



Can I Fix This?

SCRIPTURE:
Matthew 13:24-30

June 27, 2021 — Sermon by Rev. Tom Are, Jr.

I was the hospital chaplain. Well, not a full chaplain. It was an internship while I was in seminary. I had not spent much time in hospitals. I was the chaplain on call, so I went to the sixth floor.

There I met a young woman—not much older than I was at the time. She had just lost her child. He couldn't have been more than 3 years old and now she sat beside him, tears running down her face.

I introduced myself, told her I was the chaplain and I prayed for her. Then we talked. Well, that's not really the case. The truth is: I talked. I was uncomfortable with the situation and uncomfortable with the silence, so I talked. I talked until this broken-hearted mother looked up at me and asked very gently, "Would you mind if we didn't talk?"

It was a terrible situation. I desperately wanted to help. And I was so confident that I would find just the right words to make it all better. I'm glad I'm not still that stupid.

If you like, you can think of Matthew as a preacher who preaches to a congregation like ourselves. Matthew's congregation had their own pain, their own disappointments. They were convinced that Jesus was the Messiah—the one long promised in Judaism. The one who would establish God's ways in the world. They were convinced that Jesus was infused with the Spirit of God in a way that no other had been. And yet, rather than redemption and healing and abundant life being the norm, the world was still a mess. They professed that Jesus was Lord, but from all objective measures, Caesar seemed to be calling all the shots. They practiced a new kind of social order where men and women, slaves and free, could live defined not by these cultural categories, but by their identity as children of God. And as a result, the rest of the world viewed them with suspi-

cion, even hostility.

But most painful of all, the members of Matthew's congregation were Jewish. They were Jewish followers of Jesus, and their faith in Jesus caused division with other Jews. The folks in Matthew's congregation had either walked out or been kicked out of the synagogue. Friends and family they had at one time been close to, shared life with, were now divided. There had been a family fight that was deeply painful. And they were left to wonder: Is this the way life is supposed to be? If Jesus is really the promised one of God, is life supposed to be like this?

So, Matthew, being a preacher, reminds them of a story that Jesus loved to tell. It's about farming again. Jesus wasn't a farmer, nor was his father. You would think Jesus would have a story or two about carpentry... but no, he tells lots of stories of seeds, soils and weeds. In this parable, Jesus says there was a wheat field, but weeds were found among the wheat. Now for this sermon, we will skip past the enemy and the mystery. We will jump to the conversation about pulling the weeds. A good farmer never wanted weeds in the wheat.

My mother loved to garden and she wanted all her children to help. I didn't have a green thumb. My mother knew this, so the only job she trusted me with was pulling weeds. She made it clear: weeds have no place in a garden. I hated it. I promised myself when I was old enough to have my own garden—well, first of all, I wouldn't have a garden—but if I did, I would not treat weeds as second-class flora. In my garden, weeds would live a life of liberation and thrive. And if I had children, I would take them to my garden and rather than treat them as indentured servants sentenced to pull weeds, I would teach them to delight in all of God's plant life.

That's what I was going to do. Well, I got over all

of that. I still have no green thumb and anything that grows in our yard is the result of my wife's magic. But me, I still pull weeds. Mom was right; weeds have no place in the garden.

Jesus sounds a bit like me when I was a teenager. And for the record, no one has ever said that before. All of his stories are surprising. The first surprise is that the laborers don't just pull the weeds, but first ask, "Is this what you want us to do?" If they had had just one afternoon with my mother, they would know that weeds don't belong in the garden. Of course you pull them. But Jesus says, "No. You better leave them alone until the harvest. If you pull those weeds now, you will do more harm than good."

Again, this is not a story about farming; it's a story about the kingdom—how life is lived in God's promised day. If I understand the text, Jesus is teaching us how to deal with the disappointments and injuries of life, and the failings in the world. And what he teaches, if I understand the text, is that some weeds need to be pulled. But some weeds, you need to leave alone and let God redeem what we cannot repair.

Two stories: I saw a birthday card on the already opened stack of mail and I asked, "Oh, who is this for?" Between the first of the year and the second week of March, all the Are's have birthdays. They just come one right after the other. I saw a card in the midst of the birthday season and asked, "Who is this for?" Carol looked at me and said, "Probably for me." It was March 10 and March 10 just happens to be Carol's birthday. And even with my best, 'of course, I knew that' expression, I fooled no one. It was clear that I had completely forgotten her birthday.

I think about that moment every time we eat at our dining-room table. You aren't seeing the connection. That little lapse in memory back in 1996 cost me a dining-room table. That's what she got for a belated birthday present. I could have squeezed by with a sweater if I had just remembered. But sometimes when you mess things up you need to do whatever you can to make things right. Sometimes when things are going wrong in the world, we need to do everything we can to make it right.

Here's another story. In 1880, there were three men running for the Republican nomination for president: Ulysses S. Grant, James Blaine and John

Sherman. But the convention could not settle on any of these. After days of voting, they elected a man on the 36th ballot who had not run and said he did not wish to be the nominee: James A. Garfield. He was only at the convention to give the nominating speech for Sherman. After refusing to run, Garfield was then elected the 20th president of the United States. Four months into his presidency, he was shot.

It was not a fatal wound. But it was a wound from which he never recovered. Dr. Willard Bliss treated the injured president. He was never able to find the bullet, as it had traveled across his body. But almost daily, with unsterilized instruments and his own unwashed fingers, Dr. Bliss probed the wound in search of the bullet.

Several months after the shooting, Garfield died. An autopsy revealed that he died, not of the gunshot, but of raging infection that no doubt was introduced to his body through Dr. Bliss's treatment. Dr. Bliss was no doubt attempting to help, but rather than help, he made things worse. The president died not because of the actions of his would-be assassin, but because of the care of his doctor.

Sometimes even doing the best we know how only makes things worse. Sometimes we have to just trust that God will redeem, God will make it right in some promised day, God will repair that which we cannot fix. And the most important lesson is that knowing the difference requires wisdom. It requires some humility.

I sat with Shirley in the first church I served. She sobbed. Remembering my hospital chaplaincy blunder, I just sat quietly. I held her hand and handed her tissues. She had just changed the locks to her doors so that her son—her firstborn whom she loved—could not return to the home where she brought him a few days after he was born.

In the twists of years, her son Mark had become captured by drugs and he needed help. She had tried, Lord knows she had tried, to be the source of that help. There was no one in the world who wanted to help Mark more than his mother. But in the way of things that certainly seemed unfair to her, her wanting to help had no bearing on her being effective in helping. She realized he would need to find help elsewhere. So, she closed the door and told him to

get his life straight... to please find help. And then she prayed the kind of prayer that is filled with tears.

The gardens of our lives are filled with weeds. The laborers were wise. They knew to go to the farmer and ask: Is this something you want us to fix? Or is this something we must leave in your hands? It's hard to trust God with the broken pieces of our lives.

But we can learn from these laborers. Every day we, too, should ask God, "What is ours to do? And what must we leave for you? What do you want us to take on? And what do you want us to give up?" This is how we live toward that promised day, when God will make right everything we have failed to make right. Nothing is hopeless.