

WORSHIP

Sermon | 9.6.2020



Promises Worth Pursuing Instead: Mystery over Management

The Reverend Pen Peery

Matthew 13:24-30

He put before them another parable,

“The kingdom of heaven may be compared to someone who sowed good seed in his field, but while everybody was asleep, an enemy came and sowed weeds among the wheat, and then went away. So when the plants came up and bore grain, then the weeds appeared as well. 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?” He answered, ‘An enemy has done this.’ The slaves said to him, ‘Then do you want us go and gather them?’ But he replied, ‘No; for in gathering the weeds you would uproot the wheat along with them. 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.’”

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Of all the ways we have had to adapt over these past six months, I think the vocation that may deserve the biggest gold star are our teachers.



I mean...**good golly**...to turn on a dime and go virtual in March...and now to gear up for another strange and uncertain year with new classes of students...it's heroic work...worthy of our respect and admiration for the ways they literally help to change the world by the students they shape.

Growing up, my best teachers were able to frame things in a way that I could understand. There is an art to that. To take a concept and to make it relatable. To unlock doors to new knowledge with the keys of curiosity. To challenge old assumptions and release new possibilities. Even as I speak I can see my teacher's faces...and I can remember their names.

Before they called him Lord, Jesus' disciples called him "teacher." That's why they followed him – Jesus taught them about a different way to understand the world. A different way to live in the world. To understand that life was a gift...an abundant gift bestowed by an abundantly generous God. That's why the crowds came - to see, yes, but to learn.

One of the many effective ways that Jesus taught what it meant to walk in faith was to use a strategy that would reframe people's thinking: "You have heard it said..." Jesus would say, "but I say to you."

Jesus knew that when it came to matters of faith...and life...we all carry around assumptions that need to be re-examined. We carry baggage that we need to release before we will be able to feel fully alive. Jesus knew that sometimes we pursue promises that do not bring life...but, rather, keep us from it. And that was true for disciples in Jesus' time...as it is true of Jesus' disciples today.



This morning we begin a sermon series called “Promises Worth Pursuing Instead.” Over the next five weeks we are going to adopt Jesus’ teaching style - and reframe...maybe, even, reclaim...what it looks like to live in the light of the good news of the gospel.

Today’s focus is on the promise of mystery instead of management.

The Scripture that will be our guide is from the gospel of Matthew. It is a parable - another example of the way that Jesus loved to teach. I’m reading from the 13th chapter. Listen with me for the word of God.

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I can’t say this has always been true, but about the time I reached a certain age of maturity...where I had assumed an adult-size level of real-life responsibility...I found that one of my favorite things to do when I needed to decompress was to mow the grass.

It was just so...satisfying. To fire up the mower, map out a section of the lawn, and start making progress...progress that you could see! Back and forth, back and forth...every pass growing closer to the goal. Then the weed-eater. Then the blower. And then you could you walk out into the street in front of the house and take a good couple of minutes to admire what you had accomplished.

I’m not sure I could actually live a fully agrarian life, where my success could be so concretely measured by how well I managed the land entrusted to my care, but I’ve fantasized about it on occasion. Enough that I can even feel a level of empathy with the field-hands in Jesus’ parable.



Can you imagine their predicament in the story that Jesus tells?

If you are a field-hand, your job is very clear: to tend to some – defined – portion of dirt and make sure that what is planted there produces what it should. You plant, you water, you maintain, you harvest. Then you do it all over again the next season.

So say one day you go out to your field - the field that is your responsibility - that is the source of your livelihood - and when you look out, you see evidence of an infestation: weeds that could threaten the crop.

It's not a good situation for the field hands...and so they do what would come naturally for all of us: they try to shift responsibility away from themselves.

Maybe you noticed their brilliant piece of self-preserving speech,

“Master, did you not sow good seed in your field?

Where, then, did these weeds come from?”

Those are carefully chosen pronouns intended to make it very clear that THEY had nothing to do with these weeds that now threaten the crop.

It turns out, the field hands had nothing to fear – for the landowner knew that the weeds were not their fault, but were an enemy's doing. But then, the landowner does something peculiar: he tells the field hands not to pull up the weeds, but to let them grow alongside the wheat. The landowner's expressed logic in this decision is to protect the good crop from being uprooted by the pulling of weeds.

However, in reality, the landowner's logic doesn't hold up. Granted, I might not be an agronomist, but I did a little research and, actually, what we know about weeds in Palestine is that it is much better to pull them up as soon as possible and as often as needed.



