

SOUTH GEORGIA ADVOCATE – JULY 18 EDITION

Special Olympian sails away with bronze in Berlin

By Kathy L. Gilbert

James Thigpen, representing the U.S., sailed into Special Olympics history, winning a bronze medal at the 2023 World Games in Berlin.

Thigpen lives at [Wesley Glen Ministries](#), a residential community serving adults with intellectual and developmental disabilities, in Macon, Georgia. It is a ministry of the [South Georgia Conference](#) of The United Methodist Church.

His sailing partner is Phil Martin, volunteer director of the Sailing Center at Lake Tobesofkee. He and Thigpen have been sailing partners for more than 20 years.

Martin sailed with Thigpen as a [Unified partner](#). Unified partners are participants without intellectual disabilities who have trained with an athlete as a team for a long time.

Approximately 7,000 Special Olympic athletes from 190 countries competed in 26 sports during the June 17-25 [Special Olympics World Games 2023](#).

Thigpen and Martin were one of only two teams from the U.S. selected to compete in sailing at the Berlin games. The other U.S. team was from Texas.

In an interview with United Methodist News, Thigpen and Martin talked about their adventures at the World event.

“I am proud of myself for getting third place,” Thigpen said. Martin is quick to remind him, “That’s third place in the world, James.”

Thigpen proudly recited a phrase used at the 2023 Berlin Special Olympics: “Let me win, but if I cannot win, let me be brave in the attempt.”

Thigpen, 42, started working with Martin when he was 14 years old. The pair sail every Saturday.

“James gets very excited when the boat goes fast,” Martin said. “He is very focused, and he lets me know if he thinks I am not letting the boat go faster. We have been sailing so long together we understand what needs to happen.”

The U.S. delegation to Germany included 160 athletes and 30 support staff.

The competition is similar to a car race, Martin explained. The first boat around the course wins. The boats must maneuver around a series of buoys both into and against the wind.

The boat in which the pair sailed at the games was very different from the one they use at home, Martin said. “It was twitchy,” he said.

“It was fun,” Thigpen said. “We flipped the boat over.”

Laughing, Martin said, “We got right back in and kept sailing. We weren’t the only ones who flipped over.” Martin said he and Thigpen took every opportunity to explore Berlin. “We averaged about 20,000 steps a day,” he said.

James loved meeting people from other countries, Martin said, and he made many friends.

James was especially excited to meet Tim Shriver.

Shriver is the son of the late Eunice Kennedy Shriver, who started the Special Olympics in 1968. He is president and CEO of the Special Olympics International.

Another highlight was a dinner for all the U.S. athletes, hosted by the U.S. Embassy.

“It turned into a great impromptu dance party,” Martin said.

Stacy Starr, a Special Olympics coach who traveled with Thigpen, said it was an amazing experience.

“Families were given credentials that provided free transportation all around the city and free entrance to many palaces, churches and exhibits,” she said. “The German people were so kind.”

Thigpen has lived at Wesley Glen Ministries for 17 years. He said he loves it because “it is a Christian home.”

“At Wesley Glen Ministries, James is a faith leader among his peers,” said LuAnn Osteen, director of residential services. “Each resident found comfort in knowing he felt their prayers from his home in Macon, Georgia, all the way to Berlin, Germany.”

Cameron Bishop, president and CEO of Wesley Glen Ministries, said James “is a shining example of how each of us is gifted with God-given talents and abilities, that when cultivated, can lead us to achieve far more than imagined.”

Kelly Roberson, assistant to Bishop David Graves and director of ministries/communications for the South Georgia Conference, said Wesley Glen Ministries is a “ray of sunshine” in the conference.

“God is working in and among the staff and residents each and every day, and it is exciting to see.

“We are so proud of James and every resident of Wesley Glen for the contributions they are making in their community and for the ways they shine the light of Christ.”

One of James’ housemates, Andy, told everyone he could about James going to Germany, said Charleen Brice, direct support professional at Wesley Glen Ministries.

Macon Mayor Lester Miller visited Wesley Glen Ministries while James was traveling. On July 18, Miller will issue a proclamation for James in honor of his winning a Special Olympics World Games bronze medal in sailing.

Andy told him, “The man you came to see is not here. James is in Germany!”

“James is our star,” Brice said. “He truly made us proud.”

Gilbert is a freelance writer for United Methodist News Service in Nashville, Tennessee.

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Conference disaster response team encourages preparation

The South Georgia Conference is no stranger to storms.

And folks throughout the Conference – not just those on the coast – need to be aware and should always be prepared for what may lie ahead.

The 2023 Atlantic hurricane season runs from June 1 through November 30 and is predicted to have “near-normal” hurricane activity, according to the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration (NOAA).

NOAA is forecasting a range of 12 to 17 total named storms (winds of 39 mph or higher). Of those, 5 to 9 could become hurricanes (winds of 74 mph or higher), including 1 to 4 major hurricanes (category 3, 4 or 5; with winds of 111 mph or higher).

Whether this season is average or above, being prepared for storms – no matter if they’re hurricanes, tornadoes, or wind and rain events – helps protect people and properties when disasters do strike.

Conference Disaster Response Team

When a need arises, Luis Morales, Conference Disaster Response Coordinator, wants South Georgia United Methodists ready to respond.

Both Morales and the conference’s [three district disaster response coordinators](#) are actively engaged in training, preparing, and responding.

“Our district coordinators are working with people in their districts trying to get them in an awareness mode, always prepared for the season,” he said.

As part of the conference reorganization, two districts are now paired under one superintendent. Our district disaster response coordinators will also align themselves under the same construct: Coastal and Northeast Districts - Kelly Crane, North Central and South Central Districts - Susan Hughes, and Northwest and Southwest Districts - Glenn Martin.

Prepare now

How do individuals and congregations best prepare?

Prepare now so you don’t panic later, Morales said.

“Prepare for the worst and pray for the best,” he said. “If you’re prepared in advance you won’t panic when you’re closer to a calamity like a hurricane or tornado.”

Morales recommends everyone check their preparedness via the [American Red Cross](#)’ online tutorial or the Federal Emergency Management Agency’s checklist.

Here are a few basic preparedness tips from [www.ready.gov](#), the official website of the Department of Homeland Security:

- Have an evacuation plan in place and know where to go if you need to evacuate
- Have a disaster supply kit ready, including flashlights, batteries, cash, first-aid supplies, and copies of important documents
- Plan for adequate supplies if you do not evacuate
- Have an emergency communication plan in place
- Sign up for your county’s emergency alert notification system, if applicable

Respond when needed

Being trained as an early responder is a great way to be prepared when a need arises, Morales said.

South Georgia United Methodists are being certified and recertified so they can be ready to serve when a disaster strikes. Through the ERT training, volunteers can be trained and badged in the Basic Early Response Training or choose advanced courses to acquire new skills. Training in chainsaw operation is also available.

Although churches have disaffiliated from the conference, Morales says that all UMCOR credentials remain valid.

“The reason people took the ERT class - because of their willingness to help our neighbors in a time of need - remains there,” Morales said. “The disaster team needs all credentialed persons with a passion and skill for this work so that we can accomplish the work of disaster response in South Georgia and beyond.”

According to Morales, UMCOR only requires ERTs to be Christians and bring the Christian presence to survivors during a chaotic and stressful period of their lives. Regardless of church affiliation and as long as credentials are current, individuals can be a part of an early response team.

The disaster response team is asking anyone who has already been trained in early response to complete a quick 2-minute [survey](#). This survey will help the team map out their current capabilities as the team moves forward.

The Conference is also connected to local and state agencies to more effectively render aid and resources when needed.

“We are members of the state VOAD (Voluntary Organizations Active in Disaster). We partner with them and have a network of state agencies, private agencies, and nonprofits that come to bear when something happens,” Morales said.

For more information about the work of the disaster response team and how you can be involved, contact Luis Morales at ert@sgaumc.com.



Georgia United Methodist Foundation names new board chair and vice chair

The Georgia United Methodist Foundation announces the election of a new chair and vice chair to lead the Foundation’s Board of Trustees. Ruth A. Knox was named Chair of the Georgia United Methodist Foundation Board of Trustees, and Rev. Doreen Smalls was named Vice Chair of the Board.

Knox, who works with the Hall-Knox Foundation and is a retired president of Wesleyan College in Macon, Ga., began her two-year term on July 1, 2023. Knox served as a member of the Foundation’s Board of

Trustees from 2011 – 2017, and she returned to the Board in 2018. She succeeds Kathryn Dennis, president of the Community Foundation of Central Georgia, who will now serve as Immediate Past Chair.

