

Lectionary 16 A 2020

Dove of Peace Lutheran Church

Pastor Stephen Springer

July 16, 2020

Matthew 13:24-30, 36-43

Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ. Amen.

Dear Friends:

One of the New Testament professors at our seminary in Saint Paul, Minnesota, says that whenever someone wants to really understand Matthew's gospel, this parable is the place he takes them. Professor Matthew Skinner— who happens to be Presbyterian, by the way. I guess God predestined him to teach at a Lutheran seminary— Matt Skinner says this parable is a great introduction to Matthew. And what makes Matthew different from the other gospels and the other books of the Bible.

I think he's very right. So I'm going to take you through today's gospel with the difficult part, then the encouraging part, and then a brief explanation of how the difficult part relates to the encouraging part.

Here's the difficult part. *"They will throw them into the furnace of fire, where there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth."* Got that? There's a lot of hellfire in Matthew's gospel. A lot of outer darkness. A lot of weeping and gnashing of teeth. There's a lot of stories like this one that end with some people being rewarded, and some people being punished. That's the difficult part.

On the face of it, there is not much grace or mercy in the gospel of Matthew. At least not in the way that Lutherans usually think about grace and mercy. For us Lutherans, last week we had a reading from Romans that said, *"There is therefore now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus."* Romans chapter eight, verse one. A good Lutheran appreciates this. *There is therefore now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus.* That's Paul the Apostle. Whom Lutherans justifiably love. And there's John's gospel: *Indeed, God did not send the Son into the world to condemn the world, but in order that the world might be saved through him.* Jesus did not come to condemn, but to save. To save the whole world. John 3:17. Lutherans like that one, too.

But in Matthew, there is almost always a set of rewards and punishments. And that's okay and perhaps expected in religion. Except for the idea of mercy. That if we admit our faults, God is a source of forgiveness. He is merciful and gracious, slow to anger, and abounding in steadfast love. [Joel 2:13] If we confess our sins, he who is faithful and just will forgive us our sins and cleanse us from all unrighteousness. [1 John 1:9] What makes Matthew especially troubling is that sometimes you can't understand the parable or what the point is, and so you don't know if

you might be among the condemned. Where Paul writes, *There is therefore now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus*, Matthew does not say anything about being in Christ or out of Christ. You may not know where you stand. And that matters when concepts like “the furnace of fire, where there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth” are being tossed around.

So that’s what I call the difficult part of Matthew’s gospel. The encouraging part is indicated in the parable by these words: *In gathering the weeds you would uproot the wheat along with them*. This means don’t hurt the good in your attempt to root out the bad. And it’s a metaphor, but it seems to mean people. In your attempt to get rid of bad people, you may inadvertently destroy good people. That’s worth thinking about.

Now this is not about a civil society like the United States of America. It’s not about a university or a professional certification or a police force or a homeowner’s association or a sorority. This is about the church. We’re not talking about weeding out bad doctors or lazy employees. We’re talking about the church. And this is the very important and valuable contribution that Matthew makes to the New Testament. Because Matthew’s gospel is written for a church that has divisions. For a church that has people with differing perspectives, with different backgrounds. Above all, for a church that has Jewish Christians and Gentile Christians. People who think that circumcision is important, and people who do not. People who might eat pork, and people who do not. And a lot more.

Matthew’s gospel is sober and wise about how people in church behave. And how they misbehave. This parable is about tares, not ordinary weeds. These are sinister plants that look like wheat but are actually very harmful to crops and to anyone who has the misfortune of eating them. But they look very similar to wheat. A very sinister plant grows in the middle of a very important and life-giving plant, and looks just like it. But you can’t tell until harvest. Jesus has zoomed in on this particular agricultural metaphor because he knows that religious communities can succumb to a desire to purge themselves. And purges often harm the innocent. Remember, these two plants look alike. So you can say, “Well, he may be baptized, but....” “She says she’s a Christian, but....” “They may bow the head and bend the knee, but...” This parable, which is unique to Matthew, basically says, “Don’t go there.” Because you really can’t know. Not until harvest time. And it’s not your harvest.

We’re in the church year of Matthew, and this church year ends with another parable that is unique to Matthew. The parable of the sheep and the goats. And in that parable, nobody knows what was going on. The good ones say, “When did we see you, Lord?” And the bad ones say, “When did we see you, Lord?” Like today’s parable, there is a conviction that the truth is going to come out. At the end, the truth will be made known. But that’s in God’s hands. Not ours. And if we rush to judgment, we will end up hurting the innocent. Because we don’t know.

So what I’m calling the encouraging part is that Matthew’s gospel calls the church to forbear. To delay judgment. The first gospel is sober and wise about how church folks behave. And

misbehave. It's been observed, correctly in my view, that Matthew's gospel curbs the authority of church leaders— the people you and I call clergy and pastors and priests. It's only in Matthew's gospel that Jesus says, *A disciple is not above the teacher, nor a slave above the master; it is enough for the disciple to be like the teacher, and the slave like the master.* [10:24-25a] Church leaders should be like Jesus, but they are not above Jesus. It's only Matthew's gospel that says, "If another member of the church sins against you..." And then gives two separate teachings about coping with one member of the church sinning against another. [Matthew 18:15, 21] That's astonishing, really. Did you know that the other gospels do not even use the word church? Only Matthew does.

What I call the encouraging part is that Matthew's gospel really seeks to prevent the abuse of power in the church. And I call that encouraging news because it's relevant. We know— after two thousand years, after a Reformation, and after many scandals— we know that the church has been prone to the abuse of power. And you don't really see much of that addressed in the New Testament. People behave badly, to be sure, in the New Testament. Paul's letters are always calling out people for bad behavior, for selfish, loutish behavior. But as far as the abuse of spiritual power inside the Christian community— the gospel that really foresaw that, and that brought forth the relevant teachings of Jesus— the gospel that did those things is Matthew.

I said at the beginning that the difficult part of Matthew may be related to the encouraging part of Matthew. The judgment passages in Matthew are scary and harsh. And it's not always clear where we stand in those parables. Are we the wheat or the tares? Are we the sheep or the goats? These judgment scenarios encourage us to leave certain things in God's hands. And to examine ourselves a little more closely. No one can really rest easy after reading Matthew's gospel. There is no smugness for Christians in this gospel.

So whenever you give alms, do not sound a trumpet before you, as the hypocrites do in the synagogues and in the streets, so that they may be praised by others. Truly I tell you, they have received their reward. But when you give alms, do not let your left hand know what your right hand is doing, so that your alms may be done in secret; and your Father who sees in secret will reward you.

We read that on Ash Wednesday. It's from Matthew, from the Sermon on the Mount. This gospel not does leave room for hypocrisy or smugness or complacency. And I think that's a timely message for the Christian church. That's a true reformation message. Avoiding the abuse of power. Forbearing our qualms about other church members. Not allowing hypocrisy or smugness. Every church needs to read Matthew now and again.

Professor Matthew Skinner says this parable is a great introduction to Matthew. And shows what makes Matthew different from the other gospels and the other books of the Bible. I agree. Amen.