

Good News for Procrastinators

The Rev. Dr. Jeffrey A. Vamos

July 19, 2020

Morning, everybody. I want to say, first of all, once again, looking at an empty meeting house, I picture you here and I miss you. I think maybe we all feel that way. But I am proud of the ministry that we're doing together and give thanks to God for you and for it, as we seek to understand what God is saying to us, God's word for us. Let us take a moment to join together in prayer. Let us pray. *Oh, come Holy spirit. Come as the fire and burn, come as the wind and cleanse, come as the light and reveal, come as the water and refresh. Holy God convict us and convert us and consecrate us until we are wholly and completely yours. Amen.*

Well, as I begin this morning, I have something of a confession to make. I am a procrastinator. Well you all at home, you can say, "Hi, Jeff." And I have to confess that I've spent a good bit of my life trying to come to terms with this aspect of my personality and, and even embrace it. Years ago. I took a personality - it's not a test - it's called a type indicator, called the Myers Briggs type indicator. And I guess of late, it's kind of been poo-pooed in psychological circles and has lost favor. But I've found it to be very useful because some of the feedback that I got from that personality test or type indicator was something like this – "works in creative bursts of energy." I read that and I thought - you know what? Yes, that's exactly how I do it. Right?

So instead of bemoaning the fact that I haven't started three weeks ahead and read the five articles and two books and take the notes, it's always the night before a creative burst of energy comes. That's how I get the job done when there's a deadline looming, that's when the creative spirit comes, right? So I've actually started to embrace that part of my personality.

The other thing I want to confess is that I hate weeding. And if you don't believe me, you can certainly ask my wife who's smirking at me right now...and I'd her colorful phrase, *I would rather lick a cheese grater* than spend an afternoon weeding. I like gardening, but I mostly like the fruits of gardening. So I say all that in order to communicate that if you are such a person as this—procrastinator who hates weeding—this scripture lesson, this text is for you that we're going to study today.

So let's get to it. Let's look at the story that Kyle just read. It's yet another agricultural story, a metaphor. No coincidence there, because most of Jesus' listeners would have been living close to the earth and agrarian life. Last week, Kyle talked about a story, a parable, in which the person planting seeds just indiscriminately spread them everywhere—the good soil, the rocky soil, the weedy soil. Some of it found its way to good soil. And this week's story is similar, but in many ways, extremely different. Because in this case, the person planting the seeds is extremely careful about that process. We read that this land owner purchased "good seed." Now what would that be? Seed of course was expensive. But good stuff that was absent of weed seeds - the A-1 Supremo Supremo of stuff - now that was expensive. And so we know from that fact that likely this land owner spent a good bit of time preparing the field, making sure it's weed free, preparing the soil and all of that and carefully sows the seed, which we know to be wheat, a staple of the middle Eastern diet then and now as well.

And strangely enough, when the wheat comes up, along with it, weeds. It's important that we know what the listeners in Jesus' time would have pictured in their minds when Jesus spoke of weeds in this

story. Because they weren't like dandelions weeds that are easy to tell apart from the good stuff, you know, broad leaf and the yellow flower. No, these were weeds that looked very much like wheat. They were probably indigenous grasses and we've probably seen some of them around too, that looked kind of like wheat until they're mature, and it's easier to tell them apart - weed has the stalk and the grain. So it's important to know that it's really not easy to tell the wheat and the weeds apart unless you're looking really close, or at harvest time. And so if you were to try to weed that field, you definitely would inevitably end up, rooting up a lot of the good stuff with the bad stuff.

So what do we make of this? What meaning can we extract from it? Well, I kind of light heartedly suggested that this is good news for procrastinators. And in some ways I think that that's a valid interpretation. I mentioned the Myers Briggs type indicator, which sort of posits two different polarities in this certain area of personality. There's the kind of person who wants to get a task done right away. And in fact, people who find it very difficult to leave things undone...and these are the people who run the world; you know, these are the people who are CEOs of corporations because they get it done. They get it done right then and there. But the danger of this style is that you do things before it's time for them to be done. You make decisions before the time is really right. You may make a rushed decision out of your compulsion to actually finish the thing and make a decision.