“It has been an honor to serve as the Chair of the Foundation’s Board of Trustees for these two years,” says Dennis. “Ruth Knox is the perfect person to succeed me as Chair. Her decades of experience as an attorney, a leader in higher education, and her deep commitment to the church and the larger community will further elevate the work of the Board of Trustees and the Foundation in the coming years.”

Dennis also shared that she is equally pleased with the election of Rev. Smalls as Vice Chair of the Board. Rev. Smalls is a pastor in the South Georgia Annual Conference, currently serving on the Bishop’s Cabinet as District Superintendent of the Northwest and Southwest Districts.

“The Georgia United Methodist Foundation is delighted in the election of Rev. Doreen Smalls as Vice Chair of the board,” said Dr. Rick Lanford, Regional Vice President for the Georgia United Methodist Foundation. “Rev. Smalls is an amazing and extremely gifted clergy member of South Georgia. She is known and trusted for her leadership within our Annual Conference. We are delighted that she is not only on our board but will serve as our Vice Chair.”

Both the Chair and Vice Chair of the Board of Trustees are elected from among the current Trustees of the Foundation. As Chair, Knox will give general supervision and direction to the affairs of the Foundation. Additionally, she will preside over all meetings of the Board of Trustees and of the Executive Committee of the Board of Trustees.

In other news, the Foundation welcomed Calvin Stamps, owner of Atlanta-based Bretwood Capital Partners, as a returning member to the Board of Trustees and extended a grateful goodbye to David A. Duke, who completed his terms of service.

“David has provided faithful leadership for the Foundation over many years, serving as Chair of the Board of Trustees and in various leadership roles, most recently as Immediate Past Chair and Chair of the Foundation’s Finance and Audit Committee,” said Russell H. Jones, Foundation Senior Vice president, CFO, and Treasurer. “I have worked with David closely over many years and appreciate his commitment to the church and the Foundation. The Foundation will remember his service as a member of the Board of Trustees with gratitude for years to come.”

To learn more about the Foundation’s Board of Trustees, [click here](#).



Canaan Community UMC in Savannah hosts fish fry

Living out Proverbs 11:25, “A generous person will prosper; whoever refreshes others will be refreshed,” Canaan Community United Methodist Men hosted a community-wide appreciation event with a free Fish Fry on their church grounds in Savannah, Ga. It was a day full of fun, food, and fellowship. Those gathered feasted on fresh, hot fried fish, well-seasoned to the taste. Held Father’s Day weekend on Saturday, June 17, 2023, from 11am – 3pm in the church parking lot, over one-hundred people were fed on that day. The community and members expressed their overflow of love, joy, and appreciation for the community fellowship. The United Methodist Men are looking forward to hosting another community-wide event in the Fall where all are welcome and all are invited to fellowship and break bread.



2023 prayer emphasis: July prayer guide & upcoming book studies

July Prayer Guide

The South Georgia Conference is centering itself around prayer in 2023. July's prayer guide, written by Kelly Roberson, Jay Harris and Anne Bosarge, is now available at www.sgaumc.org/year-of-prayer.

Next Book Study – August 21

In addition to the prayer guides, book studies centered on prayer and hosted by Connectional Ministries, will expand our minds, challenge our hearts and encourage our prayer walks. [Click here for a synopsis and links to register for these fruit-filled conversations.](#)

Book Three: “From Burned Out to Beloved” by Bethany Dearborn Hiser

Book talk hosted by Grace Guyton on Monday, Aug. 21, noon-1pm

Book Four: “Dynamite Prayer” by Rosario Picardo and Sue Nilson Kibbey

Book talk hosted by the author, Rosario Picardo, on Monday, Nov. 27, noon-1pm



7-part video resource for local churches: discerning your mission and values

Is your local church starting something new and needing to solidify the foundation of your ministry or congregation before you get started?

Has your local church experienced mission drift and find you are in need of a way to get your leadership team refocused and back on mission?

If your local church finds itself in either of these places, the Office of Connectional Ministries has developed a 7-part video series to guide you through the process of determining your mission statement and values and aligning your church for maximum effectiveness. [Click here to learn more.](#)



July 23 Lesson: Weeds Among the Wheat

Summer Quarter 2023: The Righteous Reign of God

Unit 2: Jesus Envisions the Kingdom

Sunday School Lesson for the week of July 23, 2023

By Jay Harris

Lesson Scripture: Matthew 13:24-30, 36-43

Key Verse:

“Let 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.” (Matthew 13:30)

Lesson Aims

- To be introduced to all the dynamics going on in the parable of the wheat and the weeds
- To consider the wisdom that the planter uses in waiting until the harvest to deal with the weeds
- To learn of Jesus' use of the term "Son of Man" in his teachings
- To ponder life in the world in which the children of the kingdom share the field with evil influences
- To explore the question of why evil exists in the world God has made
- To describe the age in which we live, the war against the devil, and Christ's victory at the harvest
- To think about the judgment, our call to faithfulness, and the role of grace in our response
- To understand what we are to do (witness) and not do (judge) until the harvest
- To lean into our mandate to witness in a winsome and non-judgmental way
- To envision the righteous shining like the sun in the kingdom of the Father

Introduction

We are continuing our study of the righteous reign of God, which we began exploring through the eyes of the prophets. Then, we began viewing the kingdom of God through the lens of Jesus in Matthew's gospel.

In the previous lesson we began looking at the collection of teachings that are found in the 13th chapter of Matthew. This collection features parables, which are known for their power to evoke feelings and imaginative thinking and move people to action. These parables help the listener imagine the kingdom of heaven and the ways the reign of God might show up in daily living. Parables help us do this because the images in them are taken from daily life. A common feature of daily life in biblical times was the agrarian life that surrounded everyone and fed everyone. Everyone could relate to these images.

We learned from the Parable of the Sower last week of the special affinity between the action of seeds and the way God's word is implanted in people's lives and the way it bears fruit. Today's parable, in some ways, continues this theme, but it also adds very important themes.

The Parable with an Enemy

In the parable we are studying in this lesson, Jesus brings in an element of drama. There is an enemy in the story.

²⁴ He put before them another parable: "The kingdom of heaven may be compared to someone who sowed good seed in his field, ²⁵ but while everybody was asleep an enemy came and sowed weeds among the wheat and then went away.

The enemy in the parable has an evil purpose, which is to sow weeds in the planter's field of wheat. The enemy did this while everyone was asleep. The enemy sneaked into the field and did his evil deed without anyone knowing. He would therefore avoid detection and get away with his crime. Because seeds take a while to sprout up, the planter would find out what evil had been done to him only when it was too late to do anything to prevent the harm being done.

²⁶ So when the plants came up and bore grain, then the weeds appeared as well. ²⁷ And 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?' ²⁸ He answered, 'An enemy has done this.' The slaves said to him, 'Then do you want us to go and gather them?'

It was only later, after the good wheat and the weeds grew and appeared together, that the work of the enemy was discovered. The workers asked a question to which they already knew the answer: "Did you not plant good seed in your field?" They would naturally wonder how the weeds came to inhabit the field. The planter

knew it was an enemy that had done this. Everyone would realize that this enemy had been cunning, sneaky, and mean and had gotten away with his crime. Everything about it smacked of evil.

In comparing this parable to the Parable of the Sower, how does the introduction of an enemy in the parable change the way you feel as you explore its meaning? To what are you paying closer attention?

The Wisdom of the Planter in Dealing with the Enemy's Work

The workers wanted to do something. Their first instinct was to go out into the field and gather the weeds. They knew however to ask the planter.

²⁹ But he replied, 'No, for in gathering the weeds you would uproot the wheat along with them. ³⁰ Let 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.'

The planter told the workers not to pull up the weeds while the plants were growing. He did not want the good wheat to be uprooted when the weeds, roots and all, were pulled out of the ground. The root systems of both the wheat and the weeds would be intertwined with one another. Only when the wheat plants had produced their harvest would it be okay to uproot the weeds. The weeds would be gathered first and bundled to be burned. Then the good wheat could be harvested and gathered into the barn to be threshed and collected for consumption. The planter knew how to make the best of the situation created by this enemy. The wheat harvest would be saved. When the story ends, the enemy is still at large.

Stories involving planting and harvesting naturally divide up into stages. You never harvest in the same season that you plant. There is the planting and growing season, and then the harvest season. You work and wait during the planting and growing season. God does his work during the growing season. Then, you hope for a good harvest and lots of work to do bring it all into the barn and eventually end up on the table.

