

When the Church is a Mess¹

The title of today's sermon is "When the Church is a Mess." I think it safe to say the Christian Church has always been something of a mess. One of the churches in the Bible, the congregation at Corinth had problems on a whole different order than anything we experience. For starters, the congregation was divided into factions. There were speakers in tongues who claimed that the end of the world had already come. Prostitution was rife in the community and one church member was living with his deceased father's widow. Some tacky members went to communion like people go to the Golden Corral—ready to chow down at an all you can eat buffet. That's one church—in the Bible.

We are boring by comparison. Nevertheless, how often do we look around at the Christian movement and just shake our heads. We haven't had just one or two high visibility television preachers involved in a sex scandal. Most of them have crashed and burned that way. Consider the child abuse scandal in the Catholic Church.

I look at our denomination and wonder if common sense will ever triumph. And, on balance, most Christian groups are in the same boat. Where there isn't out-and-out stupidity there are

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church fights, lack of leadership, decisions that are clearly outside Christian values, teachers and theologians who don't hold standard Christian views. And some don't believe in God!

It's distressing! If we look at the Christian movement with clear eyes, we find breathtaking levels of everything from garden variety stupidity to real malice.

Jesus actually addresses the mess in this parable. He talks about a field being sown with wheat. Good enough. But then he talks about an enemy who sneaks into the field when everyone's asleep, sowing weed seeds, which germinate right along with the wheat.

Linger on this image for a moment. Every field and garden has its share of weeds. But the image here is of weeds being intentionally sown. That means that someone has gone to the trouble to harvest weeds and laboriously separate the seeds. We're not talking about the incidental weed popping up. We're talking about a consistent, even coverage of weeds that look like a crop within a crop. Every row is filled with a thicket of weeds. Every wheat stalk's roots are entangled with a weed's roots. Every leaf competes for sunlight with a weed's leaves.

And that's not all. Scholars think the species of weed here is Bearded Darnell, a poisonous grass that looks like wheat in the early stages of development.

So what we have in our lesson is Jesus' word picture of an impossibly corrupted field. I don't know about you, but there is something about anything that is flawed, or spoiled, or overrun that unnerves me. I think my response to a field in this state of messiness would be to burn it.

Anyway, Jesus has a completely different attitude. As Jesus tells this story he goes on to tell how the landowner wisely restrains the field hands from trying to correct the situation. They are not, in other words, to be wadding into the field and trying to yank out the darnel.

This makes sense. The Darnel looks so much like wheat that good grain will be uprooted and some weeds left. Further, the weeding process will so disturb the soil that the wheat would be fatally weakened. Put bluntly, trying to correct the problem might actually make things worse. So the landowner's plan of action is to forestall corrective action until the harvest when the Darnel is more distinctive looking and when the wheat has had a chance to mature. It's at the harvest that the plants can be separated properly.

This whole picture, the sower, the enemy, the wheat, weeds, and field hands, Jesus tells us, is what the Kingdom of God is like. The whole story is what it looks like when God's reign is breaking into the world. Our imaginations of what God rule

looks like is a perfect field, weed-free, and flourishing. Jesus' picture of God's reign is the picture of an incredible mess.

If we're on the right track then we are warranted in the conclusion that unending patience and tolerance for imperfection in one another are necessary if we're going to flourish as disciples.

Now I realize that what I'm saying defies some common sense. Obviously, any organization needs some means to "clean up its act," by being able to get rid of abusers, trouble-makers, and the morally defunct. You may be aware that the Presbyterian church has a whole code of regulations called the book of discipline that provides for the church to respond to officers and members whose behavior threatens to disrupt the whole church. It can and does happen.

Book of Discipline notwithstanding, Jesus gives us little support here for such a process. What Jesus leans on is patience and an ability to function in the midst of a mess. If the church is a mess, that's God's problem. At some point in God's own time and at the end of all things, he'll separate the wheat from the weeds. In the meantime...patience.

For some reason, as I was writing this I began reflecting on all of the churches I've been familiar with. I've worked in

several and remember their flaws. Ministers whose real beliefs would shock their congregations; sessions filled with elders who knew next to nothing about Christianity; congregations who were so desperate to simply survive that they struck unhealthy deals with unhealthy members; deep personal rifts between members; sexual irregularities.

What's refreshing is that all those congregations have survived and even flourished in some ways. Being a part of such churches may yet be an amazing, transforming experience.

I also reflected on people who have become disgusted with their churches and who left. People who say, "That church is filled with hateful people whose lives are no inspiration to me." Or, "I can't respect a minister who does what he did." Or, "the pastor never visited when my mother died."

Whatever the complaint, those perfectionists are invariably outside a congregation.

Here's the heart of this lesson: "Don't attempt to pull out the weeds." Can you sense the grace in all of this? God is working with us in all our foibles and nastiness. Oh, he'll eventually bring us and all his people into perfection. 'But for the time being what we're doing together will be a glorious, grace-filled mess. We're in this together. God's with us. The

kingdom is like this. The kingdom is this. This is to say this
is how it's supposed to be.