

# Preaching from St. Stephen's Pulpit

*St. Stephen Lutheran Church, Williamsburg, VA*

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## **The Roots of the Kin-dom and the Spirit of Adoption**

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Beloved by God, my siblings in Christ; grace to you and peace from God our Creator and our Savior Jesus Christ. Amen.

There is a profound, deeply entrenched human instinct to categorize the world around us. We are, by our very nature, creatures who seek order in chaos, and unfortunately, that desire for order often manifests as a desperate need to view the world through a strict, binary lens. Clean or unclean. Good or evil. Right or wrong. Us or them. We love to easily categorize the people around us because it gives us an illusion of control. If we can simply draw a line in the sand and place all the “good” on one side and all the “bad” on the other, the complexities of human existence suddenly seem manageable.

We see this exact impulse vividly in our Gospel reading today from Matthew 13. Look at the servants in the parable of the weeds and the wheat. The moment they spot the weeds (the *zizania*, a deceptive plant that looked exactly like wheat until it reached maturity), their immediate, visceral reaction is one of violent extraction. They run to the householder and ask, “Do you want us to go and gather them?”

This is the human default. We want to identify the “out-group,” rip them up by the roots, and purify our space. It is the age-old, destructive desire to find a scapegoat, to locate the source of our anxiety in someone else and eradicate it. But here is the breathtaking theological surprise of this text, the householder says, “No.”

To understand the radical nature of God's “No,” we must first understand the yoke of Empire. The empires of this world, whether we are talking about the crushing weight of Rome in Jesus' day or the systemic powers of our modern era, thrive on the strategy of dividing and conquering. Empire enforces what can only be described as a closed circle of violence. It sets the terms of existence, dictating who is valuable (the “wheat”) and who is expendable, illegal, or unwanted (the “weeds”). Empire demands endless purity tests. It builds higher fences, draws

thicker borders, and ultimately treats human flesh as disposable machinery in the service of its own accumulation of power.

When we internalize this imperial logic, when we take it upon ourselves to do the weeding in God's garden, we cause immense, generational harm. Our perspective is terribly, inherently limited. We do not have the eyes of the Creator. When we try to play the householder, when we wield the trowel of judgment, we inevitably uproot the good right alongside the bad. We reduce complex, radiant, image-bearing human beings to mere labels. We turn people into categories. We perpetuate cycles of oppression, engaging in the tragic “*thingification*” of our neighbors, stripping them of their sacred humanity in the name of our own comfort.

God is our Divine Protector. God looks at the field and recognizes that the roots of the weeds and the wheat are too deeply, too intricately intertwined below the surface of the soil. Violently tearing out the weeds would inevitably destroy the wheat. God actively refuses our human instinct for destructive extraction. In that divine refusal lies the central theme for us today, in a world and an Empire that constantly seek to divide, conquer, and uproot, we are called to trust in the protective patience of God and to boldly claim our powerful adoption as children of the Kin-dom.

So God offers a different way. God's “No” to the anxious, violent servants is simultaneously God's resounding “Yes” to creation.

God knows that humanity is deeply, inextricably interconnected. We are bound up in one another, our roots tangled in the dark, fertile soil of this shared earth. Because of this, the Kin-dom of God is not a sterile, perfectly manicured lawn. The Kin-dom is a messy, beautiful, fulfilling, and profoundly conflicted community. It is a place of wild growth. God's protective patience allows us to grow together, enduring the friction of our differences, trusting that God's grace (not our violent intervention) will sort out the harvest at the end of the age. God refuses to let the field be decimated in a misguided quest for purity.

This brings us to the profound theological shift the Apostle Paul outlines in his letter to the Romans. In the eighth chapter, Paul issues a stark warning against living according to the “flesh” and contrasts this way of life with the Spirit of adoption, which frees us from fear.

Now, I want to remind you, as we have discussed in this space before, that Paul is not promoting a toxic dualism here. The physical body is not bad; our bodies are made by God and pronounced good. When Paul speaks of the “flesh” (the *sarx*), he is not talking about your skin and bones. The “flesh” is the ego turned in on itself. It is the selfish, fearful drive to hoard resources, to judge our neighbors, and to exclude anyone who threatens our fragile sense of security. To live according to the flesh is to live by the logic of the Empire, constantly scanning the field for weeds to pull.

But Paul proclaims a liberating truth, “For you did not receive a spirit of slavery to fall back into fear.” We are no longer bound by the fear that makes us want to aggressively weed our neighbors out of the garden. Instead, we have received the Spirit of adoption!

Through this Spirit, God has brought us intimately into the divine family. We are no longer defined by our utility to Empire, our economic output, or our ability to conform to societal purity tests. We are defined solely by our belovedness to the Creator. We cry out, “Abba, Father!” a cry of profound intimacy and trust.