There is still the matter of the enemy. One of the great Christmas classics is the movie, "It's a Wonderful Life" by Frank Capra, starring Jimmy Stewart as George Bailey. The movie ends very happily. Uncle Billy and George's wife, Mary, are able to rally all of George's friends to raise the money that went missing. More than that, George learned that he really did make a difference to a lot of people. What does not get resolved is the fact that the evil Henry Potter did not reveal that he secretly pocketed the money that Uncle Billy thought he had lost. The movie made history because the movie ended without bringing the bad guy to justice, which was unprecedented.

Jesus' audience would probably note that the enemy in the story does not get brought to justice and is still at large. The audience would be left with a lot to ponder. Even without the explanation that follows, it is clearly a story of good and evil. Metaphors abound in the story to fire the imagination. People would be pondering how to apply to their lives the wisdom of waiting until the harvest to act.

What are situations you can think of where the better part of wisdom is to wait? What positive things happen in this time of waiting? What is being avoided by not rushing into action?

Jesus' Explains the Parable and the World in which Christians Live

Like the Parable of the Sower, we get to hear an explanation that the rest of the crowd did not get to hear.

³⁶ Then 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."

In the last lesson, we learned that there would be people in the crowd who did not need the explanation to understand the parable. The message in the parable was accessible to them. Likewise, there were those in the crowd that, even if they heard the explanation, would not get it because they were not receptive to the message of the kingdom of heaven. They would leave confused. Parables worked this way by design.

The fact that the disciples got to hear the explanation does not set them above the crowd, nor does it set them below the crowd. The good thing is that we get to hear the explanation.

³⁷ Jesus answered, “The one who sows the good seed is the Son of Man;

The one who sows the good seed is the Son of Man. Who is the Son of Man? Let’s look at Jesus’ use of the title, Son of Man. Son of Man is a messianic title. The prophet Ezekiel was fond of populating his visions with a character addressed as “Son of Man” or “Mortal One” as a mediator between God and the people. Son of Man is a representative of the divine, but one who shares our characteristics enough to represent humanity before the divine.

Let’s ponder why Jesus did not simply say, “I am the one who sows the good seed,” or “God is the one who sows the good seed.” The answer is that in the gospels of Matthew, Mark, and Luke, Jesus did not go about openly saying that he was the Messiah. This is referred to as the Messianic secret. Jesus allows, and even prefers, that others call him Son of David or the Christ rather than referring to himself this way. Jesus wanted people to come to this conclusion through the Holy Spirit. Jesus reveals his true identity in all of its fullness only near the end of the story in the gospels.

The Son of Man sows the good seed. The sowing of the good seed is the work of God through God’s chosen mediator to bring about the kingdom of heaven, the reign of God.

³⁸ the field is the world, and the good seed are the children of the kingdom; the weeds are the children of the evil one,

The seed in the Parable of the Sower (Matthew 13:1-9; 18-23) is the word of the kingdom of heaven, the message about God’s reign. In this parable, the metaphor of the seed encompasses the people who are receiving this word and living by it. They are called children of the kingdom. They are the people living according to the reign of God.

The weeds are the children of the evil one. They are the products of the seed of the enemy. They are living a life that could be called “anti-kingdom.” They are the ones who are working against the children of the kingdom.

Jesus gave us a lot to ponder when he said that the field is the world. The wheat and the weeds share the open field together. The children of the kingdom do not live in stone fortresses or ivory towers. They share life in the world with the children of the evil one in the same way that the wheat and the weeds share the open field.

What does it mean to you that children of the kingdom do not live in stone fortresses or ivory towers? In what ways do you experience the children of the kingdom and children of the evil one coexisting together in the world, as if sharing an open field? What dangers do you envision? What about opportunities?

Why Evil Exists in the World God Made

We are told that the enemy in the parable, who sowed the seeds of weeds among the wheat, is the devil.

³⁹ and the enemy who sowed them is the devil; the harvest is the end of the age, and the reapers are angels.

What Jesus is doing in this parable is describing life for his followers in the world. There is recognition that life is not easy for those who are called to live according to the reign of God. There is an answer for why life is difficult for those who are working and praying for God's kingdom to come on earth as it is in heaven. There is an evil force loose in the world that is actively seeking to undo what God is doing.

From ancient times, God's people have wondered why evil exists in the world God has made. What this continuing theological conversation explores is referred to as "theodicy." Theo-" means "God" and "-dicy" means "just." Theodicy asks the question, "If God is good, and God made the world, why does evil exist in the world?" Theodicy is the attempt to justify the ways of God toward humankind, particularly with the existence of evil in mind.

In the parable, the devil is the cause of evil, but it should be remembered that the devil is not equal to God. In scripture and in Judeo-Christian tradition, the devil is a fallen angel, who because of his pride and jealousy against God, rebelled against God, leading away other rebellious angels. You could say that evil is bigger than the devil because the same tendencies that lead to sin in us led the devil at one point.

Why does evil exist and persist in the world? The answer is because God allows free will. God allows free will because God wants our response toward him in love to be of our own free will and not forced or coerced or programmed into us. Giving humans and angels free will allows the space and opportunity to choose independence from God and even rebellion against God over a loving relationship with God.

Since the devil is not God, his power is not unlimited. Humans have the power to resist the devil and resist sin. Sin diminishes our lives in two ways. One way is when we give into sin and sin rules our lives. Another way sin affects us is when others have sinned against us. People can also become victims of sinful systems. This is why being children of the kingdom means answering the call to work toward the liberation of people from sin, oppression, and exploitation.

What do you think of the free will that humans are given? What does free will say about the love you offer to God? Would you agree that free will is a risky proposition? How would you advance the argument that the risk that God takes is a risk worth taking?

The Current Age in Which We Live and the Coming Harvest

When Jesus says that the harvest is the end of the age, Jesus is calling attention to the present age in which we live. We should remember that this present age is the age of the Son and the Holy Spirit and the Church. We live between the first and second coming of Christ. We live in the age whose ultimate destiny is determined by the finished work of Jesus Christ on the cross, his victory through the resurrection, and his ascension to the throne of heaven. We live in the age of the Church empowered and led by the Holy Spirit who was sent by the Father and the Son at Pentecost.

There is a vision in the 12th chapter of the Book of Revelation that describes what the devil is up to in this age and what his limits are. According to this allegory, the devil has been dealt a mortal wound through the sacrificial death and victorious resurrection and ascension of Jesus Christ. It says,

*"Now have come the salvation and the power
and the kingdom of our God
and the authority of his Messiah,*

*for the accuser of our brothers and sisters has been thrown down,
who accuses them day and night before our God.
But they have conquered him by the blood of the Lamb
and by the word of their testimony,
for they did not cling to life even in the face of death.
Rejoice then, you heavens
and those who dwell in them!
But woe to the earth and the sea,
for the devil has come down to you
with great wrath
because he knows that his time is short!”...
Then the dragon was angry with the woman [the Church]
and went off to wage war on the rest of her children,
those who keep the commandments of God and hold the testimony of Jesus.”*
(Revelation 12:10-12, 17)

Notice the strong affirmation of the kingdom of our God and the authority of his Messiah. In this vision, the devil's fate has been sealed. It is just a matter of time before the devil is ultimately defeated, but until then he will try to inflict as much damage as possible and turn hearts toward himself and away from the righteous reign of God.

In this present age, between the coming of Christ 2,000 years ago and the harvest at the end of the age, Christians must live as wheat that must share the open field with the weeds planted by the devil. We should be encouraged by the fact that we are the seeds planted by the Son of Man. As seeds, we are full of promise and potential. The call under which we live is to remain faithful. This call guides our conduct.

Have you ever thought about the mortal wound dealt to the devil by Christ's victory over sin and death on the cross? What does this say to you about the devil's limitations and the devil's motivation in this limited window of time?

The Judgment at the End of the Age

We know from the parable that the weeds are to be gathered by the reapers and burned, while the good wheat is to be gathered into the barn. Jesus had more to add in his explanation of the parable.

⁴⁰ Just as the weeds are collected and burned up with fire, so will it be at the end of the age. ⁴¹ The Son of Man will send his angels, and they will collect out of his kingdom all causes of sin and all evildoers, ⁴² and they will throw them into the furnace of fire, where there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth.

