

Tenth Sunday after Pentecost

DUMPSTER DIVING

Matthew 13:24-30, 36-43

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Analysis by Steven E. Albertin

24He put before them another parable: "The kingdom of heaven may be compared to someone who sowed good seed in his field; 25but while everybody was asleep, an enemy came and sowed weeds among the wheat, and then went away. 26So when the plants came up and bore grain, then the weeds appeared as well. 27And the slaves of the householder came and said to him, 'Master, did you not sow good seed in your field? Where, then, did these weeds come from?' 28He answered, 'An enemy has done this.' The slaves said to him, 'Then do you want us to go and gather them?' 29But he replied, 'No; for in gathering the weeds you would uproot the wheat along with them. 30Let both of them grow together until the harvest; and at harvest time I will tell the reapers, Collect the weeds first and bind them in bundles to be burned, but gather the wheat into my barn.'"

36Then he left the crowds and went into the house. And his disciples approached him, saying, "Explain to us the parable of the weeds of the field." 37He answered, "The one who sows the good seed is the Son of Man; 38the field is the world, and the good seed are the children of the kingdom; the weeds are the children of the evil one, 39and the enemy who sowed them is the devil; the harvest is the end of the age, and the reapers are angels. 40Just as the weeds are collected and burned up with fire, so will it be at the end of the age. 41The Son of Man will send his angels, and they will collect out of his kingdom all

causes of sin and all evildoers, 42and they will throw them into the furnace of fire, where there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth. 43Then the righteous will shine like the sun in the kingdom of their Father. Let anyone with ears listen!

Author's Note: This analysis was prompted by a recent event that happened in our church parking lot. My congregation is in the midst of a major building renovation and expansion project. There is construction rubble and debris everywhere. And, of course, there is the ever-present dumpster, without which no construction site would be complete. One recent Sunday morning in the midst of the Sunday morning hustle and bustle I was shocked to observe a pickup truck stop at the dumpster. Out jumped three young men who suddenly climbed into the dumpster searching for who knows what. I may have thought that dumpster was filled only with waste. But they believed that in the midst of that mess was something of great value. I was shocked by their audacity and daring. It made them oblivious to the crowd of gathered worshipers who were standing there with me gawking at their boldness. Suddenly one would pop up and toss what looked like a piece of junk into the back of the pickup truck. A look of joy was on his face. It was as if he had discovered a buried treasure! One of my members came up to me and said, 'Pastor, haven't you ever seen dumpster divers before? Every weekend every construction site in the city is visited by these dumpster divers who somehow are able to find some pretty valuable stuff in the midst of the all that construction waste.'

Dumpster divers? There could be no better way to describe the way Jesus speaks of the kingdom of heaven in today's Gospel. When Jesus speaks of the kingdom of heaven, he is speaking of himself and how he can transform our lives into daring searches for the treasure that the rest of this world only considers so much trash.

DIAGNOSIS: Dumped

Step 1: Initial Diagnosis (External Problem) : *Scrounging*

Like those dumpster divers, we spend our lives SCROUNGING for something of value only to continually come up empty. We never can find the buried treasure or lay our hands on the priceless pearls. Our lives are filled with tiny mustard seeds that never seem to amount to anything. The yeast we thought would raise the dough only flops. We fish for the “big one” but only get a net full of sea sludge. You can add to this list your own unfulfilled dreams and frustrated hopes. We scrounge, search and hunt but the prize remains elusive and hidden. Our lives remain unfulfilled. Our hearts are forever restless, searching, scrounging for that one thing that will make this all worthwhile.

Step 2: Advanced Diagnosis (Internal Problem) : *Cynical*

And so we become hardened and CYNICAL. Why bother to search for treasure or priceless pearls? We give up on the tiny mustard seeds, convinced they are too small to amount to anything. To heck with fishing! Who needs a net full of sea sludge! Why bother to make wheat into bread? Just go buy a loaf at the store. And so when we see those dumpster divers rummaging through the construction trash, we cynically ridicule their naivete. They must be crazy to think there is anything of value in there. So we flee the blighted cities and run to the suburbs to build our successful churches. We won't waste our time evangelizing those who don't have the pocketbooks to support our religious enterprises. We scoff at the ordinariness of our churches and the ordinary people with their tattered and soiled lives sitting in the pews. Why can't they be the committed disciples they ought to be? We will only invest ourselves in those causes and ventures in which there is a bottom line to

measure, where a goal can be met and success can be assured.

A treasure buried in the field? A mustard seed that can grow into a great tree? A bit of yeast that can transform a huge amount of flour into dozens of loaves of bread? Priceless pearls in the midst of this congregation of cheap imitations? A Big One swimming out there in this algae infested and polluted sea of sludge? Forgiveness of sins in a sip of wine and a piece of bread? A promise to trust in a world where everyone is out for themselves? A God who is gracious and merciful, slow to anger and abounding in steadfast love when the evening news is filled with one brutal and vicious story of human folly after another? A God who is good when the love of your life is slowly being eaten up with cancer?

No wonder we are cynical and without faith. The world is one big dumpster filled with trash. It is beyond us why anyone would foolishly believe that it is worth diving into a mess like this. There is nothing here worth getting yourself dirty for. There is nothing worth believing in other than playing it safe and keeping ourselves clean.

We have convinced ourselves that our cynicism is not a distortion of life but the ultimate reality. We prefer to stand safely inside our churches as those foolish dumpster divers waste their time looking for treasure in a sea of trash. We know better!