The weed that scholars believe Jesus is referring to in this parable is called *zizania*, a poisonous type that stands in contrast to wheat early on, but that closely resembles wheat as it grows to maturity. Not only would it be better for the overall crop to pull these weeds early, in the end, it would also take a lot less work – because separating the weeds from the wheat at harvest is an extremely difficult and time consuming.

What is strange about this parable...and this is why Jesus teaches with parables... because there is always something strange – or out of place – that gets our attention – but what is strange about this parable is that the landowner doesn't want the field-hands help in managing what they perceive to be a problem. The field hands know what to do – they've spent their lives dedicated to figuring out how to manage through situations just like this one – they've trained for it, practiced it...so much so, perhaps, that it is more than what they do...in some ways, it is **who they are**: managers of a parcel of land, responsible for what happens to it and what comes out of it.

Yet, in this case, they are absolved of their responsibility. The landowner claims that mantle.

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Sounds good, right? Well...I'm not so sure. If I am that field hand, I'm not so sure I am altogether pleased with the landowner...because what am I supposed to do now?

I actually like management. Knowing what is mine to do. Feeling that I have some control over my situation. I find that what often brings me comfort is when I can manage my way to a place of understanding – where I can weed out as many variables as possible so that I have a grasp on what to expect.

It's what we do, right?



For particular tasks, or projects – we build a punch-list of what needs doing to ensure that we accomplish what is assigned...

In our careers – we set milestones and goals – building the ladder and always knowing the next rung...

Raising our kids – we work hard to ensure that they have “everything they need for success” – even if we don’t exactly know how they would define that word for themselves...

Anticipating the future – carefully planning and cultivating the life we will have when we have finished our work and can enjoy the fruits of our labor.

I like keeping my hands on the wheel – managing these areas of my life.

And it is even true in matters of faith.

I recognize, of course, where I rank compared to God.

But I like knowing what to expect – and what is expected of me. I like a system of belief that I can wrap my mind around. I like questions of faith that have answers. I like a certain level of predictability that makes faith comfortable and leaves me feeling settled and in control.

Even if – deep down – I know I am not...

Maybe, if we can admit that, we might begin to see faith...
and our relationship with Christ...in a different light.

There is a burden of being the one who always manages things. A burden that comes when we feel like things depend on us being responsible – and in control. That is especially true for those of us who are educated, success-minded and often in charge...all traits, I suspect, that are reflected in the membership (and leadership) of our two congregations.

For those who have carried the weight of that burden, we know that it doesn’t always bring life, does it? It can be wearisome. It exposes limits that we don’t like acknowledge we have. It threatens to unravel the narrative we’ve constructed...or



lived into...that fuses our ability to manage through and understand and fix problems with **who we are** as a person.

And then what does it mean if we can't manage? Or understand? Or fix?
Who are we then?

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*"You have heard it said – you've got the whole world on your shoulders, **but I say to you** – God's got the whole world in God's hands."*

*"You have heard it said – if you just work hard enough, you can understand and manage through...anything, **but I say to you** – God's thoughts are not our thoughts...and there is a freedom...a lightness...that comes from trusting that we are surrounded by mystery."*

Over the last 20 years in ministry, there is a conversation I have had with people that has happened enough times for me to recognize it as a pattern...as a commonly held concern.

The most vivid example of this conversation is a visit I had with a member of a former church whom I will call Doris. Doris was 90 – and still full of vim and vigor. She sought me out one afternoon in my study and confessed that – even though she had been active in every conceivable aspect of the church for the past 65 years – she wasn't 100 percent sure she had been baptized. She moved around a lot as a little girl, and she never remembered her parents telling her about her baptism and had never been able to find a baptism certificate or record.

Aware that she was in the twilight of her life, Doris was haunted by the feeling that she had not done enough to deserve the grace she so desperately wanted. In spite well-lived and impactful life, Doris had labored for many years under the conviction that faith – that salvation – was something for her to manage. Perhaps, she asked me, if I could just baptize her it would give her peace of mind.



I think there are a lot of people like Doris...who have been conditioned to believe that faith is accomplishment; that salvation is effort; that God operates by the same set of standards that we do when it comes to distinguishing between what is righteous and what is not.

And while I did end up baptizing Doris, it was not until we had a conversation about what the water in that font represented...

which was a confirmation of something that was already true –

visible sign of a grace that had already been at work in Doris' life and mine –

a celebration of the fact that those waters represented a promise that – somehow...in ways we will never fully understand...Christ has taken us into himself to give us new life...

not a life to be managed with pressure and fear – but to be received with wonder and with gratitude.

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In the name of the one who is both shrouded in mystery and able to be trusted – the God who gives life and desires that life be abundant – to that God be all glory, and honor, and power. Amen.