Jesus is referring to the judgment at the end of the age. The angels will collect all causes of sin and all evildoers and throw it all into the furnace of fire. In a previous lesson in this study on the reign of God, we saw a reference in Zephaniah to the heat of God's anger and the fire of God's passion. In Zephaniah 3:8, God says, *“Therefore wait for me, says the LORD, for the day when I arise as a witness. For my decision is to gather nations, to assemble kingdoms, to pour out upon them my indignation, all the heat of my anger, for in the fire of my passion all the earth shall be consumed.”*

We saw in that lesson that the goal of God's judgment was not annihilation, but to make the way for a fresh start: *“At that time, I will change the speech of the peoples to a pure speech, that all of them may call on the name of the LORD and serve him with one accord.”* (Zeph. 3:9) When God says, “at that time,” God is

referring to the time when the fire of God's righteous anger has burned up all except for that which is pure and enduring.

The description of this type of divine action is echoed in the New Testament, in the Letter to the Hebrews. Beginning in Hebrews 12:26, we are reminded that once more at the end of time, God will shake not only the earth but also the heaven: *"This phrase, 'Yet once more,' indicates the removal of what is shaken—that is, created things—so that what cannot be shaken may remain. Therefore, since we are receiving a kingdom that cannot be shaken, let us show gratitude, by which we may offer to God an acceptable worship with reverence and awe, for indeed our God is a consuming fire."* (Hebrews 12:27-29)

There are multiple illustrations in scripture that describe the same thing. In some places, the image is wheat that has been threshed on the threshing floor, then sifted so that the good grain remains in the sieve, but the chaff falls through and is swept up and burned. In other places, it is the unfruitful parts of the tree that are pruned so that the tree bears more fruit and the pruned branches are burned. In other places, it is the impurities in the ore that are burned away while retaining the pure silver. It is all about what remains after God does his purging and purifying work—what God calls "the fire of my passion." (Zephaniah 3:8)

It is the remnant which is preserved. Zephaniah describes the faithful remnant: *"For, I will leave in the midst of you a people humble and lowly. They shall seek refuge in the name of the LORD—the remnant of Israel; they shall do no wrong and utter no lies, nor shall a deceitful tongue be found in their mouths. Then they will pasture and lie down, and no one shall make them afraid."* (Zeph. 3:12-13)

This was the turning point of Zephaniah's message. After all the purging has gone on, what can remain is a totally transformed people with whole-hearted devotion, unified in their service to the Lord, humble, authentic, and resting in God's grace and protection. This was God's goal all along in allowing events to unfold which try and test God's people.

The faithful remnant does not consist of those who were merely spared, but it consists of those who have gone through a process of refinement. In the Book of Revelation, the faithful remnant consists of two groups of people. One group consist of those who remain on earth after catastrophic devastation who turn to the Lord and grow in their faith. Another group of the holy remnant consists of those who are in heaven—perfected through persecution, death, and resurrection. We're given a picture of this holy remnant in heaven, dressed in white robes as a sign of victory over the evil one: because *"they have conquered him by the blood of the Lamb and by the word of their testimony, for they did not cling to life even in the face of death."* (Revelation 12:11)

The furnace of fire is not a picture of judgment to be greeted by Christians with glee or smug satisfaction. It represents the place of profound regret where there is weeping and the gnashing of teeth associated with mourning and deep anguish. These words of Jesus represent a call to action and a call to faithfulness until the faithful are revealed at the end of the age.

As you think about this call to faithfulness, to what are you paying attention? We seek to choose life under the reign and rule of God over evil, but what about all the times we are going to get it wrong? Where do confession, grace, repentance, and forgiveness fit in?

What Christians Are to Do and Not Do Leading to the Harvest

We should remember in Jesus' parable who is responsible for the judgment and who is not. The reaping of the harvest is something God will accomplish through his angels. The children of the kingdom are not responsible for the harvest. There is more than a subtle hint here about the what the children of the kingdom

are not to take into their own hands. The children of the kingdom are meant to stay in their lane, so to speak, and not get in the angels' lane, when it comes to the harvest and the judgment at the end of the age.

This is the point the parable was making before Jesus started explaining what the parts of the parable mean. Remember when the workers discovered the weeds growing up among the good wheat plants. That's when they discovered the enemy's evil deed. Their first instinct was to do something. They wanted to go out into the field and gather the weeds. At this point in the growth of the crops, they were able to detect the weeds scattered among the good wheat plants, but the mature wheat kernels had not yet appeared on the stalks of wheat. They wanted to go out and pull the weeds, but before they moved into action they knew to ask the planter.

It is a good thing they did ask, because the planter knew better. The planter told the workers not to pull up the weeds while the plants were growing. He did not want the good wheat to be uprooted when the weeds, roots and all, were pulled out of the ground. The root systems of both the wheat and the weeds would be intertwined with one another. Only when the wheat plants had produced their harvest would it be okay to uproot the weeds. The weeds would be gathered first. Whatever mature wheat was uprooted at this point could be set aside with the rest of the good wheat. The weeds would be separated and bundled to be burned. Then the good wheat could be harvested and gathered into the barn to be threshed and collected for consumption. The planter knew how to make the best of the situation created by this enemy. The wheat harvest would be saved.

In Jesus' explanation of the parable, the angels will know how to collect all causes of sin and evildoers. Furthermore, they will wait until the end of the age when it is appropriate to judge. This frees us up to obey Jesus' all-important teaching in the Sermon on the Mount.

“Do not judge, so that you may not be judged. For the judgment you give will be the judgment you get, and the measure you give will be the measure you get. Why do you see the speck in your neighbor's eye but do not notice the log in your own eye? Or how can you say to your neighbor, ‘Let me take the speck out of your eye,’ while the log is in your own eye? You hypocrite, first take the log out of your own eye, and then you will see clearly to take the speck out of your neighbor's eye.”
(Matthew 7:1-5)

We are not equipped to take into our hands the matters which are reserved for the angels. Think of the Crusades. Consider the Inquisition. Remember the Salem witch trials. These were horrifying instances where Christians tried to take matters into their hands and do exactly what Jesus said not to do. They tried to uproot the ones they deemed were evil and extinguish them. These actions were committed in the name of Christ, but they did not represent Christ—far from it!

What do you see happening when Christians take matters into their hands and judge other people? How do Christians get it wrong and misrepresent Christ and the Church? How does this affect the Church's reputation and witness and take the Church off-mission?

The Opportunity and Mandate to Witness to Our Faith

There is another reason to wait for what the angels will do at the end of the age. In the Second Letter of Peter, there is a word helping to explain the delay of the Lord's return. It says, *“The Lord is not slow about his promise, as some think of slowness, but is patient with you, not wanting any to perish but all to come to repentance.”* In other words, the Lord is not finished with his work in converting souls. In bears repeating: the Lord does not want any to perish, but all to come to repentance.

The Lord invites us to join him in this work of winning souls to Christ. It has not been determined what or who the weeds are. Since the Lord does not want any to perish, we should see everyone as someone who *needs* to know Jesus and as someone who *could* come to know Jesus given the right opportunity. Our witness should be as winsome as possible. Letting the angels sort it all out at the end of the age, gives us the opportunity to get in our lane of influence and stay in that lane.

I hear too many Christians and too many churches engaged in the business of judging people instead of the business of witnessing to people. They are trying to sort out who the weeds are before it is time to do that. The people they should be trying to reach are being turned off from the church. The people who are earnestly trying to witness to the people who need Jesus are having a more difficult time of it. The ones who are witnessing to the love of Jesus are being hampered by mixed messages being put out by other Christians. The target audience is confused to say the least. People who should be representing Jesus and his desire to save people are misrepresenting Christ and the Church. If there has ever been a time for the church to hear the parable of the wheat and the weeds it is now.

43 Then the righteous will shine like the sun in the kingdom of their Father. Let anyone with ears listen!

This is the vision moment in the parable. A mature field of wheat, which is ready for harvest, literally shines in the sunlight. We are to imagine the righteous shining like the sun in the kingdom of their Father. This vision should operate in our minds in a way that compels us to work with the Lord in cultivating the good wheat. The enemy would love nothing better than for us to get distracted and spend our time in doing work that uproots the good wheat along with the weeds.

Let anyone with eyes see this vision. Let anyone with ears listen to this parable.

How easy is it for the Church to wall itself off from the world? What are you doing in your church to extend the witness of Christ into your community? How do you witness to people with a winsome spirit and from a non-judgmental stance? What part does our willingness to form relationships with non-Christians play in this work?

Prayer

Gracious God, Your Son Jesus taught the Church how to relate with people in the world. Teach us how to align our lives with Your reign and also reach out to those who have yet to know Christ, so that the righteous will shine like the sun in Your kingdom, through Christ our Lord, who reigns with You and the Holy Spirit, one God, now and forever, Amen.