Whereas those who might be procrastinators wait until the time is right. And in this parable, the time is right at the end, at the deadline with the harvest. You know the play Hamlet – Shakespeare's great play...is all about a young man being tortured over making a decision, can't make a decision. And his friend says to him, at one point in the play, "the ripeness is all." So at the right time, Hamlet is able to make a decision. So sometimes we need to be aware that procrastinators are in the right, even though they often get a bad rap.

What else might we say about this story? Of course, I hate it when Matthew gives us the interpretation later on in the chapter, which he did last week too. And I actually don't think that Jesus did that when he spoke it, it might've been, it likely was a later editor who added the interpretation. Because the thing about parables is they're open to interpretation. The idea is that you're sort of afflicted with not knowing exactly what it means and you have to think about it. And so the Holy Spirit enables truth to arise within us and in community. So there's more than one way to interpret a parable.

And I'm going to start off with a somewhat unconventional way of thinking about this parable. Just think for a minute about the field, what that represents. It's a metaphor of course. And you know, the conventional interpretation is that it's the world. But what if we thought of the field and the plants growing in it is *us*, or actually within us. That's a very different way of thinking about it. And at one point we might think that there was a clean slate. Everything was good, and free of problems. And we might then also think about the book of Genesis, the very beginning of the Bible, when everything was cool, you know, there was a garden and it was great, and there were plants so we didn't have to work for a living. And then evil entered the picture. I think we're meant to sort of maybe hark back to that story too. Because within each of us there's good stuff and bad stuff, that's growing.

This is a psychological interpretation and it would be very friendly to a psychologist named C. G. Jung. I'm sure many of you are familiar with what he's about. He wrote a lot about this thing called the shadow aspect of our personality - those things that are, we might consider, to be negative aspects of who we are. And Jung talks about how the quest of a human life is the quest to integrate these parts of our personalities into a whole person, a whole personality. And it doesn't mean saying they're great,

but it means understanding that the negative characteristics of our personality might also have to do with our strengths.

I think the only way that I can think of, or the most immediate way I can think of to illustrate this idea is by talking about my father. And I know I have spoken of him before. My father was bipolar, what used to be called manic depressive. And if you had met him, he would seem the most stable person you would ever want to meet. But it was the fact that several times in his life, he had episodes and was hospitalized in a psychiatric hospital for manic depressive episodes. And so much of his spiritual quest was all about integrating this aspect of his personality into his spiritual life - a brain disease. And we should be aware that, you know, when somebody has kidney disease, there's not this moral overlay through which we look at kidney disease. But it's so with mental illness - there's this shame socially associated with it. And a subset of, and related to mental illness, is alcoholism - an addiction; they're brain disorders. But we apply moral overlay to them. And so for my father. So much of his journey was to integrate this into his life. And instead of understanding this as a shameful aspect of his life or allowing it to toxify, it actually was a means by which he deepened his relationship with God and his understanding of grace. One of his favorite texts was a line in a section of Second Corinthians 12 in which Paul is talking about a thorn in his flesh to keep him from becoming too elated or too big-headed. But also this thorn in his flesh - we don't know what it was, but we know it was a source of suffering for him - was a means by which he understood more deeply the grace of God, through which he heard the voice of God saying "my grace is sufficient for you - my power is made perfect in weakness." So, you know, the people who successfully deal with alcoholism, aren't the ones who say "I can handle ...I've got it all under control." No, they're the ones who say, "I'm an alcoholic and I need a higher power to help me deal with that fact." And in some ways that can enrich and deepen one's relationship with God.

So, the wheat and the tares, we can think of them as growing inside of us. And life is a journey to figure out how to deal with the weeds. Realizing if we pull them up, we're going to pull up the good stuff too. But let's spend just a minute thinking about the more conventional way of interpreting this parable, the way that Matthew seems to want us to think about it. And in that interpretation, the field is the world and the plants growing in it are people, human beings. And there are good and bad, good stuff and bad stuff, wheat and weeds. And so the impulse of the field hands in saying, "shouldn't we pull them up?" I think represents our human tendency to want to see that there's evil there and to deal with it ourselves, to root it out without realizing that, doing that, we might lose the very good that we're trying to promote.

