

**GRACEFUL GARDENING; MATTHEW 13:24-40; JULY 23, 2017;
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For a religion – in fact three religions Judaism, Christianity and Islam – that started with a good God creating what he looked upon with satisfaction and called a good earth, God's people are riddled with rivalry and schism. 'Holier than thou' noses held high in the air have turned off many in and outside of the church.

Emily Dickinson, Ralph Waldo Emerson, and Henry David Thoreau are just a few prominent Americans who got tired of presumed superiority and left.

In our own time, the rise of the so-called "nones" – those who subscribe to no organized religion but identify themselves as "spiritual" – is attributed, in part, to the politics and posturing within the church that seems so out of sync with Jesus.

The classic example, in America, of this phenomenon is Anne Hutchison, the Massachusetts Bay Colony Puritan who came to New England in the early 1700s and was a charismatic leader of bible studies and theological seminars for women, then men.

Hutchinson's influence steadily increased by reviewing the previous Sunday's sermon or the published sermons of preachers elsewhere in the colony and she did not refrain from criticizing the preachers who advocated 'good works' to earn salvation rather than trusting God's grace to bring new life.

The works v grace controversy goes back to the Pharisees; it was a favorite topic of St. Paul; Luther debated the issue with the Roman church and came up with his famous formula: Scripture alone, faith alone, grace alone.

Not surprisingly Hutchison did not last long in Massachusetts by criticizing male authority figures. She was put on trial, judged, excommunicated and banished to the wilderness in the dead of winter – not unlike Hagar and Ishmael whom Abraham banished to the desert wilderness. In both cases that sentence, it was assumed, would result in death.

But God who has his eye on the sparrow had his eye on Hagar and her son and Anne Hutchison and six of her fifteen children as they trudged due west away from the Massachusetts Bay Colony.

The wilderness Hutchison walked into turned out to be Rhode Island – where Roger Williams, another outlier and advocate of religious freedom took her in.

The list of those banished from the religious establishment is long: 12th century Waldensians, Galileo, Copernicus, Michael Servetus, Martin Luther, Quaker George Fox, Moravian Count Zinzendorf, Charles Darwin. People we consider giants today.

It is easy to look back and see our ancestors' mistakes; hindsight is 20-20. But the problem is the judgment and condemnation in the church continues.

So it's good to have Matthew today to call our attention to this perennial threat to the community caused by impatience, intolerance and distrust of God's purpose for the church.

Perhaps a little context helps. In Matthew's church in Jerusalem, comprised primarily of Jews, it was believed that to be a Christian one had to first be a Jew. To be a good Jew one had to follow the kosher laws of Torah. This could lead to exacting scrutiny to make sure everyone was dutifully keeping all the external demands of the law.

The result led to the pursuit of a purity that shunned the rest of the world, like the Essene community from which John the Baptist came; they literally lived in the desert out and away from corrupt society. Their view was there are the faithful and there is the rest of the world.

This is a problem for the church (and other religions as well – witness the Sunni/Shite division that drives conflict in Islam or the deep animosity and sometimes violence between orthodox and all other Jews). It was to the temptation in Matthew's church to see themselves as the true church and ignore, reject, and/or persecute those who didn't fit their standards for purity – that Matthew's Jesus tells the parable of the weeds among the wheat.

In case you're thinking this applies only to religious groups or religious fanatics let me remind us that any group to be a group has to identify standards or norms for what it means to belong to the group.

Codes of conduct including dress, manners, language; social standards including education, occupation, income; physical features including age, sex, race are all arranged in various ways to define specific groups.

Some groups make no bones about it – you have to jump through these hoops and possess these qualities; other groups can be moderately tolerant. But it is not uncommon for even tolerant groups to be blind to the subtle ways they exclude others. Millennials talk about the messages spoken and unspoken that they are too young and not ready for full participation in the church.

We like to think we are tolerant at Westminster and we are but we might ask ourselves why there isn't more diversity in this community of faith. It takes a concerted effort to reach out to those who are different and make them feel welcome. But there is also the obstacle presented in the story today – we just don't want certain kinds of people around here. Let's listen again to the parable.

Servants come to the owner of a farm to tell him there are weeds infesting the wheat. "Master," the servants ask perturbed, "didn't you sow good seed in the field?" To which the owner of the farm says, "An enemy has sown bad seed among the good." "Then let us go out," the servants request, "and root up the weeds from wheat." "No," says the farmer, "if you do that you risk pulling up the wheat as you pull out the weeds. Just let it grow. I'll sort it out later, at the final judgment day."

