

Sermon Text: Matthew 13:1-9, 18-23

I'm starting to wonder about the wisdom of turning the lights down for the sermon. Someone told me they thought that was signal for naptime. I hope not! You will have to pay attention to stay with me on this particular sermon, and I hope that it will speak to you God's Word in some way if you do.

First of all, my attempt in the beginning is very often, with a serious sermon, to begin with some small attempt at humor, and I promise this is a very small attempt. Did you hear about the tribe found in Asia, a tribe discovered in Asia that worshiped the number 0? Some of you, I know, already have the punch line – Is nothing sacred? Oh, someone laughed!

We say, “Some things are sacred and other things profane.” Which is which? Emerson said, “A man is what he thinks about all day long.” Now, we live in a time when a largely unexamined and dangerous ideal permeates the thoughts of our culture. It is the seed of an idea, obviously contrary to Jesus' teaching of love. Love God, love your neighbor as you love yourself. A seed, which has borne fruit of chaos and the destruction of lives and the promotion of violence and the disintegration of covenants, the covenants that make community possible. The seed, which has borne this poison fruit, is wrapped up in the attitude heard from the lips of our young people and from popular songs and movies. In fact, my niece, who is here with us today, inspired me to write this particular sermon. The seed, which bears this fruit, seems so small and insignificant, you may laugh when I say it, for it is simply the hopeless and careless slang pronouncement that life has no rules and no boundaries and no goals and no real meaning. The word, which undercuts the firm foundation of faith in Christ, and renders meaningless the very idea of meaning, the word is “Whatever!”

Whatever! That's it. Do you believe in God? Whatever. Have you any goals for your life? Whatever. Does giving your word, does the truth matter to you? Whatever. Staying faithful in marriage, do you think that matters to you or to God or to your children or to the culture at all? Whatever, as long as I get what I want, whatever. Now, philosophically, it is nihilism wrapped up in existentialism, which the short version of those philosophical thoughts is nothing matters, nothing at all, except perhaps me. Whatever. No thought beyond me. No concept of any absolute, which leads us to no absolutes at all, which leads in behavior individually and in groups to just whatever. If there is no one above us, then who is to say what is right and what is wrong? You see, the seed of whatever replaces God was in Christ fulfilling the law, not doing away with the law, but fulfilling it, living it, revealing at once what God intended life to look like in Jesus Christ, and at the same time in Jesus' life, revealing that each and everyone of us has fallen so far short of the law of love that the creator God has laid down for us to follow, we have fallen so far, that God had to intervene. He did in Jesus Christ. Do you see how different a life turns out when one believes that there is a God and that there are standards, that that standard is love of God and love of neighbor and love of self, and being unloving in any dimension equals sin against God or sin against neighbor or sin against self. Sin, which demands judgment. With that foundation, with that conviction, the forgiveness of God, given to us freely even though we deserve judgment, even though we deserve judgment, God gives us grace, that is God's amazing grace, that is God's love and God's gift to us of the good news of the Gospel, forgiveness here and eternal life beyond. A life lived knowing there are standards, and that the standard is love, but we fall

The Reverend James D. Dennis, Jr.

July 10, 2005

short, and God kept up his end anyway by loving and forgiving us. Such a life, I believe, leads to compassion for others and care for others and thanksgiving to God, which spills out in your life in myriads of ways. We will not be perfect, but we will recognize Jesus as the standard when this is our faith, and as our Savior when we fall short of the standard, but a life of whatever begins and ends with no standards and tends to seek self until bored and then the next desire until you're bored and then the next and then the next and then the next and necessarily concludes in the succession of boredom that life must be meaningless because every single desire fails to satisfy, and a life based upon whatever starts looking for meaning in power or maybe gangs or maybe groups or maybe cults who tell you what to do because doing on your own hasn't worked. You may start doing the most adolescent of things – blaming. It's the whites. It's the blacks. It's the West. It's the Democrats. It's the Republicans. It's my parents' fault or my wife's fault or my husband's fault that I'm not happy, that I'm not fulfilled, that I lack meaning. So here we are.

