



Confirmation Sunday, May 2, 2010  
Pastor Mark Toone  
Chapel Hill Presbyterian Church

## *Thy Kingdom Come: Messier Than We'd Prefer* Matthew 13: 24-30; 36-43

We are in a new series called, "Thy Kingdom Come." Jesus is answering the question, "What does the Kingdom of Heaven look like?" Last week we heard the parable of the sower. We did a little soil analysis of our own lives. But what was the constant in that parable? Right, the seed! Four different soils. But in every case, the same powerful seed. And how did the sower sow that seed? Extravagantly! Wastefully! He throws seed everywhere, hoping and believing that it will take root... even in unlikely places.

But what's the **best** place to throw good seed? Good soil! This morning's parable picks up right where we left off last week.

<sup>24</sup>Jesus told them another parable: "The kingdom of heaven is like a man who sowed good seed in his field. <sup>25</sup>But while everyone was sleeping, his enemy came and sowed weeds among the wheat, and went away. <sup>26</sup>When the wheat sprouted and formed heads, then the weeds also appeared.

<sup>27</sup>"The owner's servants came to him and said, 'Sir, didn't you sow good seed in your field? Where then did the weeds come from?'

<sup>28</sup>"'An enemy did this,' he replied.

"The servants asked him, 'Do you want us to go and pull them up?'

<sup>29</sup>"'No,' he answered, 'because while you are pulling the weeds, you may root up the wheat with them. <sup>30</sup>Let both grow together until the harvest. At that time I will tell the harvesters: First collect the weeds and tie them in bundles to be burned; then gather the wheat and bring it into my barn.'"

As I said, this picks up right where the last parable left off. A farmer has sown seed in good soil. But in the middle of the night, the farmer's enemy comes into his field and sows another kind of seed. What kind? Weed-seed! This may seem like an odd thing to do but it actually happened in those days. In fact, the Romans had laws punishing this form of agricultural terrorism.

But even after the seeds began to sprout, no one suspected anything. In Palestine there is a weed called "Bearded Darnel." In its early stages, it is a dead ringer for wheat. You can't tell the difference. In fact, the Jews call it "bastard wheat." It blends right in with the rest of the good wheat...until they begin to sprout. Darnel has a fuzzy head. Then, it is **easy** to tell the difference...and it is too late. Because by the time the wheat and Darnel have sprouted, their roots are so entangled that you cannot pull the weed out without destroying the wheat around it.

But you have to separate the two because Bearded Darnel is poisonous. It causes dizziness and sickness. Even the tiniest amount tastes bitter. So, you can't just leave that weed in with the wheat; it will taint the harvest. The only thing you can do is wait until the harvest; **then** you pull everything up, separate them, burn the weeds and bring the wheat into the barn.

This is a very interesting story. But what does it mean? What do we learn about the Kingdom of Heaven from this story? Well, Jesus explains this parable a bit further in the chapter:

<sup>37</sup>"The one who sowed the good seed is the Son of Man. <sup>38</sup>The field is the world, and the good seed stands for the sons of the kingdom. The weeds are the sons of the evil one, <sup>39</sup>and the enemy who sows them is the devil. The harvest is the end of the age, and the harvesters are angels.

<sup>40</sup>"As the weeds are pulled up and burned in the fire, so it will be at the end of the age. <sup>41</sup>The Son of Man will send out his angels, and they will weed out of his kingdom everything that causes sin and all who do evil. <sup>42</sup>They will throw them into the fiery furnace, where there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth. <sup>43</sup>Then the righteous will shine like the sun in the kingdom of their Father. He who has ears, let him hear.

One of the first things we learn is this: we have an enemy. The devil. Think back with me for a moment: when is the **first** time we meet the devil in this gospel? Way back in chapter 4; the temptation of Jesus. And we don't hear about him again...until this chapter. Nine chapters later, in two consecutive parables, Jesus mentions him twice. In the parable of the sower, he is the bird that snatches the Word of God so that it cannot take root in the listener. And now we discover his second strategy. If he fails to snatch away the seed in time, what does he do? Sow **more** seed. Bad seed.

