

**Good Shepherd Lutheran Church
Watertown, WI**

“Parable of the Fish Being Sorted”

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Matthew 13:47-51

I’ve never preached on this parable. I’ve always avoided it, in part because the other two parables in the lesson are so alluring. A pearl whose value exceeds all others. Buried treasure that someone finds in a field. For the preacher, “There’s gold in them there hills.”

But fish being sorted the good from the bad . . . as an image for the Last Day judgment? The good are tossed into containers, the bad and worthless are thrown away. Can you smell the scene? Some of these worthless fish are too diseased for human consumption. Others are worthless because of the Levitical rule that only fish “with fins and scales” could be eaten (Lev. 11:9-12), which means a growing pile full of eels and catfish and the like. They don’t want any of those back in the lake. So, they rot in the sun on the muddy sand until consumed by seagulls and crabs and other scavengers.

Maybe one reason I’ve never preached on this parable is because of the heavy Law within it. Jesus means it to be a strong word of warning, and it is. “So it will be at the close of the age. The angels will come out and separate the evil from the righteous and throw them into the fiery furnace. In that place there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth.”

It echoes the parable from last week, where the weeds and the wheat grow together until the harvest, and at harvest time the reapers gather the weeds first and bind them in bundles to be burned, but the wheat is gathered into the owner’s barn (Mt. 13:24ff).

It echoes Matthew 5, “You are the salt of the earth. But if the salt loses its saltiness . . . it is no longer good for anything, except to be thrown out and trampled by men” (v. 13).

It echoes Matthew 8, where Jesus says of the faith of the centurion, a Gentile, “I tell you the truth, I have not found anyone in Israel with such great faith” but then says of the “sons of the kingdom”, (that is, those whom you would expect to be saved), “many will be thrown outside, into the darkness, where there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth” (v.5ff).

Or how about Matthew 22, where those invited to the wedding banquet for the king’s son didn’t want to come. They exclude themselves. Therefore, the king sends out his servants to invite the good and the bad so the hall is filled with guests. But then, some guy tries to crash the banquet without wearing the wedding garment. Doesn’t seem like a big deal to him, but it is to the King. “Tie him hand and foot, and throw him outside, into the darkness, where there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth. For many are invited, but few are chosen.”

Clearly, these are all meant to warn us. Anyone who takes Jesus seriously must also take seriously the coming judgment. We don’t get to pick and choose our way through Scripture like we do when walking through a buffet line.

Well, into our text. A dragnet is drawn through the water between two boats. Corks keep the top side floating on the surface. Rocks weigh down the bottom side. The net is indiscriminate. It pulls in fish of every kind, edible and inedible. In the lake, the fish are undifferentiated. The good and the worthless swim together. It is only when they are pulled up for final scrutiny that they are sorted into two: some to be preserved, others destroyed.

Similarly, in the world those who belong to God and those who belong to the devil are undifferentiated. They live as neighbors. They marry each other. They are born into the same families. Some live their whole lives appearing to be one or the other, but we cannot be certain. We cannot read the hearts. God and His angels will have to do the sorting.

The Gospel is proclaimed by the church. All kinds of people are caught up in the gospel net. All kinds and conditions of men and women are swept together into its meshes. But these are sorted ultimately into two: the evil and the righteous.

In the church on earth, the evil are mixed among the righteous. They may all confess the faith and sing the hymns, but some are just mouthing words they do not believe. Some are full-blast hypocrites, naming themselves Christian while living in unrepentant sin. Some are sham Christians, mere adherents of the church. Their names are on the church roster, but their hearts belong elsewhere, to some other idol or god.

As fish are separated, the good from the bad, so also on the Last Day all humanity will be separated, the righteous from the evil. And the angels will throw the evil into the fiery furnace. Jesus asks his disciples, “Have you understood all these things?” They said to him, “Yes.” They’re not thrilled about it, nor are we. But we understand it. Mark Twain said, “It isn’t those parts of the Bible that I can’t understand that bother me. It is the parts that I understand perfectly well.” As we confess in the creed, “He will come to judge the living and the dead.”

So, what is the critical difference between the living and the dead? What separates the righteous from the evil? It is not how you vote. It is not found in your church attendance or the generosity of your charitable contributions. It is not in your behavior, being kind to all, for all have sinned and fallen short of God's holiness and perfection.