I can't help but thinking about this story and the conversation that we're trying to have about race and racism, because it calls to mind really, for me, at least two imperatives that are in tension -- two things that we need to do, but that are in some tension. And so first I think that as we think about racism --and by the way, I really want to emphasize --I guess the only way to put it is as a challenge for all of us in this church to participate in a conversation, to sign up for a book group. You don't have to agree with everything said in *White Fragility* -- please, critique away. The important thing is that we have a conversation. And it may be that folks are tired of thinking about and talking about racism. But listen, there are people in this society who don't have that luxury of not thinking about it. And so we need to be mindful of that. But the imperative is that when we encounter racism, we need to do something. We need to call it out. We need to not be silent because that's the way that not just racism, but evil, persists, and multiplies just like weeds.

You know, years ago, I don't know why I remember this incident so vividly, but I was playing golf. And I was using a pink tee. And whoever I was playing golf with, I can't remember who it was, made a joke

about gay people. I mean, it was patently homophobic. And you know, at the time I just tittered and played along. Didn't ruffle any feathers. And again, I don't know why I remember that so vividly these many years back. And I'm sure there have been other incidents like that, but on one hand it may seem so innocuous. And yet that's how it happens. How evil continues to multiply is that people who know better, whose conscience convicts them, and do nothing about it. Instead of saying -- You know what? That's not funny. You know, I'm on a different page and let's talk about it.

But the other extreme here it is all about how we approach that conversation and how we approach this business of dealing with evil. There are weeds in the field, but again, the tendency is to want to pull them up without realizing that that process might cause us to lose the good thing itself that we're trying to promote. You know, there's this business of 'being woke' that I want to understand better. I want to converse with people who use that language. But my initial reaction as a person steeped in Calvinism, as a child of John Calvin has to say -- Whoa, that just gives me the willies.

None of us is woke. We are not woke people. And if we think we're woke, you know, you think you're without sin, you deceive yourselves and are strangers to the truth. That's a problem because what's happened is people who feel like they're on a higher moral plane, look at people who are not there yet. And they say, we need to get you on the same page. You know you're not on my page. And that has so fractured the body politic that has been so problematic in our politics today. America is fractured, I think in many ways, because of that way of thinking.

You know, my wife, Catherine and I were listening to a podcast, an interview of Ibram X. Kendi, who wrote the book, *How to be an Antiracist*. It's so interesting because he says, if I'm understanding him correctly, that the key characteristic of being an antiracist is *confession*, and not just for white people, for everybody, you know. We are all swimming in this soup called racism and the way to combat it and be antiracist is to recognize how it's working, not just in you, but in me, in all of us. And ironically, if you say -- no, I'm not a racist -- that's sort of like indicts you for being a racist. "Those who say they're without sin are strangers to the truth." Right? And so I think of the play, the book, *Les Misérables*, one of my favorite works of literature, Victor Hugo's great work. And you think about Javert, one of the main characters in that book. And his life's effort, his life's work is hunting down evil people, in particular, Jean Valjean, who stole a loaf of bread and stole the Bishop's candlesticks, which is actually the means of his redemption, right? That's his entire life energy is arrayed toward uprooting evil people. But spoiler alert -- in the end, it destroys *him*. So we need to be very careful about how we approach evil and not deny that it's there, there are weeds, that's a big problem.

And so as we're watching television, and as you're shaking your fist at those evil people -- believe me, I do -- we need to realize that they look like weeds, but it's really hard to tell. And as the parable might make clear, there will be a harvest and there will be a judgment, but we are not the ones who will be judging. We too will be judged. And so the trick is to judge, without being judgmental and to love indiscriminately and carefully as together, we seek to do what's right. As together, we seek to deal with the strange problem of the wheat and the weeds. That's an adventure that I hope that you'll join. May it be so. Amen