

“Parables for Common Laborers”

Psalm 15 and Matthew 13:24-30, 47-50

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Market Square Presbyterian

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When my wife and I moved to a Native American fishing village 45 years ago, we were in for major culture shock. The biggest shock was discovering that while the Tlingit people wore the same kind of clothes, ate the same cereals, and shopped from the same stores, there were significant differences in styles of communication. The biggest shock was learning to understand their story-telling style of answering questions.

The polite Tlingit form for answering a question is to tell a story. I would ask where we buy heating oil for the house and get a story about salmon swimming up a stream. I would ask the elders about plans for an upcoming worship service and get a story about bears in the forest. It was quite confusing.

One of the things I realized about this form of communication is that it assumes knowledge that is common to all who are living the native lifestyle, close to nature. For someone like me who came from a city lifestyle, whose jobs mostly had been in office buildings, commuting to work, sales calls on customers and warehouse labor, I could not relate to animals in the forest stories. After a few years living in a small fishing village, however, these stories made sense.

Today I invite us into the unfamiliar territory of Jesus' parables. These stories come from a rural agricultural setting different from most of our experiences. We, who have worked in offices, at desks, with modern technology, don't always connect with the assumptions of the rural agricultural lifestyle of Jesus' day. He tells stories about farmers planting seeds in various soils. He tells stories about harvesting crops. He tells stories about fishing with nets. We may have gardened, or done some fishing with hooks and fishing poles, but unless we have done the common labor of farming a field and tossing nets off a fishing boat, we likely don't have the knowledge that would have been assumed by the common laborers listening to Jesus.

Notice particularly that these parables come from the life of common laborers. These are heard by people whose hands are calloused and sun-burned faces from long hours of hard work. These are not stories from the lives of the educated, the elite, the prosperous, those living in cities. So what shall we do with these parables today? Let's see if there might be something valuable for us today.

²⁴ Jesus 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.'"....

⁴⁷ "Again, the kingdom of heaven is like a net that was thrown into the sea and caught fish of every kind; ⁴⁸ when it was full, they drew it ashore, sat down, and put the good into baskets but threw out the bad. ⁴⁹ So it will be at the end of the age. The angels will come out and separate the evil from the righteous ⁵⁰ and throw them into the furnace of fire, where there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth.

A man driving through a small rural town pulls up to the four way stop in the center of town. Just then an old-fashioned circus wagon rumbles through the intersection. He reads the sign on the side of the wagon. It says, "Barney's Circus with 50 elephants." No sooner does the wagon get across than the first elephant slowly walks through the intersection followed by the second then the third. He turns off his engine and struggles to be patient with this slow parade of lumbering pachyderms. He half-heartedly begins counting the elephants. After a while he loses interest as he daydreams while still counting. Finally, he gets to "48, 49, 50." In haste he starts his engine and roars through the intersection. But he miscounted and hit the last elephant.

He apologizes to the circus owner and gives his information before driving away. He gets a bill a week later for \$100,000 from the town's veterinarian. He calls and complains, "I admit I hit the last elephant. But how can hitting one elephant cost this much?" The vet answers, "It's true you only hit one elephant, but you pulled the tails out of the other 49."

As we chuckle at this silly story, it puts in our imaginations the image of elephants strung together trunk to tail in a long line. I want us to use that image to describe the series of parables in Matthew 13. Matthew writes his gospel by taking several disparate parables that Jesus told in a variety of settings and attaching them trunk to tail in a line. Matthew invites us to let these parables parade through our minds helping us see connections that may not have been as clear in the original telling of these stories by Jesus.

Jesus' sense of humor shows up in some of these parables. His stories create farcical moments that would be seen as ridiculous to the common laborers in the know. These common laborers with calloused hands and dirt under their fingernails, would get the humor that the wealthy owners might miss. Take the parable of the weeds and wheat.

The common family farmers who planted and harvested their own fields understand the everyday situation of weeds growing among the wheat. It is what it is. You want to grow a field of grain? Weeds are a normal part of the farming experience.

Jesus, however, adds a tone of humor when he suggests the owner blames an enemy for the weeds. The silly owner in the story thinks to himself, “This must be the work of an enemy trying to destroy my farm!” Likely at this point in the story any farmers listening would have chuckled at the silly image of some enemy expending energy trying to ruin a neighbor’s crops by planting weeds. Weeds don’t need to be planted, they just grow on their own.

With this humorous twist in the story, Jesus adds another layer of silliness. “Do you want us to tear out all the weeds?” the slaves ask. Anybody with basic farming experience knows this is a dumb idea. Of course you don’t tramp through the fields trying to tear out all the weeds, because it is likely more damaging to the wheat than it is successful at removing the weeds. By now those listening would have been elbowing each other with smirks at the humor.

How might we interpret this parable today? Let me suggest a possible interpretation of how this humorous parable might apply today.

We often have a tendency to want to fix things in our broken world. This is admirable. We are rightfully offended that some people have bad motives. We are saddened to unveil corruption in high places. We want to believe the purpose of a healthy economy is to help everyone find their place. We want the world to function fairly, justly, kindly, with everyone following the rules. So, when things go awry, when we uncover systemic racism, oppression of the poor, greed, abuse of authority, we immediately want to fix it. We, with good motives, want to find quick easy answers. We want to pull the weeds!

Jesus challenges this approach to the complexities that make up evil. Evil emerges through complex systems that include bad behaviors, impure motives, greed, lust for power. There are no quick fixes. Weeds grow in this broken, fallen world. It is what it is. In fact, Matthew emphasizes the point of impatience and seeking quick easy fixes by attaching immediately, trunk to tail, two more parables about the kingdom of God requiring slow patient growth (planting a mustard seed and yeast folded into dough).