Dr. Jay Harris serves as the Superintendent of Clergy and District Services for the South Georgia Conference. Email him at jharris@sgaumc.com. Find his plot-driven guide to reading the Bible, the "Layered Bible Journey," at www.layeredbiblejourney.com.



July 30 Lesson: Finding and Gathering

**Summer Quarter 2023: The Righteous Reign of God
Unit 2: Jesus Envisions the Kingdom**

**Sunday School Lesson for the week of July 30, 2023
By Jay Harris**

Lesson Scripture: Matthew 13:31-35, 44-52 (*adding verses 31-35 to the lesson*)

Key Verse:

“And he said to them, “Therefore every scribe who has become a disciple in the kingdom of heaven is like the master of a household who brings out of his treasure what is new and what is old.” (Matthew 13:52)

Lesson Aims

- To introduce the six parables that we are including in this lesson:
 - The parable of the mustard seed
 - The parable of the yeast in the dough
 - The parable of the treasure hidden in a field
 - The parable of the pearl of great price
 - The parable of the dragnet
 - The parable of the manager who brings out of his treasure what is new and old
- To explore how the kingdom starts out small and grows big
- To contemplate the hidden dimensions and dynamics of the kingdom
- To consider the supreme value of the kingdom and what it is worth in terms of our commitment
- To learn to navigate among the competing options presented to us by the kingdom and the world
- To reflect on what it means to be discipled as a scribe of the kingdom of heaven
- To discover Jesus’ pattern of taking what is new and old from the treasure of God’s word

Introducing the Six Parables of this Lesson

The Summer Quarter’s theme that we have been studying is the Righteous Reign of God. This is one of the grand themes of the Bible that comes up again and again throughout scripture. The concept of the reign of God is developed as we see God’s interactions with his people unfold throughout history.

In the first unit, we examined the reign of God through the messages of the prophets. In the second unit, we have been exploring the kingdom of heaven through Jesus’ teachings in Matthew’s gospel. More specifically, over the last two previous lessons, we have been studying the collection of teachings found in the 13th chapter of Matthew. These teachings are typically referred to as the Parables of the Kingdom. Today’s lesson rounds out our study of the parables in this chapter.

We are adding verses 31-35 to the lesson, because they fit too well with the rest of the verses to leave them on the cutting room floor. This means that we will be studying six parables of the kingdom in this lesson. Each one helps us develop a fuller understanding of how the reign of God breaks into our world.

You will notice that these parables are short but impactful. They are intended to provoke imaginative thinking and imaginative living, which are required to live according to the reign of God. Five of the six parables do not come with an explanation. Most of the parables found elsewhere in the gospels do not come with explanations.

The Parable of the Sower and the Parable of the Wheat and the Weeds that we studied in the last two lessons are more unique because they did come with explanations by Jesus. These parables naturally benefit from explanations because they are allegories. Various parts of these parables stand for something else.

Most parables found in the gospels are not allegories. Only one of the six parables in this lesson is an allegory. Parables which are not allegories typically make one point and the point is usually not spelled out.

The listener is called upon to decide what the point is. This is how the parable fires the imagination. They tease the mind into active thinking. They stay with us as we decide how to live them out.

God's Kingdom Starts Out in Small Ways and Grows Big

Each parable that we will be studying starts out, "The kingdom is like..." Each one stands alone, but when added to the others, spurs the imagination even more.

³¹ He put before them another parable: "The kingdom of heaven is like a mustard seed that someone took and sowed in his field; ³² it is the smallest of all the seeds, but when it has grown it is the greatest of shrubs and becomes a tree, so that the birds of the air come and make nests in its branches."

A seed is small compared to what it becomes when the seed germinates, sprouts, appears above the ground, and grows to maturity. What we normally think of as a mustard plant is not a tree. There is, however, a plant known as *Salvadora persica*, which is called a toothbrush tree and also called mustard tree because of the smell of its bark and the wood beneath. These are found in Africa, India, and the Middle East. It is not only the size of the tree that is mentioned in the parable, but also the life it supports. Birds are able to come and make their nests in the tree.

The point of this parable is that God's reign often breaks into our world in small ways, but the impact of these actions grows incredibly large.

The Hidden Way the Reign of God Often Works Before We See its Effects

The reign of God not only starts out small, there is often much that occurs beneath the surface at first that we do not see.

³³ He told them another parable: "The kingdom of heaven is like yeast that a woman took and mixed in with three measures of flour until all of it was leavened."

In numerous versions of the Bible, instead of saying "mixed," it says, "hid." "Hid" is the better translation. The woman in the parable hid the yeast in the flour.

My family got into the bread making craze years ago when we got one of those bread makers which automates the process from the mixing, to the rising, to the baking of the bread. What was most amazing to me was dumping that little yeast packet into the mix, and realizing the surprising reaction caused by that tiny amount of yeast in the dough. There is something hidden and even mysterious about the way the yeast works.

The woman in the parable hid the yeast in three measures of flour, which is about ten gallons of flour. When this much flour is made into bread, it feeds from 100 to 150 people. So, the picture created by this parable is one of amazing, surprising extravagance.

It just so happens that this was the amount of flour that Sarah made into cakes in Genesis 18. Abraham and Sarah served these with a whole calf that had been prepared and cooked for the three mysterious strangers that came their way one day. We learn that these strangers were in fact angels masquerading as strangers. The amount of food Abraham and Sarah that prepared was a part of the extravagant hospitality they were offering their guests, which in turn made them worthy recipients of the equally extravagant blessing and promise bestowed to them by the angels.

Whether it is a seed, yeast in dough, or the life of the kingdom, it is the transformation occurring secretly beneath the surface that will eventually cause us to be surprised when the transformation breaks the surface and reveals itself to our delight.

What Matthew says in the next two verses carries the theme of hiddenness further as he describes Jesus' habit of using parables to teach.

³⁴ Jesus told the crowds all these things in parables; without a parable he told them nothing. ³⁵ This was to fulfill what had been spoken through the prophet:

**“I will open my mouth to speak in parables;
I will proclaim what has been hidden since the foundation.”**

Two lessons ago, we talked about how the teachings that were conveyed in parables were more accessible to some people, but not all. The illustrations were drawn from everyday life. The uneducated could understand. They had characters and a plot so that you can see yourself in them and be drawn into the action. The details draw you in because of their vividness and sometimes their strangeness. They are indirect. You don't feel you are being “preached-to.” This kind of indirect communication causes listeners to let their guard down. Parables are open-ended. You sometimes don't know the precise application so that it teases your brain into active thought. It begins in our familiar world, but presents a different vision of the world. It challenges our everyday lives and perspectives and values.

But what Jesus said in Matthew 13:10-17 tells us that not everyone was meant to know the secrets of the kingdom. Jesus also meant for parables to be inaccessible to those who were not receptive to the word of the kingdom of heaven. Jesus quoted Isaiah where it talks about a people who will make a pretense of listening but never understand, whose hearts have grown dull and somewhere along the way stopped truly listening to God.

Jesus told parables so that people would leave their guard down and receive the message of the kingdom, but some people keep their guard up all the time or raise their guard as soon as they hear something that might upset the status quo or make a demand upon their lives.

Being able to understand the parables the way Jesus intended for them to be heard requires a whole-hearted response. Jesus wants us to understand the kingdom of heaven on his terms, not ours. Jesus said to the group gathered around him, “*But blessed are your eyes, for they see, and your ears, for they hear.*” (Matthew 13:16) Jesus spoke of the unprecedented opportunity they had, because they were giving up everything to follow him and were therefore receptive to what he was teaching. Jesus used parables to proclaim deep truths concerning the reign of God that had been hidden since the foundation of the world.

God's Kingdom Is Worth Giving All We Have and All We Are

You will notice that the next two parables continue the themes we have discussed thus far, but they also add another important element.

⁴⁴ “The kingdom of heaven is like treasure hidden in a field, which a man found and reburied; then in his joy he goes and sells all that he has and buys that field.

⁴⁵ “Again, the kingdom of heaven is like a merchant in search of fine pearls; ⁴⁶ on finding one pearl of great value, he went and sold all that he had and bought it.

The treasure compared to the open field is small. The pearl in comparison to the oyster shell, among thousands of shells found beneath surface of the water, is also small.

The treasure is something hidden beneath ground in a field. The pearl is something hidden inside a rather unattractive, encrusted shell. To find these hidden treasures is a big deal.