Let's pause here to say this: **Jesus believed in a real devil.** He taught about him, he resisted him, he battled him and defeated him. In our enlightened age, many Christians view the devil as a fairy tale character; a red gremlin with pitchfork, horns and a pointy tail. **Listen carefully:** if you dismiss or ignore the devil, you are dismissing and ignoring the clear teachings of Jesus. We have an enemy. His name is Satan. The Accuser. The Splitter. He wants to harm us. He wants to foil the mission of Christ. In the end, he will be destroyed but in the meantime, he is a spiritual hooligan that must be dealt with. If you deny his existence, you've already given him a foothold; he loves it when people don't believe in him. It makes it easier to do his work of deceiving and destroying.

So, one mistake we make not really believing in the devil. But the other mistake is **that we believe in him too much.** There are some Christians who give the devil way too much credit. Satan **is** trouble; he must be dealt with. But if you give too much power to the devil, **you dishonor Christ who has already defeated him on the cross.** And if you give too much power to the devil, **you are dodging your own responsibility for the sinful and stupid things you do.** The fact is most of us don't need the devil to help us screw up. We are plenty capable of screwing up all by ourselves. **Most of the trouble I get into is not because the devil made me do it; it's because my own sin made me do it.** The devil just becomes my scapegoat.

But I digress. In this story, the devil **is** doing mischief. He comes at night and sows weed-seeds. In the first parable, the seed was the Word of God. Now Jesus mixes things up. Here, the seeds are people. The good seed are Kingdom People; the followers of Jesus. And the bad seed? They are the children of the evil one. **And where are those weeds sown?** Around the outside of the field? No! They are sown smack dab in the **middle** of the wheat field. **Now pay attention...this is the key to understanding this parable: What is another name for that wheat field? What do we call the gathered followers of Christ?** The Church! The Children of the King and Children of the Devil are growing up together...right here in the Church. That's what Jesus is saying.

Do you see why I title this sermon, "Messier than we'd prefer?" We don't want children of the devil growing up inside the church next to us. Look around! Can you spot them? We only want the good, clean, nice children of the King sitting in the pew next to us. That's certainly what the workers wanted, isn't it? They say, "Let's go pluck them out! Let's grab every single weed, pull it out and destroy it." In other words, "Let's identify the people who are **not** really followers of Jesus; let's identify the hypocrites and destroy them! Pluck them out and destroy them."

Sounds reasonable, doesn't it? Who wants weeds in their wheat? Who wants corruption in the church? Most of us come here because we want to be better, to lead better lives, lives that are part of something bigger and more wonderful, than ourselves. If we've got Weed People sitting next to us, well isn't that just...nasty? Take a look! Let's get rid of them.

But Jesus' response is very surprising...in fact it's kind of disappointing. "Shall we pull these weeds out by the roots?" "Nope. Don't pull out the weeds." Why? Because you'll end up pulling out good plants, too. If you try to be too pure, too perfect, you will end up destroying some of the very seedlings that you want to protect.

Historically, this has been painfully true. The Crusades, the Inquisition, the Salem Witch Trials...all of these started as efforts to purify the Church. What they did, however, is exactly what Jesus predicted they would do. They became a reproach to the Church and to the Lord. Down through the centuries, these have continued to damage tender onlookers who are so turned off by the violence of these dreadful acts that they can't stand to be associated with us. **And the Church is still ignoring Jesus on this matter.** Every time we try to purify our ranks—to surround ourselves with only the "holy" people like ourselves—we **move exactly away from the direction of Jesus who invited sinners into his inner circle**...and then transformed them. Jesus was always being accused of hanging out with messy people. And you do remember the name of the group that was obsessed with weeding out heretics, right? The Pharisees! Do you know what their name means? "The Separated Ones." Every time we try to make the church pure, we end up destroying those we are supposed to nurture.

And there is another reason that we aren't very good weeders of God's field. **We can't tell the difference.** The fact is, there are people in this church who look very weedy—very “sketchy,” as the kids might say—but we have no idea what work the Holy Spirit is doing on them. We won't know until harvest time...but we will certainly discover that those whom we wouldn't have given a chance—the ones we would have ripped out by the roots and tossed aside—became powerful forces for the Kingdom. And even more disturbingly, we will discover that some of those great, tall, impressive stalks of wheat—the ones that looked so religious and so good—were in fact, bitter and poisonous pretenders...who ended up harming the very cause they pretended to serve.

That's why we can't be weeders. We cannot tell the difference. And when we do try to weed, we end up killing the tender plants around us.