Step 3: Final Diagnosis (Eternal Problem) : Dumped

Do we really know better? The truth is our cynicism is deadly. Finally 'at the end of the age' (or when we breath our last, whichever comes first and it doesn't matter ultimately) God will 'separate the evil from the righteous and throw them into the furnace of fire, where there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth' (v. 42). God does not look kindly on such arrogance and

pride. Surprisingly it is precisely in hiddenness that God chooses to work. Contrary to our distorted and faithless assumptions, God is in fact partial to the weak, the lowly, and the little ones of this world. God has a heart for dumpsters and the trash that fills them.

But in our cynicism and unbelief, we don't believe such foolishness, so we turn our backs on the hidden treasure, the pearl of great price, the explosive power of leaven, the tiny mustard seed and the "big one" lurking in the sludge. God doesn't make such mistakes. God knows trash when God sees it and won't make the same mistake we did. God knows how to find the good ones and throw out the bad. The evil will be separated from the righteous and trashed, discarded and DUMPED 'into the furnace of fire, where there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth.'

That is not good news for us who are cynical and faithless. We thought we knew better but, in fact, we are the ones who were blind and foolish. We deserve to be dumped. In fact the dumping has already begun. The weeping and gnashing of teeth that afflicts so much of our lives are signs that God may already be handing us over to the furnace of fire. No one is left unburned. No one I know has ever been able to escape the cemetery.

PROGNOSIS: Discovered

Step 4: Initial Prognosis (Eternal Solution) : *Divine Dumpster Diving*

But God is not content to just dump us. God is unafraid to look like a fool; so God dives into the dumpster of this world to search us out and rescue us from the garbage and the fate that garbage deserves. The life, death, and resurrection of Jesus is nothing other than DIVINE DUMPSTER DIVING, than God jumping head long into the trash of this world not in some flashy or glamorous way but as a babe born in Bethlehem, as the son of an

ordinary carpenter, as a rabbi wandering the countryside, as a friend of other trashy types. Jesus is the mustard seed, the yeast, the treasure hidden in the field, the pearl of great price, the little bit of yeast, the “big one” hidden in the sea sludge of ordinary humanity. But unlike all of those whose value, though hidden, was ultimately coveted, Jesus’ value was justly rejected, hated, despised and disposed of, for daring to dive into the dumpster with such worthless trash—with sinners like us.

But this was God’s amazing and gracious exchange. Diving into the dumpster was none other than the only begotten Son of God who mercifully traded God’s righteous life for our trashy death. Miraculously we become what Jesus was. Even though we may not look like much, we become the mustard seed, the yeast, the treasure hidden in the field, the pearl of great price, the powerful yeast, the “big one” who didn’t get away.

Step 5: Advance Prognosis (Internal Solution) : *Discovered*

Because of this Divine Dumpster Diver, we have been DISCOVERED. We may have thought we were insignificant seeds, forgotten and ignored leaven, treasure lost and buried in a field, a pearl regarded as only cheap costume jewelry, and only so much sea sludge, but Jesus dives in to discover us. And when this Divine Diver emerges from the trash on ‘the third day,’ we trust that we are in his hands. Our self-understanding is transformed. Our faith receives the benefits of being discovered by this amazingly gracious Dumpster Diver. Our cynicism is transformed into faith, into a new understanding and appreciation of God, of ourselves, and the world.

God’s love can indeed be counted on. No longer cynical and bitter, we believe what had been impossible: that we are indeed worthy, the apple of God’s eye, forgiven saints, princes and princesses in the Kingdom of Heaven. God is our Papa and we are

God's kids.

Though small we are seed that can grow into a mighty tree. Though insignificant, we are yeast that transforms the flour around us. Though hidden, we are treasure in the eyes of God. Though hidden deep beneath the sea, we are a pearl of great price, fit for precious jewelry. Though mixed in with the sea sludge, we are a delectable culinary delight.

Step 6: Final Prognosis (External Solution) : *Treasuring The Trash*

And the world is no longer a gigantic dumpster filled with trash. We have a whole new outlook on life in the world. Because of our faith, we have 'been trained for the kingdom of heaven . . . like the master of a household who brings out of his treasure what is new and what is old.' We see the world differently. We delight in TREASURING THE TRASH and caring for the little ones. We can open and read the Scriptures in new ways able to discern God's gracious kingdom at work all over its pages. Passages that may previously have seemed worthless, like so much trash, are now unlocked by the promises of God. Scripture is able to propel the Kingdom of Heaven into our midst in new ways that previously had been unknown to us. We do not turn our backs on the world. Now we are able to re-prioritize our lives, selling all that we have, letting go in order to take hold of the treasure and the pearl of the kingdom and the new life the kingdom makes possible. We might seem like tiny mustard seed, but because of the kingdom we believe that we can make a huge difference in this world. We trust that we can grow into a mighty tree and provide protection and shelter for the little ones of this world. Our numbers might be few, but we are what leavens the world. Though seemingly small in number and tiny in significance, we can multiply our influence (like yeast in flour) far beyond our small numbers and feed the world. We can be patient with others, slow to pass judgment, able to put the

best construction on everything, knowing that in the end God will keep his promises, the good will be separated from the bad. We will be saved from the 'furnace of fire' and spared the outer darkness with its weeping and gnashing of teeth. With that kind of freedom, faith, and downright daring, we too become dumpster divers, jumping headlong, deep into the world, recognizing the treasure in trash because of, and in the name of, Jesus!