

Sermon Archive 159

Sunday 23 July, 2017

Knox Church, Christchurch

Lesson: Matthew 13: 24-30

Preacher: Rev. Dr Matthew Jack



In the early 1990s, a solo mother, struggling through a law degree, drawing down a domestic purposes benefit from the Department of Social Welfare, decided to make a false declaration. She lied about the number of people in her flat helping her to pay the rent. Hiding her flatmates' contribution, she made herself look more solely responsible for the rent, and thus boosted her entitlement for an accommodation supplement. So it **was** a lie, and a financial benefit **was** derived – apparently over a period of three years.

Now that she is financially secure, many years later, she explains why she told the lie. She needed to feed her daughter. She maintains that in a far from generous system, a system which encouraged dishonesty through generating desperation, it was either “tell the lie” or “feed the child”. It was all about the hunger of the child. Sympathetic observers of her confession have found themselves quoting the all-famous moral dilemma question: is it wrong to steal bread to feed your family?

A recent Catholic online discussion (not linked to this particular iteration of the dilemma) elicited the following comments. One person said:

A starving person taking a loaf of bread from someone who is well fed is not actually stealing. The purpose of food is to satisfy bodily hunger, and if someone is truly starving then taking the bread is simply putting it to proper use. The well fed person who intentionally keeps food from someone who is starving is actually sinning. . . . Check out paragraph 2402 in the Catechism for Information on the Universal Destination of Goods. Basically, God gave Earth to all [hu]mankind, not to individuals, but private property is the typical means by which everyone is assured their due. Private property does not negate the first principle that all goods belong to humanity in general, however, and therefore property rights can't be used to keep food from the starving, or shelter from the homeless.

Along the same lines, another person quoted Basil the Great:

“The bread you store up belongs to the hungry; the cloak that lies in your chest

belongs to the naked; the gold you have hidden in the ground belongs to the poor”

Someone else objected, saying:

I disagree with this. It presumes that the well-fed person will not share. [It presumes] that the starving person has the right to simply help himself without even asking. It denies the well-fed person the opportunity to give and thus denies them the grace attendant with the performance of a charitable act.

Another commentator became impatient, saying:

*You guys are pretty funny. I wonder if you are aware that your attitude is precisely the same as communism. The food belongs to the hungry, the medication belongs to the sick, the clothes belong to the naked... and to hell with those who **worked** for it.*

One last commentator took a fairly straight shooting approach, saying:

This is complete[ly] ridiculous. It is forbidden through the ten commandments that God gave to Moses. "THE SEVENTH COMMANDMENT: You shall not steal.

That's a little representation of what some Christian people are saying about the stealing of bread.

Back here in the world of Meteria Turei and benefit fraud, most non-Green politicians are calling Meteria's lie "understandable in the circumstances, but morally wrong". They're saying that no social welfare system is ever going to work properly if lies are fed into it. The Green line has been that no lies would be fed into it if the system was working properly. When children are hungry, the system clearly isn't working.

It remains to be seen whether Work and Income will investigate Meteria's confession. Some analysts say she could owe the system \$13,000. Others put the figure at a higher \$57,000. Pretty much everyone though, noting that she's now on an annual salary of \$173,000, thinks she should pay the money back. Interestingly in a ream where people often go the second mile in their quest for the jugular, no one seems to be calling for anything more punitive - like criminal prosecution. From the other side of the house, Deputy Prime minister, Paula Bennett, another person who once lived on a benefit, said "perhaps we should pause before casting the first stone". There seems to be a tacit admission that a lot of us might wither under moral scrutiny. Perhaps we all realise, deep down, that we're all likely to have done something morally ambiguous. Mitigating motives. Extenuating circumstances. Hidden justifications. Compromise and ambiguity. Are you wheat or weed? Should

you be pulled out of the ground, or called a “lovely harvest”? Are you good? Or are you bad? It doesn’t work that simply - does it? That there is public debate about bread and children, that people can take spirited but quite diverse positions, reveals that simple moral categories aren’t always a sufficient tool. And on the edge of it all, in the shape of a question mark, the reality that doesn’t go away - children needing bread. Can you look at the children and call anything “simple”?

Looking forward to the birth of her child, whom Mary knew would be all caught up in the purposes of God, Mary sang about the scattering of the proud, the bringing down of the powerful, the sending of the rich away empty. She sang of someone battering down the empire of this world, sorting out from the very start what needs to be burned.

A little later, Mary’s now-grown child, Jesus, is saying “hang on a bit. Not so fast with the reforming zeal. Let’s not go pulling out those weeds. Let’s give them time to grow a bit, lest we harm the harvest.”

I wonder had Jesus just lived sufficiently “long and deep” among the wheat and weeds to know there is wisdom in waiting - grace in waiting. Telling a parable to a crowd who must know just as much about moral ambiguity as we know, Jesus seems to be saying “hold back on the judgment for now. For the sake of the harvest, let’s spend time, let’s wait and see”.

David Lose, a Lutheran in Philadelphia, says:

At heart, this parable isn’t about the nature of evil and provides little material for constructing a coherent [explanation of it] (if there even is such a thing). Rather, I think this parable is about ambiguity. Yes, the sower planted with good seeds. Yes, there are now weeds strewn among the wheat that puts the ideal harvest the sower had imagined at risk. Ideally, the servants could just rip out the weeds, but the sower knows that to tear out the weeds now risks ruining the maturing wheat as well (THE MATURING WHEAT). And so the sower must wait, living with both the wheat and the weeds until the day of harvest when they may be separated in due time. How often do we not also face similar dilemmas? If not with wheat and weeds, then with a multitude of difficult choices:

- *like between getting a job to support the family or staying at home to spend more time with the family;*
- *or between supporting someone who consistently struggles at work and*

pulls the quality of your team down or firing that person;

- *or between two different treatment options in responding to a grave illness;*
- *or between staying in your current call where things are comfortable [and reasonably effective] or choosing to move on to newer, but unknown, pastures;*

The thing is . . . that we don't live in an ideal world, and each week we're faced with a myriad of challenging decisions, some small and others large, to which there is no clear answer. Some decisions we'll get right, others wrong, and still others we won't know whether we were right or wrong for months or years to come.

That's what was said by David Lose in America. Home here on this side of the Pacific, we are entering a time where many politicians will say many things to us, and we'll be invited to think about right and wrong, the things we want to grow and the things we feel need ripping out. We'll be called to bring our moral sense to political issues. In the process there'll be some things that we'll have little difficulty calling "good" or "bad". There'll be other things, though, that'll be harder to evaluate - more morally ambiguous. And although that might make our garden a bit prickly and messy, maybe rising to the ambiguity will be part of our maturing - the maturing of the good wheat. Maybe part of the maturing will be acknowledging that at different times we ourselves don't know whether we're wheat or weed - or maybe some genetic-modified hybrid of both. And maybe part of the maturing will be taking grateful possession of the offer of the God who, for our sake, speaks to us through ambiguous parables, and gives grace and time that our harvest may be good.

In closing, then: is life a time given merely for the resenting of the presence of weeds? Or is life a time of grace for growing? Are weeds in our world simply for our ripping and removing? Or are they part of the landscape upon which we mature and come to harvest – as we work out how to live among them? Is morality a plain matter of quoting commandments? Or is it giving our ears and imagination to the strangeness of a parable? Things **are** ambiguous, and Jesus says "don't go so fast". He gifts us time for our maturing. Time for suspension of the judging. Time for listening, for growing and grace.

Listening and waiting, then, we keep a moment of quiet.

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