**So, does this mean that the weeds get of Scot free?** Absolutely not. There will be judgment. Terrible judgment. **It just won't be us doing the judging.** In the end, Jesus will send his angels and “they will weed out everything that causes sin and all who do evil.” There is a saying, “Justice delayed is justice denied.” But not in the Kingdom. Justice delayed is justice assured, because it is Jesus doing the judging, and it gives him plenty of time for his grace to change lives and destinies. If we leave to Jesus the judging that we are incompetent to do, it will be done right and fairly...and it will not have the collateral damage that is certain if we try to be the judges right now.

So...does this mean that as a church, we never carry out discipline? Never call people on their behavior? Never correct false teaching? Absolutely not. Later, in Matthew 18, we discover that Jesus has a prescription for church discipline. Any church that won't discipline will become sick. We ARE called to discipline. But we are **not** called to destroy. It is a very fine line to walk...but I'm afraid it is the walk we have been assigned.

The Kingdom of Heaven is messy. Wheat and weeds... growing up together! Imagine!

**This morning, we are welcoming a whole new crop of seedlings. Our confirmation class.** I think there are several ways that this parable might speak into your young lives on this important day, even as it speaks to the rest of us. **First, just because you look like wheat...doesn't necessarily mean you are wheat.** You may go through all the right Christian paces, but if your heart is not right—if your heart does not truly belong to Jesus—sooner or later you will be revealed for what you really are. I am so glad you went through this class; so glad you are joining the church. But it is not the external things that will determine whether you belong to Jesus. The question is, will you live your entire life—hidden as well as seen...away at college as well as here in front of your church family—with passion for Jesus and with integrity? Wheat or weeds?

The good news of the gospel is this: no seed is set! Jesus wants to redeem all of the seed; he wants every one of you to grow up to love and follow him. If you choose to...if you believe in him... you will. If you do not...if you will not...you will one day face him. And even if you faked out everyone else in your life...you will not fake him out. **And you will be called to account for your weedy life.** That's true of everyone here, *beginning* with your pastors and elders, **but including you.**

Here's the other important word to you young people...and to everyone else. Be careful about trying to weed the church. You will do more damage than good. You may find yourself rubbing elbows with people that you disagree with. That vote differently than you. That think differently than you. That act differently than you. **And if you love Jesus, you will be tempted to assume that they must not love Jesus because they don't look, live, vote and think like you do.** Jesus warns us: Don't you dare assume that! Don't you dare behave that way. If you do, you will bring harm to the very cause you are trying to promote.

You may not like the people God calls into the pew next to you. That's all right; they may not like you either. Most of us think we have better taste than Jesus. **If we got to pick his followers, they'd be a much better bunch than the ones he seems to pick!** But not one of us is nearly as pure a stalk as we'd like to believe. And we have no idea who God is working on and how he is changing them. So, beloved, speak the truth in love, be gracious and patient, live your own life with integrity, prepare yourself to get messy... and leave the weeding to Jesus.

## **SERMON DISCUSSION QUESTIONS**

- 1-This sermon series is entitled "Thy Kingdom Come." As a review, what did we learn about the Kingdom of Heaven from the Parable of the Sower?
- 2-In what way is the Parable of the Weeds similar to the Parable of the Sower? How is it different?
- 3-What does this parable have to say about the presence of evil in the world?
- 4-What part does the devil play and what should we believe and do about Satan based upon Jesus' approach here and throughout his ministry?
- 5-What is the central theme of this parable? Who are the "weeds?" If we pull up the "weeds," what happens? If we DON'T deal with weeds, what happens?
- 6-Read Matthew 16: 15-20. Isn't this contradictory to the Parable of the Weeds? Why or why not?
- 7-In what way is your own Christian walk challenged by this teaching of Jesus?

## FINANCIAL REPORT FROM PASTOR JIM MEAD:

In the coming 45 days your session and staff will be making decisions that will impact the life and mission of this congregation next year: we're preparing the 2011 fiscal budget. We know you love Chapel Hill and we also know we need to do a good job of letting you know where we are as a church financially. That way, you can be part of praying about the decisions your leaders are making and offer us your input.

Let's begin with this: everyone knows the economy has had a tough impact on many families in this church—some lost jobs, some lost houses, some retired people went back to work. As Paul says, when one member of the body suffers, all suffer; and the real truth is that all of CHPC has suffered because of the recession.

If you're not sure that's true, let me put it in perspective. In 2008 we budgeted \$4.3mm in giving. This year, 2010, we budgeted \$3.7mm in giving.

