on the right side of history, align yourself with Jesus Christ, who is Lord of heaven and earth, and His kingdom will never end.

So this is our chance. When people cancel you or come against you or say things that aren't true about you, *that's* the opportunity for grace. That's when grace has its most power, when they don't expect it. When they do something wrong to you, bake 'em cookies. When they curse you, bless them. When they say evil things about you, find out their good qualities. The old saying, "kill 'em with kindness" is not in the Bible, but the principle is kind of in there, right? Paul talks about heaping burning coals on their heads. They'll be convicted.

And so this is our opportunity. I ask you, do you love Democrats *and* Republicans? Do you love people of all races and are committed to their well-being regardless of who they are? Do you love people of different religions? I didn't ask on any of those, do you *agree* with all of that. I'm just saying, do you *love* them? Because love is not an option. Truth is not an option, either. We align ourselves with the truth. And we can engage with that, even if we disagree, while loving them all the way through.

Church, we cannot allow ourselves to be pulled into the divisions. And yet, on social media I see it all the time: Christians who sometimes are even speaking the truth, but there's no love. And so the world hears this *BANG-BANG-BANG*, you know, the clanging gong Paul talked about. They don't even hear the truth. They just think, *this guy's a jerk. I don't want anything to do with what he has*. "Speak the truth in love," the Word of God says.

So we can't allow ourselves to be pulled into the division. This is our chance to shine, church.

I want to take you to somebody who lived out harvesting in the midst of hostility. In the book of Acts, it says that God spoke to a disciple named Ananias and said, "Ananias, there's a man here in Damascus, and his name is Saul. And I want you to go to him and

pray for him, that he might be healed. He's blinded." Do you remember this story? And Ananias is like, "You've got to be kidding me, Lord. He's the enemy of the church. This guy would be happy if I got killed. He might kill me himself." But God pressed on him. He *pressed* on him. And Ananias went to Straight Street, prayed for Saul of Tarsus, who then became the Apostle Paul. The majority of the New Testament is written by a former enemy of the church! A first-century religious terrorist, I dare say. And God got his heart.

This is our chance, church. The church has many enemies today. It has many enemies and many critics, but it has no rivals in the work of human redemption on planet earth. This is our chance to shine.

If you look historically at the plagues in the ancient world, the church *grew* during the plagues. Do you know why? Because they're the ones that would go out and risk their lives caring for the sick. And after the plague passed, people would say, "during the darkest time, it was the Christians, it was these followers of Jesus who came and fed me. It was the followers of Jesus who came and prayed for me. It was the followers of Jesus who did not abandon us. I will follow their God." Church, this is our chance.

Why *can't* the church grow in this pandemic? If we live out the gospel, it will. It will, amen?

And finally, in this parable, Jesus wraps up with a warning. And church, I don't want to be guilty of dismissing the warnings of Jesus. So maybe this isn't for you, but maybe this is for you to pass on. But maybe it's for all of us, so that we won't take it lightly. Jesus makes it known. He says in the parable that "the harvest is the end of the age, and the reapers are the angels. The angels will collect out of his kingdom all causes of sin and all evildoers, and they will put them into the furnace of fire, where there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth. And then the righteous will shine like the sun in the kingdom of their Father."

Church, it's a hard Word. And we're all more comfortable with Jesus, meek and mild, carrying a lamb over His shoulders. But Jesus spoke words of judgment. Because He is God the Son and He is holy, he is necessarily the enemy of all that is evil, of all that is sinful. He knows it harms humanity, and so He cannot wink and look the other way. He is an enemy of sin. And so if sin is in us, we need to confess it. He will wash it away. He has died for that and He is risen from the dead to liberate us from the power of sin. But if we cling to it, if we yield to it, there is judgment. There is judgment.

And so, my final question that I asked the college students frequently and I ask you; I ask myself: Do we think a better offer is coming? *Do we think a better offer is coming?* A better one than the one we have on the table right now? Because the offer on the table



is pretty amazing. That the God who made the heavens and the earth, who put the stars in place and makes the planets orbit the sun—*that* God came to us in our rebellion and loved us in spite of our sin. He walked among us as a human. He taught, He served, He healed, He washed feet. He embraced the outcasts, and He preached love and truth, grace and ultimate reality. And then He walked those long, long steps to the cross and was crucified for my sin, for your sin. But death could not hold Him, and three days later He's risen from the dead, and He's alive forevermore at the right hand of the Father, interceding for us.

The offer on the table today is: Trust in Him. Repent of your sin and receive forgiveness and walk in abundant life and eternal life with the Shepherd who loves you. That's the offer on the table right now. I'm telling everybody I can: Don't miss that offer. I do not think a better one is coming. There is judgment, and there is opportunity to be harvesters with Christ. Harvesters *even* in the midst of hostility.

We have a high calling, church. Let us not miss it. Amen.

### **Closing Prayer**

Jesus, you are the Lord of the harvest, and we are your workers, your children. Put us to work, Lord. Fill us, enlighten us, speak to us, and then set us into action, that your kingdom would come and be established here in Smithfield as it is in heaven. We pray in Your name, Jesus. Amen.