

## 2.5.2017 Epiphany 5 (Matthew 13:24-30)

Imagine for a moment you live in another country, a distant land that is completely foreign to this one and you've been given the opportunity to spend one day in the United States. That day is today and you touch down in a place called Houston, Texas – the home of Super Bowl 51. In the morning as you make your way through town you see some people gathering at a place they call church for what you believe is a religious ceremony. Your curiosity about American religions leads you into this building where you observe their form of worship. An organ begins to play and as the people stand you look around the room and see some people singing, but just as many remain silent or only quietly speak the words of the hymns. After a time of prayer everyone sits down quietly and listens as one person speaks for 10 or 15 minutes. It cost you nothing to participate in this form of worship, but as the end of the service draws near a small alms basin is passed around the room for any who wish to give an offering. The service concludes with another hymn and as the people leave you hear many of them enthusiastically talking about another event that will take place later that afternoon.

As you see them smile, laugh, and talk about this upcoming event you notice they seem to have already forgotten about what they just experienced and it makes you wonder if you've made a mistake in your observation about American religion. Perhaps the real worship is yet to come. You make your way through town and your suspicions are immediately confirmed. The small building in which you spent the last hour pales in comparison to the shrine they have constructed for this ceremony. Now this is a place of worship! It holds over 70,000 people, cost \$352 million to construct, and is equipped with a special feature that you believe makes it quite appropriate for a worship service – it has a retractable roof!

Of course this all comes at a price. What was free in the morning will cost you many thousands of dollars this afternoon for the men who lead the people in this ceremony are real American idols that are paid hundreds of millions of dollars for their athletic abilities. As the people stand and the ceremonial game begins you look around and notice everyone is involved in this service. This is a real community of people that worship with their heart, soul, and mind. They lift their voices and shout and chant and sing with great passion. As the ball moves up and down the field they laugh together and cry together. They won't soon forget this ceremony and will hardly be able to control their emotions as they make their way through town spreading the news about what they just experienced.

So, here's the question: If you were the visitor who came to Houston today and attended

these two events, which one would you identify as the religion that is most important in America? Is there even a chance that a foreigner who arrived in Houston today would think that the worship that took place on Sunday morning was more important than the game which took place on Sunday afternoon? Now, if you're a big sports fan you make think I'm calling you out, and if you're more passionate about a Sunday afternoon of sports than a Sunday morning at church – I am. However, it's not just you, it's me and everyone else because this is not only about the Superbowl. That's just the glaring example today. This is about all those things in American culture that fight for our attention, affection, time, and money. It's all those interests, hobbies, and people that we end up worshipping by placing them before Almighty God.

As you consider these thoughts contemplate three words found in the Gospel for today: "... *while men slept.*" In our Gospel Jesus shared a parable about "*a man which sowed good seed in his field: but while men slept, his enemy came and sowed tares (weeds) among the wheat, and went his way.*" When Jesus interpreted this parable for His disciples He told them that He is the sower of the good seed, "*The field is the world; the good seed are the children of the kingdom; but the tares (weeds) are the children of the wicked one*" (Matthew 13:37-38). So in this parable you have a picture of Jesus through our baptism sowing good seed into the world, but "*while men slept*" the enemy comes with his own seed and plants it among the good seed. The words "*while men slept*" are a grim reminder of the complacent way of man and the fact that we completely underestimate our enemy.

Most enemies won't attack you face to face or come at you when you are aware and able to defend yourself. Real enemies have a long term plan to harm you and often attack at a place and time you don't expect. They attack in beautiful places like Pearl Harbor and on days like December 7, 1941 "*while men slept*" on a Sunday morning. After this attack Japanese forces had a new enemy in the United States and we attacked them as an enemy would – by dropping bombs with destructive power they never imagined from planes flying at 31,000 feet. In the picture Jesus paints in this parable we discover our enemy works the same way. He is not only patiently waiting for the perfect opportunity to strike, he is busy at work in his own field cultivating noxious weeds so that when that time comes he will have his seed ready to plant among the good seed. He's like Japan busy in their war room planning the attack on Pearl Harbor or the United States which employed 130,000 people and spent billions of dollars in a top secret program to develop the atomic bomb.

We know our adversary "*the devil, as a roaring lion, walketh about, seeking whom he*

*may devour*” (1 Peter 5:8). He is at every turn looking for the perfect opportunity to strike, so how do we as good seed defend ourselves? We defend ourselves with roots which through Word and Sacrament run deep in Christ and bring forth fruit for the harvest. I don’t have much of a green thumb, but I know one of the best ways to keep weeds out of your lawn is by promoting the growth of good, healthy grass. If we want to keep weeds out of our spiritual lives we need to cultivate what is good by spending time in daily prayer and Bible study, by making this weekly service our most fervent priority on Sunday, and by setting our *“affection on things above, not on things on the earth”* (Colossians 3:2). Remember Jesus tells us, *“Seek ye first the kingdom of God, and His righteousness; and all these things shall be added unto you”* (Matthew 6:33). As followers of Christ we are called to make the kingdom of God and our spiritual health the primary focus of our lives. When we do so the Lord adds to us, in just the right amount, every good gift and every perfect gift this world has to offer. By first taking hold of what is best (*“the kingdom of God, and His righteousness”*) everything else is put in its proper place.

Through His Son, God has done a miraculous work in us. He has planted us as good seed in His field. Now He wants to work through us to draw the world to Him and that means we must be awake and focused on the things of His kingdom. We must be ready to respond to His grace, ready to grow, and ready to reach out passionately to the world God died to save. The stranger to the Gospel message will not be drawn to Christ by people who make a bold profession within the walls of the Church, but so soon forget or simply choose not to speak of their faith outside these walls. The world will not be drawn to Christ by people who act more excited about a game or a hobby on Sunday afternoon than they do about the unimaginable truth that on Sunday morning, through the Body and Blood of His Son, God communes with His people here at His table.

So, please consider these words that Jesus used to warn His disciples: *“... while men slept.”* Then ask yourself if you are being sung to sleep by American culture.