So, in the past 3 years we have cut \$612k out of our planned expenditures, and we cut an additional \$74k in the past month. It's been the right, and only, thing to do. And, while it's been really painful, in some ways it's actually been good for us because the Lord has taught us there were some things and some staff positions we could get along without.

So: what expenses do you think we've cut; what have we *stopped* doing?

Let me help you find the answers. In your bulletin is this document—will you please find it so we can look at it together?

The far right column shows the percentage each department has cut from its budget since 2008. Scan down it with me, please, until you find these numbers: 30% and 24%. What departments of our church have been cut 30 and 24 percent—you'll find the department name on the left of the chart.

Yes, Administration and Facilities—the two “sexiest” departments in the church, of course. We've cut those two departments \$497k in the past 3 years. That's 73% of all the cuts we've made.

Now, think about that with me a bit. If 73% of the cuts have been in administration and support, what has not been cut very much?

Did you figure it out? Right: ministry, programs and mission: worship, children and youth ministries, Recovery ministries, mission partners and so on.

We've cut \$345k out of staff, and we've saved more than \$100k by putting off fixing and replacing things, but we have not cut a single ministry or program—not one.

How could we do that—how could we cut staff and not cut programs?

Well, partly because the staff who are still with us are working harder and longer hours, for less money and less benefits, *and* partly because members have taken up some of the slack. For example, our Cornerstones group—mostly 70+ in age—are setting up and taking down their own tables and chairs each month.

Now, here's the thing, beloved: we are at the end of our ability to cut the budget any further without cutting ministries. That may be hard to believe, I know, when our budget is \$3.7 million. And, I've even heard some people who ought to know better say that we probably have too much staff.

But the reality is that our staff hasn't had a raise in three years, and most of us took salary and benefits cuts in 2008.

I know, people say “In this market you should be glad to have a job and a paycheck.” That's true enough—and those of us who are still on the staff are grateful to still have our jobs.

But we are not overstaffed for the size of the ministries we are leading and supporting. I've been the Sr. Pastor of a large church, and in my ministry leading a presbytery of 157 congregations I've observed 100s of congregations all over the country.

I've been watching Chapel Hill for most of three years, now, and I am certain of this: we no longer have enough staff to keep doing all the ministries we have—some of our staff are showing signs of burnout *now*.

Here's what's even tougher: the staff positions we need to add at this point are all in support, administration and facilities—positions that are invisible to the congregation, but provide the essential foundation that lets everything else work.

So, the bottom line is this: the only way to reduce our expenses at this point is to stop doing a ministry, program or mission.

Over the past several weeks our ministry leaders have been me to answer this question: What would you cut that would not cripple your *core* mission?

Here is an example of how that works. Two years ago Pastor Jeremy cut the position of Director for Early Childhood ministries from full time to half time. This summer we will restructure the department and eliminate the position entirely. This won't cripple our *core* ministry to our smallest children, but every week this coming year we'll have 20 fewer hours devoted to our littlest children by a talented, creative leader who knows what it takes to reach them and their families for Jesus.

Here are some other cuts we could make without crippling our *core* mission in any dept:

Cancel Go Sunday, or move it to a Saturday (\$32k)

Close every Friday with no exceptions, which means eliminating CHill, a ministry to middle school kids

Close the church building for a third week—in August

Go from 3 to 2 worship services each Sunday

Eliminate a pastoral position—2 pastors instead of 3

Cancel Upward and Day Camp next year  
Not give our 2<sup>nd</sup> graders Bibles next year  
End our children's drama ministry  
End Wednesday evening ministries and dinners  
Cancel our Bell Choir ministries  
Eliminate complimentary coffee and end our food services ministries

Or, take \$100k out of our mission budget—support for Go Teams, money to mission partners and more.

Please hear me: every one of these ministries matter and we are NOT proposing that we make any of these cuts. But there is nothing left to cut without cutting a program, ministry or mission. We've already cut everything else we could.

I know that some of you will wish we had talked about this more clearly a year ago. I ask your forgiveness for not making sure we did that. But, now you know.

If you want to know more detail about any of this, or want to give us your input, I'll be in the Prayer Chapel after this service, with our Financial Director and key elders.

Two weeks ago Pastor Mark preached powerfully about God's sovereignty. Like you, your leaders trust God. Sometimes God says to a church, "I want you to have less, not more." If that's God's word to us, we will thank God and the congregation for its giving and then we'll seek the Lord's leading about what to keep and what to let go of.

The Lord is with us.