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**Church of the Beatitudes United Church of Christ**

Wheat and Weeds Together

*A Sermon by*

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

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♫ God is still speaking,

Once upon a time, two families came to a rabbi wanting him to settle a dispute about the boundaries of their land. He listened to the members of one family as they recounted how they had received this land as an inheritance from their ancestors and how it had been in their family for generations. They had maps and papers to prove it. Then the rabbi listened to the other family. Its members described how they had lived on the land for years, working it and harvesting it. They didn't have the papers to prove it, but they had the calluses and sore backs and the harvest and the produce of the land. The rabbi looked at both of them and backed away from between them. They turned on him and said, "Decide, rabbi, who owns this land." But the rabbi knelt down on the land and put his ear on the ground listening. Finally he stood up and looked at both families. He said, "I had to listen to both of you, but I had to listen to the land, the center of this dispute also, and the land has spoken. It has told me this: 'Neither of you owns the land you stand on. It is the land that owns you.'"<sup>1</sup> Megan McKenna tells this parable in her book *Parables* and then asks the question, "What is it that owns us?"

Jesus has come and gone. It has been two generations and his life, his death, his resurrection are now stories passed on by the surviving community of faith. There are stories of healing, justice, and sayings like "blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness." There are sayings being preserved, sayings of the Book of Q, the Gospel of Thomas, the Gospel of Mark, and now a Gospel of Matthew.

And the times now? When Jesus lived, it was a time of Roman occupation. Now, two generations later, there has been war. The Jews are suffering from the loss of their Temple on their land. Those evil Romans have crushed them and done this to them! As Jews, they can show their papers all the way back to Genesis, Exodus, and Deuteronomy when God gave them the land. I will give you the land 'where you can eat bread without scarcity, where you will lack nothing.'<sup>2</sup>

But what do they do now as Christ's followers, a new people of the Land, but walking in a new way on the Land? And so they would have Jesus speak in a parable, and even explain the parable to the inner circle: the kingdom of heaven is like someone who sows good seeds, wheat for bread, but someone evil sows weeds. "Shall we pull out the weeds, Master? Tell us the answer we want to hear."

"You do not own the land. The land owns you."

What is it that owns you?

Matthew's community of listeners knows wheat and bread. Matthew is the Gospel that starts with a genealogy all the way back to Abraham to David to Jesus. Matthew is the Gospel that births Jesus in Bethlehem, which means 'house of bread'. Matthew is the Gospel which has Jesus baptized, called the beloved son, and sent out into the wilderness to be tempted: "If you are the Son of God, command these stones to become loaves of bread." "One does not live by bread alone," Jesus responds, "but by every word that comes from the mouth of God." (Matthew 4: 3-4) God is still speaking.

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<sup>1</sup> Megan McKenna, *Parables*, p. 54.

<sup>2</sup> Deut. 8:8

Later texts familiar to us remind us of this image:

“I am the bread of Life.” (John)

“Give us this day our daily bread.”

“This bread is my body broken for you. Take and eat.”

Jesus spoke to people who knew bread. Around the Sea of Galilee, in the fertile plains of the north, and the terraced hillsides around Jerusalem, the people knew bread. They knew the long, hot summers, the scorching winds, the extreme dryness and heat. They knew the tempestuous storms with thunder and lightning, and monsoon rains.

“Neither of you owns the land you stand on. It is the land that owns you.”

What is it that owns you?

When I was working with new church starts in the United Church of Christ, I was contacted by some people near Boone, North Carolina, about helping to start a new church. If you don't know where Boone, North Carolina, is, it is in the northwestern corner of North Carolina, in the Blue Ridge Mountains, known also as the High Country. There is a UCC camp near there, Blowing Rock, but no UCC congregation within miles. There is certainly no congregation that offers an extravagant welcome. There was a small group with a passion and they began to put the word out: a new church, a progressive voice, all are welcome. They called themselves, High Country United Church of Christ, and at one point they gave me a t-shirt, High Country UCC on the front, “growing like kudzu” on the back. How many of you know kudzu?

Kudzu is a vine that was introduced in the United States on our 100<sup>th</sup> birthday, 1876, in Philadelphia. It was taken to the southeast where it learned to thrive. Kudzu now covers 7 million acres in Georgia, and if no attempts are made to control its growth, it will cover buildings and parked vehicles over a period of years. It is a weed, yet it has also been used to stop soil erosion. It is also used to make soaps, lotions, jelly and compost, and some are wondering if it could be a valuable asset in the production of cellulosic ethanol.<sup>3</sup> High Country UCC wanted to be kudzu and this is their mission statement today:

We come together as High Country United Church to create a safe, loving environment, to discover and cultivate spiritual growth, and to establish community by reflecting and celebrating God's love.

Our mission is to inspire positive change in our world as we are led by Christ's example of love, compassion, and acceptance of all people.

Six years into their official life, they are sending youth to the National Youth event. They are doing work camps both in their own neighborhood and in New Orleans. When they first started as an Open and Affirming congregation, they had an article written about them

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<sup>3</sup> <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Kudzu>

describing their vision, and Shelly Wilson their pastor, got death threats and hate mail and picketers.

“Neither of you owns the land you stand on. It is the land that owns you.”

What is it that owns you?

A house, a car, some stuff: maybe they own me. What is it that owns you? A spirit of forgiveness, compassion, love?

The parable answers the question in its own way. What is it that owns you? Master, should we destroy the weeds?

The Master of the fields, the Boss, says, “No.”<sup>4</sup> No, the wheat and the weeds can and should grow together. Your job: Grow them. Get out there in the mixed field, and do your job. Bear good fruit. Be the people of the bread. Be the reconciliation of the world. In the midst of violence, be peace. In the midst of tearing down, build up. In the midst of evil and wrongdoing, stand up with ‘unshielded<sup>5</sup> love’. “If we will give ourselves to that vision, God will take care of the rest.”<sup>6</sup>

Friends, God has been generous to us, entrusting us with God’s land once again, and calling us all to multiply that ‘generosity of spirit’<sup>7</sup> and change the world. It’s not our job to decide who belongs and who doesn’t. It’s not our job to decide who gets much and who gets little. It’s not our job to say ‘there’s not enough, hold back, horde’.

It is our job to say “Thank you God, for your generosity. Give me the courage to share that with others. Yes, God, I will grow the crop, with your help.”

Amen.

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<sup>4</sup> Barbara Brown Taylor, *Bread of Angels*, “Why the Boss Said No”.

<sup>5</sup> <http://www.ucc.org/worship/samuel/july-20-2008-sixteenth-sunday.html>

<sup>6</sup> “Why the Boss Said No” in *Bread of Angels*

<sup>7</sup> <http://www.ucc.org/worship/samuel/july-20-2008-sixteenth-sunday.html>