And because we are adopted children of God, we are, as Paul says, “heirs of God and joint heirs with Christ.” But Paul does not stop there. He adds a challenging caveat, “if, in fact, we suffer with him.”

We must be incredibly careful here. This text has too often been weaponized to promote a harmful theology of redemptive suffering, teaching that we should silently endure abuse or seek out pain to be closer to God. That is a lie of Empire at work in theology. Standing in solidarity with the oppressed never means accepting abuse or sacrificing healthy boundaries. Christ's call to compassion is not a mandate to remain in harm's way. What Paul means is that we are called to embrace the willing, compassionate suffering required to stand in true solidarity with those whom the world oppresses. To be an heir of Christ means loving what Christ loves, which is everything and everyone. It means choosing to stand in the messy, weed-filled field, feeling the pain of the marginalized, and refusing to look away.

The inheritance we receive through this adoption redefines our relationship to power. The power we inherit is not the “power-over” that Empire utilizes to

dominate, extract, and control. It is the “power-with” of the cross. It is rooted in radical kinship, vulnerability, and community. It does not seek to conquer the field, but to nourish the soil.

Because we have been given this Spirit of adoption, we are called to claim our power to actively oppose the forces that divide us. We cannot remain neutral when the Empire starts pointing out whom **it** considers weeds. When political rhetoric, misogyny, racism, transphobia, or the grinding machinery of capitalism try to convince us that our neighbors are disposable, we must boldly, unequivocally say “No.” We are adopted children of the Kin-dom, which means our adoption requires us to be barrier-breakers, not boundary-enforcers.

How do we do this? We draw upon what we might call lived-out liturgies. Our faith cannot remain in the realm of abstract theology or within these walls; it calls for liberationist unfoldings in our everyday lives. This means intentionally embodying God's love and justice in tangible, daily ways. We practice lived-out liturgy when we visit the sick or lonely, share meals with those who are hungry or isolated, advocate alongside neighbors for fair housing or racial equity, offer hospitality to refugees and strangers, call legislators to demand justice for the oppressed, support those facing eviction, and create community in our neighborhoods by listening with compassion and meeting practical needs. Each of these everyday acts plants seeds of the Kin-dom right where we live, allowing our faith to take root in action.

This requires the active, *hesed* or *agape* love of God. It is not glamorous. It is steady and steadfast, the everyday, rolling-up-your-sleeves commitment to meeting real needs and doing the hard, unglamorous work of mutual survival. It is moving away from a model of transactional charity, where the “haves” toss crumbs to the “have-nots” from a safe distance, and stepping into transformative solidarity.

We oppose the forces of division by setting longer tables. We oppose Empire by refusing to let anyone, anywhere, be treated as disposable. We use our “power-with” to ensure that the tangled roots of our shared humanity are watered with justice and sunlight.

Paul goes on to tell us that the whole creation has been groaning in labor pains until now. And if we are honest, we feel that groaning in our own bones. Growing in a field full of weeds is not easy. Waiting for the fullness of God's justice is painful,

especially when the world is currently burning with brutal conflict, environmental devastation, and political violence. The temptation to panic, to grab the trowel and start violently uprooting everything that scares us, is ever-present.

Yet even in the midst of this groaning, we witness stories of hope that remind us God is still at work. I think of the responses I have witnessed, again and again, when communities face devastating loss after natural disasters. After the Red River flooding in North Dakota, tornadoes and storms devastating Minnesota, and now flooding and tropical storms here in Virginia and the Carolinas. Again and again I have witnessed people opening their doors and their hearts, sharing meals and resources, tending one another's wounds. And in so doing, strangers became neighbors, and neighbors became community. Those fields were full of weeds, and yet, new shoots of kindness and resilience grew up anyway. It is in these quiet acts of courage and compassion, repeated all over the world, that we glimpse the patience and hope of the Sower. If they could choose mercy over division and nurture life in hard soil, then so can we.

So we do not despair. We trust the householder. We rest in the profound knowledge that God is our Divine Protector, faithfully guarding our interconnected roots. We do not have to fix the entire field by ripping it apart; we are simply called to bear good, life-giving fruit where we are planted, trusting that the harvest belongs to a God of infinite mercy.

So, my siblings, I leave you with this invitation: Claim your adoption today. Claim the wild, expansive love of the Creator who calls you, you!, beloved. Do not give in to the fear that makes you want to divide, conquer, or uproot. Look at the people around you, even the ones who frustrate you, even the ones the world calls "weeds," and strive to see the very image of God shining in them. Trust in the profound, protective patience of the Sower, and dedicate yourself anew to the messy, beautiful, essential work of growing together in love.

Go be human, be humanity, be righteous, be who God created you to be...

Amen.