In London, just a few days ago, ostensibly in God's name, men, women, and children were blown up and hundreds injured, but in the age of whatever, we have a hard time raising outrage over anything. Without an ironclad rule prohibiting the murder of innocents, the spirit of whatever asks, “Who's to say what is right or what is wrong? Who are you to be outraged? Maybe they have a point. Maybe in their conception of God and their pursuit of Heaven for themselves this seems right to them, so how can we judge?” Remember the new rule, there are no rules. Whatever.

On a smaller scale, there was a time when no church in South Carolina ever locked its doors. I served one of my first churches, which had no locks on the doors. Churches were left open for prayer or simply left open for convenience. They didn't need locks. They were seen as a holy outpost of God's kingdom on earth, and even thieves believed, or at least respected the belief of others, that churches were off limits for crime. They were literally seen as sanctuaries, sacred places set aside for God, and untouchable by crime, unthinkable, but no longer as the break in of our church this weekend demonstrates, no longer. There was a time when divorce was rare and marriage was important for procreation, for procreation with God, a sacrificial covenant in which a couple gave themselves to the future by producing children and agreeing to nurture and raise them with standards and with faith. I'll say this delicately, but now sex, through technology and the spirit of whatever, has been separated from procreation, and has devolved down to mere recreation. If children are accidentally produced, they can be disposed of in various ways as collateral damage in pursuit of what I want in the moment, and once recreation is all there is, the question was bound to come up, “Does it really matter who or how many you recreate with?” No. Not if recreation is all there is, I guess it doesn't matter. You see, whatever. If nothing matters, then do whatever, who's to say you're wrong, but if something matters, then which things matter, and if there is a God, then God has a say. Christians are those who believe that God has said very clearly what matters in Jesus Christ and his gospel is first the bad news, that the Ten Commandments, which boil down to love God and love neighbor, are still in effect, and more than the actions, even the violation of hateful and hurtful desires in our hearts are judged by God as violations of his law, and so every single one of us, whether we have done or whether we have thought, we need a savior, a savior to intervene on our behalf. The good news? We have one, in Jesus Christ. He fulfilled the law we have broken and took our judgment upon himself on the cross.

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July 10, 2005

Now what? He sends his spirit to enable us to do the good works we were made for. In Ephesians it says, “For we are his workmanship, created in Christ Jesus for good works.” Created for good works, which God prepared beforehand that we should walk in them. Again, from earlier in the gospel of Matthew, Jesus said, “Let your light so shine before men that they may see your good works, and give glory to your Father who is in Heaven because of your good works.” Verse 17, “Think not that I have come to abolish the law in the prophets. I have come not to abolish them, but to fulfill them for truly I say to you ‘til Heaven and Earth pass away, not an iota, not a dot will pass from the law until all is accomplished. Whoever then relaxes one of the least of these Commandments and teaches men so shall be called least in the kingdom of Heaven, but he who does them and teaches them shall be called great in the kingdom of Heaven.” It does not sound at all like whatever. As Jesus taught in the parable today, the Gospel is the seed which God has planted everywhere, in Russia, in China, in Arabia, in Greenwood. It has fallen on the rocks and on the weeds and on the mountains, in the deserts, in the mansions, in the slums, and in the shacks, and sometimes it sprouts a little, and sometimes it grows and is choked out, and sometimes it matures and does what God wants it to do, produce good fruit, and that means good works, and that means a Christ-like life, and this is not a nebulous concept. These fruits are spelled out clearly, and should be thought about and pursued with God’s help, and prayed about, and actually tried. Galatians 5:22 spells out the fruit of the spirit, love and joy and peace and patience and kindness and goodness and faithfulness and gentleness and self-control. God holds out hope for all creation to see and to respond to his extravagant planting of love in Christ. It is more than we need. It is more than we can imagine. Take it to yourself and echo it to the world, and so we are to waste it on those who give us nothing in return, even enemies, because that way we love as God has loved us. Even if there is hatred in return, that is the way God loves. God expects a harvest from us. God expects a harvest, a faith that grows over a lifetime and influences others. The faith we do have probably needs to be fertilized a little, watered a little, and I don’t have it all figured out exactly how we grow a step at a time, but you don’t need me to learn what the Scripture says. It says what it says. There is such a thing as evil, and it works against God’s planting in our hearts, and some seeds are good and some soil is good and God’s word is the seed. God’s word made flesh is Jesus Christ. God’s word in flesh was planted in the ground, and rose up in the Resurrection into Heaven, and we are also called the new life as well. God so loved the world that he was willing to waste his only seed extravagantly, his son, so that everyone might have an opportunity to believe and to know and to enter abundant life, which continues forever with God. We believe that life is more than here, and we were made for more than these short lifetimes. Jesus spoke of hard soil where nothing could grow, and I know people’s hearts can become hardened. I have seen it and I have felt it, but as we grow older, the thousands of experiences, feelings, and emotions, which tread over our hearts all the time, and perhaps trample them down hard, only God can soften that soil for his seed of the Gospel to grow. We must know that God, through his word and through the Holy Spirit, can plow under all that hardscrabble and soften our hearts that have been trampled down through a lifetime of disappointments, betrayals, bitterness, and guilt. What the world and our mistakes have done to us, God can undo. God’s love is more powerful than any sin, than any hate, than any destructive lust, even more powerful than a world-weary, parking lot, packed down heart. Good soil, Jesus explains, are those people who both hear and do God’s word. Hearing is not enough, and doing is not enough. As for what was sown on good soil, this he said, is those

