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Grace Cathedral, San Francisco, CA X24  
7a Pentecost (Proper 11A) 8:30, 11:00 a.m. Eucharist  
Sunday 23 July 2017

Isaiah 44:6-8  
Psalm 86:11-17  
Romans 8:12-25  
Mt. 13:24-30, 36-43

### **Help in Weakness**

*"Who will separate us from the love of Christ?" (Rom. 8).*

"It is not we who can sustain the Church, nor was it our forefathers, nor will it be our descendants. It was and is and will be the One who says, "I am with you always, even to the end of the world."<sup>1</sup> Martin Luther writes this about Jesus. He quotes the last line from The Gospel of Matthew. "And remember, I am with you even to the end of the age" (Mt. 28). This has become a kind of motto for me. These words make Jesus feel so near. Perhaps this could be true for you too.

The twentieth century theologian Karl Barth (1886-1968) recognizes that philosophies and scientific pictures of the universe are constantly evolving. For this reason, and because what we assume at the beginning in large part determines our conclusions, Barth starts not with a theory of the human condition but with what he calls the Word of God. He begins with the living God of the Bible and the way that the Holy Spirit inspires us as we read it carefully. Barth points out a human tendency that you might recognize. Let me explain with an example.<sup>2</sup>

In 1820 Thomas Jefferson completed a project that he had worked on for decades. He went through the New Testament with a razor, cut out the parts he disagreed with and then pasted together what was leftover, that is, what he actually believed. Not to spoil the surprise, but Jefferson's book *The Life and Morals of Jesus of Nazareth* took out what he considered to be any reference to miracles and the resurrection.<sup>3</sup>

In many ways we do the same kind of thing. Most people in our society, spend more time sitting in judgment of God than they do in trying to obey God. We are part of this. We almost cannot help ourselves. Barth challenges us to do something different. He writes, "Our supposed listening is in fact a strange mixture of hearing and our own speaking... [typically] it is most likely that our own speaking will be the really decisive event. We have to know the mystery... if we are really to meet it, if we are really to be open and ready, really to give ourselves to it..."<sup>4</sup>

For Barth, "Scripture is always autonomous and independent."<sup>5</sup> It finds the people intended for it. He writes that the miracle is that, "fallible [people] speak the Word of God in fallible human words" "awakening and strengthening... our faith."<sup>6</sup> To summarize, although we hear the Bible with our constantly running inner monologue, the miracle is that sometimes God gets through to us. Barth writes, "In Jesus Christ, I am revealed to myself as he who in the totality of his existence is received and accepted by Him."<sup>7</sup>

I talked to a few of you about today's reading. We had some hard conversations. Several of you did not like this picture of a final judgment, "the furnace of fire," "the weeping and gnashing of teeth" (Mt. 13).

Crowds have gathered to hear Jesus talk about the kingdom of heaven. He describes it as a pearl of great price or a field with treasure in it, as worth trading everything we have in order to possess. It is a tiny mustard seed that grows into a great plant and dominates the landscape. It is like yeast or a net cast into the sea. It is right before us but hidden, perhaps because we have difficulty listening.

Jesus compares the kingdom to someone who sows good seed in the fields but whose enemy comes in the night and plants what our translation calls weeds. The Greek word is *zizania* and means darnel (or Eurasian Ryegrass sometimes called "false wheat") a particular kind of plant easily confused for wheat. You might even imagine the very roots of the two grasses interwoven in the soil.

As the first shoots come up the workers ask where the *zizania* come from and if they should remove pull it out. The householder says an enemy has done this but that uprooting the weeds will unintentionally involve pulling up wheat too. He tells them to wait for the harvest when the reapers will burn the weeds and gather the wheat into the barn.

Jesus offers an explanation in only two of Matthew's forty parables. This is one of them. Privately he tells his friends that the enemy is the devil, the one who sows good seed is the Son of Man, the reapers are the angels and "the righteous will shine like the sun in the kingdom of their Father. Let anyone with ears listen" (Mt. 13)!