Yet, both the treasure and the pearl hold great value. They are worth the long search. Those who found the item of great value could not simply take what they had found because it did not belong to them. Only after the field was purchased could the one who found the treasure take possession of it. Only after the pearl was purchased from the owner of the business could the merchant take possession of the pearl. In both the case of the treasure and the pearl, those who came to own them had to sell everything they had in order to purchase their find. All that a person has earned over their lifetime, all that represents a person's accumulated worth over their lifetime, is given in exchange for the treasure of great worth.

Experiencing life in the reign of God is worth our total commitment. It is worth going "all-in." It is a good thing that it is worth it, because a life lived under the reign of God also *requires* our total commitment.

What does it mean to say that the reign of God starts out small but adds up to an impact all out of proportion to its humble beginnings? In what ways does the kingdom of heaven operate secretly beneath the surface of things at times, but then emerges into plain view in surprising ways? How do people invest their lives into the reign of God and discover their investment to be exceedingly worthwhile?

Somewhere along the first half of my ministry, there was a vision statement that took hold of me. This vision statement belonged to the connection of United Methodist churches, clergy, laity, and ministries covering South Georgia to which I belong. This was the statement:

“God envisions faithful, fruitful, and bold congregations and ministries passionately growing mature disciples of Jesus Christ who are living vessels of the Holy Spirit’s desire and miraculous power to redeem every soul and circumstance.”

I remember when hundreds of us were gathered at an event to offer input into this vision process. I recall when a group took that input and prayerfully put together the above vision statement. I can still see in my mind's eye one of the leaders of this effort, the late Dr. Brad Brady, who helped guide that group in crafting this statement, and then helped communicate this vision so passionately to the people of the South Georgia Conference. It took hold of me then as a pastor in such a way that I still think about it.

There is so much to unpack from this vision. This vision continues to help me see the impact of individuals in whom the seed of the Word has found fertile ground. Through these seeds of the kingdom, ordinary people grow into mature disciples of Jesus Christ who are passionately living out their faith. To be transformed into a mature, passionate Christ-follower is no small accomplishment.

Disciples of Jesus, through God's grace, become no less than living vessels of the Holy Spirit. As vessels they carry within themselves two manifestations of the Holy Spirit. These manifestations flow from their lives to impact the lives of others. One of these manifestations of the Holy Spirit is the Spirit's desire to redeem every soul and circumstance. The Holy Spirit's desire becomes our own desire to be part of God's redemptive work in the world that reaches and transforms souls and the real circumstances of people. What a beautiful picture this is of the reign of God breaking into our world! The greater our maturity in the Word, the greater the Holy Spirit's desire is in us. Have you ever witnessed the contagious quality of the Holy Spirit's desire spreading from believer to believer?

It is not only the Holy Spirit's desire in us that makes an impact on the world around us. There is also the Holy Spirit's miraculous power working through this desire. If there is ever a setting where we should believe in the miraculous power of God, it is in the arena of God's work in redeeming souls and

circumstances and bringing about God's kingdom on earth. God's plan has been to use ordinary men and women, who have become mature disciples of Christ, to be the vessels of this miraculous power.

By miraculous power, we mean churches given up for dead coming back to life because one or more fired-up believers began to pray and get a vision. They started pouring all of who they were into reaching, caring, serving, and witnessing to their faith in the community outside the walls of their church. Miraculous power is at work in birthing new communities of faith where none existed before. Miraculous power is involved in people tackling the seemingly intractable problems that diminish life for marginal communities and bringing people real relief and hope. Miraculous power is involved in tearing down walls of division and bringing healing and reconciliation. Miraculous power is involved in bringing people to Christ. This power is also evident in the redemption of souls and the healing that people receive from their past hurts, habits, and hang-ups. The list goes on.

What other instances can think of where souls and circumstances are changed through the miraculous power of God? How have you seen people become the living vessels of the Holy Spirit's desire to bring the reign of God on earth?

I see a connection between the nature of this transformative work and the life within a mustard seed, yeast working secretly in the dough, the search for treasure and pearls, and the selling of all one has to obtain these priceless treasures.

What other connections do you see as you reflect on the four parables we have studied this far?

Learning to Navigate Between the Values of the Kingdom and the World

The next parable is called the parable of the dragnet. You will notice it is similar to the parable of the wheat and the weeds that we studied last week.

⁴⁷ “Again, the kingdom of heaven is like a net that was thrown into the sea and caught fish of every kind; ⁴⁸ when it was full, they drew it ashore, sat down, and put the good into baskets but threw out the bad. ⁴⁹ So it will be at the end of the age. The angels will come out and separate the evil from the righteous ⁵⁰ and throw them into the furnace of fire, where there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth.

A dragnet is a large fishing net that takes a group of persons handling it to drag the net through the water to catch fish. The nature of dragnets is that you catch all assortment of fish and various creatures that live in the water. There is nothing to do about it except to sort through what is caught. Christians do not live in ivory towers or stone fortresses. We live life in a world with good and bad influences.

I once heard this saying: “We are drowning in a sea of information, but thirsting for truth.” Amen!

God will send his angels to sort through the good and the bad at the end of the age, but until then we must navigate through this world with the Word guiding us and directing our values.

How do you believe scripture helps us navigate through the world and all of its influences?

Being Discipled as a Scribe of the Kingdom of Heaven

The next verses signal the end of this collection of teachings on the parables. They contain one final parable.

⁵¹ “Have you understood all this?” They answered, “Yes.” ⁵² And he said to them, “Therefore every scribe who has become a disciple in the kingdom of heaven is like the master of a household who brings out of his treasure what is new and what is old.”

In this parable, there is a double analogy being made. Jesus is saying that a disciple of his is like a scribe who has become a disciple of the kingdom of heaven. Scribes in the Jewish tradition received special training from a rabbi to be students, interpreters, and teachers of the law, God’s word. Remember that Jesus was called “rabbi” or “teacher” because people saw Jesus’ adopting this pattern in the way he selected and called twelve disciples to follow him. Jesus’ disciples were different, however, for two reasons: 1) Jesus’ disciples were not the normal sort chosen by rabbis of the time, and 2) every disciple of Jesus was being specially trained or disciplined in the ways of the kingdom of heaven. I love this analogy where Jesus compares his disciples to a scribe that has been disciplined in the ways of his kingdom.

The analogy does not end here, however. Jesus said that every scribe who is being disciplined for the kingdom of heaven is like a household manager who has at his disposal a vast inventory of treasure, and he or she brings from that treasure both what is new and what is old. The inventory of treasure for any scribe would be the law—God’s word. The “new” and “old” part is what makes this parable particularly stimulating.

Jesus, himself, throughout his ministry, took from the treasure of the Hebrew scripture (Old Testament) that which is new and that which is old. Again and again, we see Jesus giving new and fresh interpretations to the ancient wisdom found in scripture. Yet, when we see the interpretation he gives, we wonder if Jesus’ interpretation is not closer and truer to what was intended by the scripture.

Like all faithful interpreters of scripture, Jesus used scripture to apply to other scriptures as he went about interpreting them. We know, for instance, that Jesus believed the whole law could be summed up in the commands to love the Lord our God with all our heart, soul, might, and mind, and to love our neighbors as ourselves. We can definitely see evidence that Jesus used this scripture to interpret other parts of scripture.

A great example of Jesus’ pattern of interpreting scripture can be found in the fifth chapter of Matthew. If you will remember, this chapter is the first of three chapters devoted to the Sermon on the Mount. In Matthew 5, he sets out on the wildly ambitious task of giving a fresh interpretation to God’s commands. He does not do this to be pedantic, or controversial, or professorial. Jesus was laying the foundation for people to be disciplined in the ways of the kingdom of heaven.

Jesus made sure his followers understood that he did not intend to abolish the Law or the Prophets, but rather to fulfill them (vs. 17). He said that unless their righteousness exceeds that of the scribes and Pharisees, they will never enter the kingdom of heaven (vs. 20). His audience would immediately begin to wonder how they would be able to exceed the righteousness of their religious leaders. Then, they would hear the masterful way Jesus began to interpret God’s commands.

We see this unfold according to the following pattern: “You have heard it said...but I say to you.” In each instance, we hear Jesus take from God’s commands and make a new life application from the ancient wisdom of the scriptures. In each case, Jesus shows his followers how to exceed the righteousness of the scribes and the Pharisees.

Jesus took the command against murder and applied it to the soul-killing ways we insult one another and treat one another in anger (vs. 21-26). Jesus commanded his disciples to take the responsibility to seek reconciliation. Jesus was raising the bar on the commandment against murder.