The Reverend James D. Dennis, Jr.

July 10, 2005

who hear the word and understand it and bear fruit, in other words, do it. Some a hundredfold, some sixty, some thirty, but the point here to me is the whole world has potential because God sows everywhere. God sows a particular seed, and a hope of a particular crop of a good fruit. It is not an attitude of whatever, it is an extravagant act of grace and hope on God's part that in any place, no matter how unlikely, the seed of the Gospel just might take root and grow. The parable does not picture God as a careful, detailed planter, controlling outcomes large and small, and pulling strings and making things happen, instead, it pictures God scattering, helter-skelter, the seed of the Gospel everywhere, and having potential everywhere. It speaks of amazing grace, extravagant grace, and leaving a frightening amount up to us. We can interpret the parable in many ways, but we may not ignore that some folks simply fail to grow within them a faith beyond themselves. They stay rocky or weed-choked or sun-burnt or whatever, and produce nothing, and as I said earlier, nothing is not sacred. God scatters his word of grace, love, hope, forgiveness, and new life everywhere! Some never take. Some grows and dies out, some, the world and the desires of the moment take away, but God did speak in Jesus Christ, and gives all of us hope. God said, “I love you, and I want what is good for you, and what is good is that you love me and love each other and love yourself, and I will help you love that way. I will send you my son to show you that way. I will send you my spirit to enable you to live that way. The world is not now what I intended. Jesus is the life I intended. Listen to him. Follow him. It matters what path you take.” So God in his abundant love has spread his word of hope to call us into relationship throughout the entire world, to one another and to God. We are soil he's aiming to grow something in, something in particular, good fruit, a harvest, but we look at the world. Buses blown up in the same place, perhaps some of the same buses my family and I were on two years ago. Cement blocks thrown through church windows. Children casually produced and casually discarded. Lies and corruption in business and government, when one's word used to be one's bond. Whatever is not true. Not all seeds are equally good, and not all fruit is holy and pleasing to God. Hate is not equal to love, and good is not equal to evil, of course not, and we gain nothing from pretending it is. It is the church's job to love and to serve and to preach and to teach and to soften and prepare hearts to receive God's word and then grow a faith within. With God's help that is our holy calling, to share and to plant and to live out our faith before others, to inspire and soften the hearts of others, and to think perhaps this word of God, this Savior of God, this Gospel of Jesus Christ is true after all, truer than anything else. The truth God made known in Jesus Christ, the truth about God's love is for everyone and anyone who will come. God's forgiveness is complete and total, and transforms us and others into forgiven new persons, able to look at God, and without shame or remorse, say, “My Father, my Father.” The future is eternal. I know it's a worrisome time, but the future is eternal and rests in God's hands alone, the one who made Heaven and earth, and promises a new Heaven and earth after this one passes away. In the meantime, as we are living this temporary life in these temporary bodies, as we are passing through, let us live a life that is thankful to God for the new life we have, and let us pass on the seeds of the sower of the extravagant hope of the Gospel of Jesus Christ, and let us never be drawn into hate or bitterness or lust or life without bounds, without purpose with whatever as our goal. Our goal is Christ. Our goal is abundant life here, and eternal life beyond. Amen.