Let's return to Barth's original challenge. Instead of standing in judgment of Jesus' words, how do we become obedient to them? We should begin with the question that Jesus' parable answers. You too might hear this complaint about God more than any other these days. If God is good and powerful why is there so much evil in the world?

The point of the parable is not to scare you into being a better person. The weeds are not trying to become wheat, the wheat cannot become a weed. The fifteenth century theologian John Calvin (1509-1564) believed that we are simply what God made us to be. He thought that if you are concerned about being God's child that is a pretty good sign that you already are.<sup>8</sup>

The point is that as we survey our lives, we are not even qualified to distinguish the wheat from the weeds. We cannot even recognize the good and evil events or even the people for what and who they are. We have to suspend our judgment and let God be God.

Do any of you remember Eddie Haskell the teenaged character from the television show *Leave It to Beaver*? He was a terrible and cruel bully to the kids but seemed to have all the adults completely fooled by the polite way he spoke to them. We are all subject to the Eddie Haskell effect.<sup>9</sup> We simply cannot tell who is genuinely close to God, whose heart is full of love.<sup>10</sup> We do not always have to have an opinion about everyone. For homework lets try turning off the judgment switch at least three times this week.

The moral psychologist Jonathan Haidt points out that this is tremendously difficult for us. He writes that, "We make our first judgments rapidly, and we are dreadful at seeking out evidence that might disconfirm these initial judgments." He compares the

vast sea of subliminal moral perceptions, urges and desires to a kind of elephant who cannot be controlled by the rider which is our sense of rationality. For him the elephant is in charge of the rider, "reason is the servant of the intuitions." Our rationality is a kind of fulltime public relations firm" offering, "post hoc explanations for what the elephant has just done."<sup>11</sup>

I worry a little about this whole conversation on being obedient to scripture and Jesus' teaching that we should set aside our innate tendency and leave judgment to God. Talking in this way may feel abstract or distant from our lives. I worry even more about what I am about to tell you, that you will think less of me. But we need a reminder of what it really feels like when things go wrong.

This week my son Micah asked, "Dad after the 2008 financial crisis did you lose weight or gain it?" Everyone in our family remembers that winter. It was when our church suffered a colossal failure of communication and trust. On a January day I walked into the office and a colleague told me that angry parishioners were holding a secret meeting, establishing a parallel leadership structure apart from the elected board of the church. They worried about a new school we were starting, the budget, divisions between young and old, but mostly it was about me.<sup>12</sup>

I lost twelve pounds in two weeks. I couldn't sleep. My eye started twitching. When I went running I would try to visualize setting down a model of the church beside the path and going on. But I couldn't stop thinking about it even for ten minutes. This beautiful community, this gift from God, was shaken by misunderstanding and enmity, by an entirely unnecessary and senseless bitterness.

In the end, there was more than enough forgiveness and reconciliation to go around. But it was very painful before that.

Maybe you have felt helpless or radical self-doubt in a tragedy, as if the enemy was succeeding at turning good people against each other, or bringing out the worst possible events. Perhaps that is how you feel today. At moments like this no one can tell us that this terrible suffering might lead to something really great. Only someone with the power of Jesus can help us to recognize that ultimately we cannot distinguish the wheat from the weeds.

The Apostle Paul writes about a lot of moments like this. He writes from prison, after being betrayed by friends or beaten and humiliated by the authorities. And he points out what I find true in my own life, that God does not abandon us in times like this. He says, "the Spirit helps us in our weakness; for we do not know how to pray as we ought, but that Spirit intercedes with sighs too deep for words" (Rom. 8).<sup>13</sup>

Karl Barth believes that all of scripture culminates with you, right now as part of the process by which God's Word unfolds. Your story is how Christ's story makes contact with the world. Barth writes, "We ourselves in our humanity stand at the preliminary end and goal of this process, not left outside, but drawn into its orbit, not as strangers but as children of the household, not as onlookers but as those who cooperate in responsibility, not in ignorance, but as participants in the divine knowledge..."<sup>14</sup>

And so I now leave us to return to our own inner monologues with the prayer that God's Word can make it through to us. When you rage against the weeds in your life I pray for the miraculous power to suspend judgment and let God be God. When you feel hurt, when the rash elephant of your instantaneous moral judgments runs wild, I pray that the Spirit will intercede with "sighs too deep for words."