Jesus took the command against adultery and applied to the way men objectify women in the lust of their hearts (vs. 27-30). Jesus raised the bar and said that someone who looks with lust upon another human being has already committed adultery in his heart.

Jesus attacked the practice where members of the religious establishment justified men divorcing their wives without cause by twisting the law of Moses to suit their own ends (vs. 31-32). Jesus said that this was wrong because of the way it left women destitute in society. Jesus closed the loophole where men could casually discard their wives. (You can find a longer, more complete discussion that Jesus has about this matter in Matthew 19:3-9.)

Jesus attacked elaborate practices of oath-taking that were developed by, again, twisting the law of Moses. People used these corruptions of the Mosaic law to justify evading the truth and breaking their promises. Jesus said just let your “yes be yes” and your “no be no.” (Verses 33-37)

Jesus took the law, “an eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth,” and raised the bar (vs. 38-42). The original law was good in that it limited vengeance. The courts did not take the law literally but used it set up a system of paying compensatory damages that were proportional to the damage or loss experienced by the victim. Jesus, however, raised the bar again. He talked about disciples turning the other cheek when someone struck them in the face. When a Roman soldier pressed a disciple of Jesus into service to carry a load for a mile, that person was challenged to go a second mile. Jesus was not calling his followers to be doormats, but to exercise their initiative and blow the minds of their oppressor by showing an unexpected kindness in the face of oppression.

In the last example in this chapter, we see plainly what Jesus has been arguing for throughout the chapter. Jesus took the command to love one’s neighbors and expanded it to include loving one’s enemies (vs. 43-48). Everyone can love their neighbor, but to love one’s enemies is a surefire way to become salt and light in the culture so that a person’s good works can be seen and result in giving glory to the Father (vs. 13-16). Throughout Matthew 5, Jesus has been arguing for a relational, love ethic to be applied to the interpretation and application of God’s laws.

What we see in Matthew 5 is a perfect example of Jesus taking what is new and what is old by reinterpreting the law of Moses in the light of his relational take on the law. You could even argue whether Jesus’ interpretation was new or if Jesus was simply getting down to what should have been understood to be the heart of the law all along. Jesus’ interpretation was new compared to the way the scribes and Pharisees had been interpreting things. This is why Jesus’ audiences were astounded with the authority with which Jesus taught.

Jesus also offered fresh takes on what it means to be clean and what it means to keep the sabbath. Through Jesus’ interpretation of scripture, he sought to remove the social and religious stigma that was unfairly projected onto people with physical defects and disease. He also fought against rules related to sabbath keeping that seemed to miss the point or unfairly penalized those who had to work to eke out a living. In the sixth chapter of Matthew, also a part of the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus tried to take the emphasis off of *looking* holy and put the emphasis instead on *being* holy and humble, out from public view. Jesus’ relational take on scripture comes out in the way Jesus taught.

It was also clear that Jesus was not lowering the bar for his disciples, but instead he was raising the bar. When the disciples of Jesus lived out his teachings, it resulted in the righteousness of his disciples exceeding that of the scribes and the Pharisees.

Jesus’ way of interpreting scripture brings out the transformative nature of scripture. The word becomes like a seed when planted in the fertile soil of a Christ-follower who seeking to be a scribe disciplined for the

kingdom of heaven. The word is like the yeast hidden in the dough transforming the dough and expanding its size and impact. Such a reading of scripture calls for a whole-hearted response to the word and calls forth the investment of one's whole life in fulfilling scripture and bringing out the treasure found in it.

As you have encountered this lesson, how are you putting all of these parables together? What importance would you give to a disciple's formation? Would you agree with the saying that the Church is suffering from Biblical illiteracy? What do you think we should do about this? How is God calling you to make a difference?

Prayer

Gracious God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, You sent your Son to teach an amazing new way of reading and applying scripture to life for the sake of the kingdom of heaven. Challenge us to become more active students of the Bible, that we may be disciplined to promote the righteous reign of God through our words and deeds, through Christ our Lord, who reigns with You and the Holy Spirit, one God, now and forever, Amen.

Dr. Jay Harris serves as the Superintendent of Clergy and District Services for the South Georgia Conference. Email him at jharris@sgaumc.com. Find his plot-driven guide to reading the Bible, the "Layered Bible Journey," at www.layeredbiblejourney.com.



Does Praying for Others Really Do Any Good?

By Hal Brady

On a visit to one of the saints of the church, a minister suggested that they might conclude their time together by praying for her recovery. Now in the hospital, the lady had lived a rather full life-at least three score and ten. The quality of her life, however, had diminished considerably. Actually, she possessed little reason or will to continue. So, with immediate and total honesty, the saintly woman replied, "You can pray if you want, but I doubt if it will do any good."

I wonder how many people this woman is speaking for. I'm talking about people both outside and inside the church. We have prayed for others, and our prayers have seemingly gone unanswered. The late Helmet Thielicke, the renowned German theologian and preacher, empathized with us. He said, "All along the highway of our lives are there not countless grave markers of unanswered prayers." So often that's the way we have felt about our prayers for others.

On the other hand, there's the apostle Paul! Paul has gone through some kind of terrible experience in Ephesus and has been miraculously delivered. And without doubt, he believes that his deliverance has been an answer to prayer. Thus, it is that Paul asked for the continuing prayers of the Corinthians. He says to them, "You must also help us by prayer, so that many will give thanks on our behalf for the blessing granted us in answer to many prayers" (II Corinthians 1:11). Our subject is intercessory prayer, and like a number of Old Testament characters (Abraham, Moses, Samuel, etc.), Jesus, and Paul, I believe in it.

First, intercessory prayer does something good for the ones who pray! Many times, we feel so helpless - that loved one is beyond our reach, somebody is desperately ill, some situation seems hopeless - but we can always pray. Not only is prayer for others our privilege and our duty, but, at times, it is our own salvation. When we pray for others, something happened in us. We simply cannot authentically pray for others without being constrained to act in their behalf. As we sincerely hold others before God, family members, friends and

even enemies, sooner rather than later, we will be moved to ask, “Lord, what would you have me do! How would you have me become the answer to this prayer? Do I need to make an apology or extend a kindness or make a phone call or write a letter or refuse to give up or what?”

Second, intercessory prayer does something good for the ones prayed for! When the great reformer, Martin Luther, felt particularly strong and happy, he would exclaim, “I feel as if I were being prayed for.” To know that you are being prayed for is a heartening experience. While criticism tends to push us down, to know that there is someone praying for us is a source of sustaining strength. As a minister, I have always found it humbling and strengthening to know I am being prayed for. And it helps every one of us to know that. But what about those who don’t know they are being prayed for? The late William Temple, former Archbishop of Canterbury, helps us here. He says, “When I pray for my friends, coincidences happen to them. When I cease to pray, the coincidences cease.” Perhaps that’s all that needs to be said here.

Third, intercessory prayer does something good in that we cooperate with God! In praying on behalf of others, we are only cooperating with God, entering into partnership with God’s purposes. Lloyd Ogilvie, former chaplain of the United States Senate, stated, “Intercessory prayer is God putting his burdens on our hearts.” So, in praying for others, we are also proving to God that we are also concerned about others and submitting our prayers for purification and correction. Even more than that, in our prayer for others we are actually joining with the Eternal Intercessor in our intercession.

I’ll conclude with some helpful words from Dietrich Bonhoeffer concerning intercessory prayer, “To pray for others is to give them ‘the same right we have received, namely, to stand before Christ and share in his mercy.’”

Dr. Hal Brady is a retired pastor who continues to present the Good News of Jesus Christ and offer encouragement in a fresh and vital way through Hal Brady Ministries (halbradyministries.com)



Conference Updates

Annual Eagles Retreat set for Oct. 16-18

The Eagles, the retired ministers and spouses of South Georgia, have set their annual retreat for October 16-18, 2023, at Epworth By The Sea on St. Simons. This year’s program and presentations will focus on World War II. Participants will hear interesting and informative presentations about the beginning and the end of the war in the Pacific from a guest speaker traveling from Orlando, FL. Registration and room check-in begins on Monday, October 16 at 4:00 pm. Dinner will be served between 5:30-7:00 pm. The retreat will conclude on Wednesday, October 18 with lunch. Register by calling Epworth at (912) 638-8688 (ask to speak to Trice Roberts). Invite a friend or family member to come with you for this retreat for good food, fellowship, and fun. If you have questions, please contact David Tart at 229-300-8805 or revdtart@bellsouth.net.