O.K. Tighten your seat belts we might encounter some turbulence in these next couple of minutes. I want to talk about how this parable might address racism today. Specifically, let’s talk about our church’s front steps with the words, “Black Lives Matter” painted on them.

Let me make it clear, I am anti-racism. I deplore the sin of racism. I consider white supremacy to be an original sin of our nation’s founding. From the founding documents through multiple layers of segregation legislation, racism has been baked into the DNA and economy of our nation. It is evil, sinful, wrong. As my friend, Dr. Gene Gordon, retired African American pastor, reminds me regularly, “Stop saying, ‘Racism isn’t who we are as Americans. It is exactly who we are.’”

With a complicated history of racism running throughout our American history, how do we respond? Does painting “Black Lives Matter” on the front steps of our church address racism? I am sure the intentions were good. The desire, I am guessing, was to declare that our congregation is against systemic racism. Horrified at the murder of George Floyd, many well

intentioned white people wanted to fix it. As a congregation we hold no regard or prejudice as to a person's complexion and melanin. That was good. However...

Warning: Possible turbulence ahead.

However, did that painted message on the steps actually convey what we thought it meant? Is it a statement of Christian moral authority? Did it declare our moral grounds for calling racism out as wrong? Does it clarify that we believe all people are created in the image of God no matter the color of their skin or culture or language? Does it clarify our image of heaven as a place where people of every tribe and tongue and nation gather as the beloved community celebrating God's love and grace for all and that we want to work toward that kingdom here and now?

Or, might those steps be falsely interpreted by those passing by as a merely political statement? Might it even be interpreted by some as anti-police? Might it be seen as well-intentioned white people pulling weeds?

In my studies of racism—and I have led several anti-racism book discussions over the years—I am struck by a common refrain from numerous African American authors. Basically, many of their voices keep saying, “White people, quit trying to be our saviors. Quit trying to offer us quick fixes. We must do the hard work of building bridges of justice together. We don't need you to tell us how to fix it. We need you to hear our voices, respect our experiences, and support us. Let *us* take the lead. Not you. It is part of your privileged, pragmatic attitudes that you assume you can fix other people's problems.”

In fact, some respected Black Christian anti-racism authors have made the point that they are still waiting for white congregations to genuinely lament the wrongs before immediately, pragmatically trying to fix things. But we are impatient. We want solutions now. We want to fix it so we can feel better about ourselves. The simple truth is we would rather pull weeds than lament. We would rather paint some steps than participate in the slow spiritual practice of grieving with those who grieve. Pulling weeds feels like we are doing something. But are we really?

(Deep breath. Pause.)

O.K. Back to the parables. The parable near the end of this passage comes again from the lives of common laborers, specifically the work of fishing. As to the parable of net fishing, I actually had a one-day experience in Alaska working on a Tlingit salmon fishing boat. It was the most physically exhausting work I ever did. I was a college athlete. I was a runner throughout my adult life. However, even in my pretty good shape, by the end of the day my arms were so sore, my back ached, I slept a couple extra hours that night.

Jesus again tells a story for the benefit of the hard-working fishermen. When the nets are out gathering the fish, one doesn't have time to sort the good from the bad fish. Just toss the net, haul, empty the nets into the boats and repeat over and over again, hour after hour.

The most disgusting thing about this kind of fishing is the “bad fish.” I remember the day I was invited to work on an Alaskan fishing boat, that the most irritating thing was drawing the net up into the boat and having these stinging jellyfish hanging on the nets and dropping onto my arms. Getting stung all over the place came with the hard labor. Then at the end of the exhausting day of pulling the nets and filling the boat, one still has to sort the good salmon from the jellyfish and others.

All I wanted to do was see the boat to the dock, sell the fish, and sleep. But the last job requires clearing all the nets, separating the good fish from the bad.

Jesus reminds us that the great judgement and separation of the righteous from the evil will be done not by the laborers themselves, but by the angels. What a relief! It’s not our job to decide who is who. God will take care of the great judgement. Ours is to pull the nets and fill the boats.

Might Jesus be addressing our tendency to want to judge who is who? We think we know the good from the bad. But do we?

In my anti-racism studies and moving to Pennsylvania, one of my sad realizations was the discovery of segregated cemeteries. The first time I came across this, I was extremely confused. Why are Black people buried in separate graveyards from white people? This made no sense at all to me. Was the anxiety of white supremacy so fearful and the sense of threat from darker complexions so severe that even in death they needed to make judgements about where people are buried according to skin colors?

I recall a World War I story of the burial of an American soldier. According to the story three young men had become good friends on the battlefields of Europe. One was a Catholic, one a Jew, and one a Protestant. When the Protestant boy was killed in a battle near a small village, the Catholic and Jew approached the local priest for a burial. The priest explained that he could not bury a Protestant in the church cemetery, since it was consecrated only for Catholics. But he agreed to bury the boy just outside the fence of the Catholic graveyard. So, a small burial was held.

At the end of the war, before the two friends returned to the United States they went back to the village to honor their fallen brother in arms. They couldn’t find the grave, so they asked the priest if it had been moved. He walked them inside the Catholic graveyard and pointed to a grave. “But, Father, that can’t be it. Remember you said you couldn’t bury him in consecrated ground since he wasn’t a Catholic. The priest smiled and responded, “I couldn’t bury him in consecrated ground. But I realized I could move the fence.”

Here is the truth. You and I don’t have to figure out who is who and where the fence goes. Jesus will set the fence wherever he wants.