All you who are in contact with the gospel, what kind of fish are you? How will it go for you on the day of judgment? What separates the righteous from the evil? It is Jesus. The only difference between the righteous and the wicked is Jesus. It is not that Jesus finds sufficient goodness in some more than others. Instead, some have received the all-sufficient righteousness of Jesus by faith.

If you would, have a look at the front cover of the bulletin. It's a painting by a guy whose name I will not try to pronounce. First, consider those two guys straining to haul in the net. One wants to tell them, "Lift with your legs, not your back!" They are focused on the fish in the net. Their heads are down. They are intent. Perhaps they are calculating the value of the day's haul. Or maybe they are worried about the consequences if they fail. They feel the weight of the fish, the weight of the task. Perhaps they are also experiencing the weight of Jesus' call and commission, "Follow me, and I will make you fishers of men."

Sometimes in the church we can become like them, overwhelmed by the work, worrying about the meager catch of fish rather than resolving to remain faithful to the Word of the Lord.

Now look at the right side of the painting, at the fellow with the dark beard. Who is he looking at? Follow his eyes. And the guy next to him. Who is he looking at? And the next man, and the next. Follow their eyes. They're all looking at Jesus. Peter is in the lake too. He's a fish among the fish. We all are.

What separates the righteous from the evil? It is Jesus. The only difference between the righteous and evil is Jesus. When He died for you, He bore the cost of all your sin. When He baptized you, He washed you clean with His blood. He chose you, as the Old Testament lesson says, "to be his treasured possession" (Deut. 7:6). Fish don't choose. They want nothing to do with that net. We are the same way. By nature, we want nothing to do with God. "You did not choose me" Jesus said, "but I chose you" (Jn. 15:16). "You are a people holy to the Lord your God". It would be silly of us, whom God has chosen, to imagine He chose us because somehow in ourselves we were so valuable. We weren't. We're just lowly fish. Whatever value we have, we have because Jesus has chosen us to be his treasured possession.

You are the elect of God. As the Epistle lesson says, "Who shall bring any charge against God's elect? It is God who justifies. Who is to condemn?" The devil will condemn you at every turn, but His argument is with the Lord. Therefore, you are more than conquerors through Him. Not anything in all creation can separate you from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord.

It's the righteousness of Jesus that matters, not any righteousness of our own. Luther spoke bluntly about it. "Either go to hell or consider your own human righteousness to be mere dirt" (Plass, p. 1233). As Jesus asked His disciples, "Did you understand that?" Perfectly well, I think.

That guy in the parable of the wedding banquet for the King's son, the one who tried to crash the banquet? Why was the King so harsh with him? After all, he invited both the good and the bad. What could be so bad about this guy that the king ordered him to be tied hand and foot and tossed out into the darkness where there is weeping and gnashing of teeth? At the time, wedding guests were expected to wear wedding garments, which the host could provide. This fellow refused to wear that. It was freely given to him, but he thought his T-shirt and dirty jeans were good enough. This offends the host. The wedding garment that he refused signifies the righteousness of God, which covers over our sin. Isaiah 61, "He has clothed me with garments of salvation and arrayed me in a robe of righteousness (v. 10). It is only Jesus who makes the difference between the righteous and the wicked. Galatians 3, "For as many of you as were baptized into Christ have put on Christ" (v. 27). It also makes me think of John's vision of heaven with a great multitude no one could number, from every nation, tribe, peoples and languages, standing before the throne, clothed in white robes and crying out, "Salvation belongs to our God." That is, it is His doing. "Who are these, clothed in white? They are those who have washed their robes and made them white in the blood of the Lamb (Rev. 7).

We don't need to fear the Last Day. We can even look forward to it and pray for it. After all, the Judge comes here every Sunday in the divine service. He speaks His Word to you, saying, "All your sin is forgiven." He feeds you bread and wine, washing you with His blood, clothing you with His righteousness.

You might have noticed Jesus' hand on the front cover gesturing and inviting, "Follow me. Believe in me. Trust me." You might also have noticed the hole in his hand left by the nail of His crucifixion. There, the wrath of God was satisfied. There, the penalty for our sin was paid in full. There, the full extent of God's Last Day wrath was poured out on Jesus, for you and for all. Look at Jesus. He is not dead and buried. He lives. He calls. He invites and saves. And "On the Last Day He will raise me and all the dead and give eternal life to me and all believers in Christ. This is most certainly true."