Renfro Grant Applications now being accepted

Connectional Ministries is accepting applications for the Southeastern Jurisdiction Renfro Trust Grant. This grant is a brick-and-mortar grant specifically for small, rural churches. Guidelines, [requirements, and applications can be found here](#). Completed applications must be submitted to Rev. Garth Duke-Barton, Conference Secretary for Global Ministries (revgarth0810@gmail.com) by our conference deadline: Monday, August 21, 2023. (Note: application will say August 1)



Conference Happenings

2023 Lay Servant Ministries & Certified Lay Ministry

Check out the [dates & registration for the 2023 classes](#).

Reset Cohorts - 2023-2024

Do you remember how church used to be? Do you talk about going back to the way things were before the pandemic? Or do your “good old days” go even further back than that? Maybe you’d rather go back to what church was like 40 years ago when you regularly added new members and your Wednesday night dinners were the talk of the town. It’s good to remember what was, but only if that reflection leads you toward resetting your energy and resources toward your mission. The Office of Connectional Ministries is gearing up for year 2 of its "Reset Cohort." In this 7-month cohort, clergy and laity will spend time refocusing on the mission to which we’ve been called, “Making disciples of Jesus Christ for the transformation of the world.” If you’re longing for more than a return to the “good old days” and are ready to reset your church for missional engagement, Gospel energy, and a passion for people, this cohort is for you! [Learn more and register](#)

Lay Planter’s Training - Fall 2023

Here in South Georgia, we are seizing the opportunity to start new things for new people in new places. We are seeing a resurgence of grassroots efforts among our laity to dive deeply into disciple-making using new models for church planting like home churches, fresh expressions and more. Can you imagine what it will be like in a few years when laity across the conference will be engaged in leading discipleship efforts across the conference? These discipleship groups and home churches will be able to meet in all kinds of places, made up of all kinds of people. Coming up on July 22, we will have an informational zoom session to find out more about an online Lay Planter’s Course we will be offering this Fall to interested laity. Coming to the meeting doesn’t commit you to the course; it’s an opportunity to hear more about it. [Learn more](#)



Resource Roundup – July 2023

Grants available for ethnic churches

The deadline is Sept. 10 for local ethnic United Methodist churches to apply for grants of up to \$10,000. Racial Ethnic Local Church Concerns grants may be used for leadership training, small groups, worship, stewardship and spiritual formation. New programs will be given priority in the selection process. [Read press release](#)

4 Ways to Live Out Discipleship in Everyday Life

While a retreat can be a beautiful time to reset our spiritual practices and give us space to hear the word of God with clarity, the rhythms of daily life are where we are called to live as disciples. Here are four small ways to help notice God’s presence as you go about daily life as a disciple in your work and with kids, neighbors, and friends. [Read more](#)

Toolkit for cross-racial/cross-cultural ministry available

(GCORR) The work of cross-racial/cross-cultural ministry requires one to juggle a variety of mindsets, heart sets and skill sets. The United Methodist Commission on Religion and Race has developed a variety of resources to empower, prepare and equip ministry leaders across diverse ministry contexts to do their best work. [Download resource](#)

Disciple Bible Study goes digital

Since its launch in 1987, Disciple Bible Study has drawn more than 3 million participants. Now, with the new BeADisciple Study App, people can complete daily readings on their digital devices and attend weekly meetings from anywhere in the world. Beta testing of the app will begin Aug. 1. [Read story](#)

Discover your spiritual gifts!

Spiritual gifts are qualities given to Christian believers for the building up of the whole body of Christ. Learning about the spiritual gifts we have, as well as helping our congregation learn about their gifts, can be useful when we pair it with opportunities to engage our community. [Click here to discover your spiritual gift and how to use it in your ministry setting!](#)

Church and Society accepting applications for 2023 grant funding cycle

The General Board of Church and Society (GBCS) awards grants to United Methodist congregations and groups related three categories:

1. Ethnic Local Church Grants focus on the self-identified needs of ethnic local churches and persons as they address one or more chronic social issues or concerns.
2. Human Relations Day Grants support advocacy and community engagement aimed at uplifting the right of all God's children to realize their potential in right relationship with one another.
3. Peace with Justice Grants support programs and projects that witness to God's demands for a faithful, just, disarmed, and secure world.

[Click here to learn more and apply online.](#) The deadline to apply is July 24, 2023. Questions? Contact: grants@umcjustice.org.

Critical steps to protect church and family on the web

In today's digital age, it's more important than ever to protect your church and family from online threats. That's why we've put together a list of 8 DIY security hacks that you can use to keep your loved ones safe. [Read more](#)

United Methodist Publishing House Resources for the South Georgia Conference!

Whether there are faithful people in the South Georgia Conference who are beginning again, continuing their journey after a season of disorientation, grief, and loss, or just want to strengthen their commitment to our tradition, Amplify Media (a streaming resource from Cokesbury) is offering free resources for you and all continuing United Methodists at <https://amplifymedia.com/amplify-your-commitment-to-beumc/>.



Retired Clergy Birthdays – July 2023

- 7/01 – **Donald Wood:** 157 Arlington Row; Macon, GA 31210
- 7/01 – **Kenneth West:** 4183 GA Hwy 93; Pelham, GA 31779
- 7/02 – **Hugh Davis:** 102 Mossland Dr.; Perry, GA 31069-9213
- 7/03 – **Carl McDonald:** 315 N. Wheeler Ave.; Douglas, GA 31533
- 7/04 – **Glenn Martin:** 4418 Saddle Ridge Dr.; Columbus, GA 31907
- 7/08 – **Earl Bishop:** 143 Beale Court Dr.; Blairsville, GA 30512
- 7/08 – **Larry Rader:** 971 Willian Henry Cowart Rd.; Cobbtown, GA 30420
- 7/08 – **Donald Scott Brenton:** 1945 US Highway 280; Claxton, GA 30417
- 7/09 – **Marshall Singletary:** 200 White Blossom Trail; Thomasville, GA 31757
- 7/10 – **Betty Lou Miller:** 485 Tylerstone Dr.; Fuquay-Varina, NC 27526

7/10 – **Rickey Rushing**: 17575 SE 106 Terrace; Summerfield, FL 34491
7/11 – **Thom Davies**: 1 Seventh Street #1004; Augusta, GA 30901
7/12 – **Eric Sizemore**: PO Box 472; Rochelle, GA 31079
7/14 – **Loran Smith**: 121 Hidden Creek Circle; Lizella, GA 31052
7/14 – **Ronnie Wills**: 81 Gatlin Bluff; Thomasville, GA 31757
7/16 – **Roland Fall**: 321 Lake Joy Rd.; Perry, GA 31069
7/18 – **Ray Bittner**: 130 Ford St.; Poulan, GA 31781
7/18 – **Sonny Mason**: 2218 Glendale Rd.; Augusta, GA 30904
7/19 – **Sam Rogers, III**: 5300 Zebulon Road, #15; Macon, GA 31210
7/20 – **Man Lee**: 18 Mannering Dr.; Dover, DE 19901
7/20 – **Isaac Moon**: 100 Riverside; Griffin, GA 30224
7/21 – **Richard Lanning**: 104 Macintosh Lane; Centerville, GA 31028
7/23 – **Norman Dunlap**: 708 Robins Nest Ct.; Columbus, GA 31909
7/24 – **Donald Woeltjen**: PO Box 1322; Fitzgerald, GA 31750
7/27 – **Charles Ricks**: 4191 Mt. Union Rd.; Huntington, WV 25701
7/27 – **Mark Zeitlin**: 154 Sweetwater Blvd.; Brunswick, GA 31525
7/28 – **Donna Sue Roberts**: 1209 Loblolly Lane; Bainbridge, GA 39817
7/29 – **Jim Kenney, Sr.**: 139 Altama Connector; Brunswick, GA 31525
7/29 – **Al Lewis, Jr.**: 915 E. 42nd St. E; Tifton, GA 31794
7/31 – **Lowery Brantley**: PO Box 125; Pineview, GA 31071



Scripture Readings – July 18 edition

July 23

Eighth Sunday after Pentecost, Year A

- [Genesis 28:10-19a](#)
- [Psalm 139:1-12, 23-24](#)
- [Romans 8:12-25](#)
- [Matthew 13:24-30, 36-43](#)

July 30

Ninth Sunday after Pentecost, Year A

- [Genesis 29:15-28](#)
- [Psalm 105:1-11, 45b](#)
- [Romans 8:26-39](#)
- [Matthew 13:31-33, 44-52](#)