Jesus' audience would have to have been asleep not to get the point. And it would have startled, frightened and angered them. Was he asking them to lower their standards? To ignore their principles?

Jesus told parables to awaken the self-awareness of his listeners – not to reinforce their uncritical opinions of themselves; he wanted to startle them into self-recognition. Someone called Jesus' parables 'honest moments' when, if we let our defenses down our lives can change for the better, even be transformed.

On the face of it, the weeds among the wheat parable is a metaphor for the unsettling situation when committed members with perceptive visions about what the church ought to be and to do exist side by side with those who are indifferent, motivated by self-interest or, Matthew is suggesting today, are overly righteous. Not infrequently the opinions of the later prevail over the opinions of the former.

I recall one influential church member who was a kind of adult Eagle Scout – preoccupied with responsibility, doing the right thing, and enforcing the rules. The Presbyterian Church with its *Book of Order* rules and regulations used to be a magnet for this kind of personality. This church member bent on following the rules would routinely quote the rulebook to approve or disapprove of proposals for programs and ministry and in the process inadvertently squash genuine traction of the Holy Spirit in people's lives who saw the church as an instrument of love and service.

You see, at a deeper level the parable is saying that those who regard themselves as the keepers of the tradition can be the ones who suffocate, like weeds, those who are searching to find their way or are just discovering what it means to follow Jesus.

The parable is a call to avoid excluding others. Or to state it in the positive – we are called to be patient, kind, and forgiving. It can be a shock to find that the world, the family into which we were born, even the church is not an entirely trustworthy place. Families cause deep pain as well as great joy. The church can be inspiringly courageous one moment and petty and faithless the next. We are a mixed bag of saints and sinners. Humility is a virtue as well. We are all works in progress.

Make no mistake, Jesus' parable is not a call for passivity in the face of evil, or to ignore injustice in society, or violence in the community. It is a realistic reminder that we live in an imperfect world and that the attempt to pluck up the weeds rather than 'live and let live' as they say in AA can do more harm than good.

How does the parable apply to us here and now? It is always appropriate to remind ourselves that to be a truly welcoming church we do well to lower the threshold to our life together as much as possible; by that I mean not to let our attitudes and opinions about age, race, occupation, socio-economic status, sexual orientation, politics, or any social norm – prevent anyone from feeling welcome here.

You always know when it's time to be tolerant when you feel your stomach tighten up at the sight of someone who is different in some way that makes you uncomfortable.

That's when we are called to move toward rather than away from the other; to seek to understand rather than to judge.

But there are larger implications of this parable for our society. I said last week that it's time to build bridges. There are important reasons why people feel disenfranchised from the American dream – many feel forgotten, excluded, and judged. They have not participated in the economic abundance of the nation; the traditional pathways to a fulfilled, secure and happy life are closed to them.

But rather than finding pragmatic solutions to our problems we are bogged down and held hostage by political ideology. Politics is the measure for who is in and who is out of my group – and it looks for all the world like the enemy – fear, suspicion and distrust – who has sowed the bad seed in the night is succeeding in growing a crop of weeds that is thriving not just in Washington but in our own easy dismissal of the other side.

The lack of exposure and dialogue has led to the festering of cynical attitudes and stereotypes one about the other. We have fallen into the trap of seeking ideological purity that demands total allegiance and prevents us from choosing the best of all sides for the good of the whole rather than striving for the dominance of one over the other.

What Matthew could clearly see is that the demand for purity was preventing the church from being the church. Sure there will be some dissonance, everyone will not always be on the same page, misfits will come and go.

But if we get hung up on ourselves we will be blind to the needs around us and fail to live out the great commandment – to love God and serve the neighbor. The same is true in our national life – the more we get hung up fighting with one another the less time we will devote to the great calling of this nation to be a land of opportunity and a beacon of hope for all people.

The more time I spend deriding and condemning my nemesis the more like my nemesis I become and the less of God's purpose for my life will I enjoy.

What the parable does is open a window of opportunity for the church to remember what it means to be the church and focus on what a church does – care for the sick, the lonely and those in need – without worrying about who's in and who's out.

That's not a bad prescription in these times for being a citizen.

The only way let go of our preoccupation with being right in our religion or politics is to trust in God's larger purpose and plan for the church and the life of the nation; and that in God's order evil is temporary and the good will prevail.

Anne Hutchison is revered today as one of the great heroines in the state of Massachusetts;

a plaque in her honor in the state house calls her “a courageous exponent of civil liberty and religious toleration”;

her veneration is a helpful reminder to us as a church and nation that judging, finally, who is in and who is out is God's job not ours. Amen.