"It is not we who can sustain the Church, nor was it our forefathers, nor will it be our descendants. It was and is and will be the One who says, "I am with you always, even to the end of the world."

<sup>1</sup> Martin Luther W.A. 54, 470, 474f cited in Karl Barth, *Church Dogmatics Volume 1, Part Two* Tr. G. W. Bromiley (NY: T&T Clark, 1956) xi.

<sup>2</sup> In the last few months I have read about 1400 pages of the Karl Barth's never-completed 9000 page work *Church Dogmatics*.

<sup>3</sup> Thomas Jefferson, *The Life and Morals of Jesus of Nazareth Extracted Textually from the Gospels in Greek, Latin, French and English*. A recent New York Times article on this topic:

<https://www.nytimes.com/2017/07/04/opinion/thomas-jeffersons-bible-teaching.html?smid=pl-share&r=0>

<sup>4</sup> Karl Barth, *Church Dogmatics Volume 1, Part Two* Tr. G. W. Bromiley (NY: T&T Clark, 1956) 470.

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*, 583.

<sup>6</sup> "... every time we turn the Word of God into an infallible biblical word of man or the biblical word of man into an infallible Word of God we resist that which we ought never to resist, i.e., the truth of the miracle that here fallible men speak the Word of God in fallible human words – and we therefore resist the sovereignty of grace, in which God Himself became man in Christ, to glorify Himself in his humanity" (529). We believe that the Bible is the Word of God... Of course, the whole mystery of this statement rests on the fact that faith is not for everybody, and that even if we have it, it is a small and weak and inadequate because not a true faith. Therefore the miracle which has to take place if the Bible is to rise up and speak to us as the Word of God has always to consist in an awakening and strengthening of our faith." (512), *Ibid.*, 529, 512.

<sup>7</sup> *Ibid.*, 706.

<sup>8</sup> John Calvin, *The Institutes of the Christian Religion* tr. Ford Lewis Battles (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1960).

<sup>9</sup> Sometimes I ask my teenagers about other kids because I know that I only experience young people in the moments when adults are around.

<sup>10</sup> Edward F. Markquart, "Weeds and Wheat," Series A Sermons, [http://www.sermonsfromseattle.com/series\\_a\\_weeds\\_and\\_wheat.htm](http://www.sermonsfromseattle.com/series_a_weeds_and_wheat.htm)

<sup>11</sup> Jonathan Haidt, *The Righteous Mind: Why Good People Are Divided by Politics and Religion* (NY: Pantheon Books, 2012) 46-7.

<sup>12</sup> There were two secret meetings. They gave a powerpoint presentation to the vestry that fell two days after the funeral for a nineteen year old former youth group member who I loved.

<sup>13</sup> At my funeral one day they will read his final conclusion, that "Neither death, nor life, nor angels, nor rulers, nor things present, nor things to come, nor powers, nor height, nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus" (Rom. 8).

<sup>14</sup> "... yet we cannot fail to reckon with the fact that it does actually happen that in our humanity we ourselves are now drawn into the process in which the Word of God exercises its freedom and as the word of prophets and apostles takes its course through the world. That we are believers and witnesses will always be a matter of doubt, and humanly speaking even for despair. We have to remember that this is a reality for which we can never do more than give thanks and pray. But we deny this reality, and therefore the whole process of events in which God's Word comes to man as a human word, and therefore the work of the Son and even God Himself, if we try to escape the fact that we ourselves in our humanity stand at the preliminary end and goal of this process not left outside, but drawn into its orbit, not as strangers but as children of the household, not as onlookers but as those who cooperate in responsibility, not in ignorance, but as participants in the divine knowledge, *conscientes*"

<sup>14</sup>Karl Barth, *Church Dogmatics Volume 1, Part Two* Tr. G. W. Bromiley (NY: T&T Clark, 1956) 701.