

***Theme: Going Fishing – The Fishing Stories of Jesus***  
***“Parable of the Nets and Fish”***

Sermon preached by Jeff Huber

July 14-15, 2012 at First United Methodist Church, Durango

**Matthew 13:47-50**

*“Again, the Kingdom of Heaven is like a fishing-net that was thrown into the water and caught fish of every kind. When the net was full, they dragged it up onto the shore, sat down, and sorted the good fish into crates, but threw the bad ones away. That is the way it will be at the end of the world. The angels will come and separate the wicked people from the righteous, throwing the wicked into the fiery furnace, where there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth.”*

**VIDEO      Going Fishing Week 3 Sermon Starter**

**SLIDE      Parable of the Nets and Fish**

When I was a kid I didn't have to walk up hill in the snow both ways to school like some of you. I had it much worse. We lived on a hill that was about twice as high as going from Florida road up to the college. It was fun riding my bike down the hill to go to school but it was not so much fun riding my bike up that hill when I came home from school. To make matters worse, when I got home and felt like just plopping down in front of a television set we didn't have a remote control because television sets didn't have them yet. This may come as a surprise to many of our young people so I am glad you are sitting down when I tell you that in order to change the channel on the television set you had to be committed, because to change the channel you had to get up, walk across the room to the television set, bend over and turn the dial. Yes, we had a television set with a little dial on it.

Channel surfing for us looked like this—turn the dial, step back and watch what is on the screen, then bend back down if you are not satisfied with what you see and turn the dial one more time. You do this until you have gone through all five channels. Then you go back to the first one and see if the commercial is over. You do this until you can find a show that you can live with for the next 30 minutes and then you would repeat the process all over again. I used to actually take a pillow cushion from the couch and sit on it right in front of the television set so I could turn the channel without getting up until my mother then unplugged the television because it supposedly is bad for your eyes to sit that

close to the TV.

In today's world we can't fathom a television without a remote that gives us access to 500 channels with nothing on them, which means you have to channel surf to find that one thing that might be worthwhile! Not only can you channel surf safely from your couch today so you don't ruin your eyes, but you also can rewind live television and fast-forward through the commercials using the remote control. Isn't that awesome!

If you are really upscale you can use the PIP function on your remote control so you can now watch two lousy programs at the same time and not know what is going on in either one. Because of the fancy remote controls we now can rule the universe from the safety of our couch. We can tell our TV what we wanted it to do for us and make it do it with the push of a button.

Now we have other appliances who are jealous and also need remote controls. We can start our cars from inside the house in the middle of winter so they can be warmed up for us by the time we go out to use it. We have beds where you can sleep at number 45 and your spouse can sleep at 55 and you can pretend like you know the difference on your sleep number bed. We have thermostats that are so specialized you can have it set for 74° on the nose during the daytime and then at 10:30 at night drop the temperature to 73° because you like to cuddle in bed. Now all we need are remote control for our pets and for our kids we would be all set.

I can even remember a time when I was a kid and would drive up to our house and my mother had the audacity to make me get out of the car and open the garage door because we didn't have a remote-control garage door opener! As a side note did you know that the average American knew 10 of their neighbors before the garage door opener became standard back in the 1970s and today the average American knows only one of their neighbors? Through our remote controls we now have control over whether we get to see our neighbors or not and many of us are relieved.

The further we move through history the more we humans try to invent things that give us more control over our environment. I couldn't think of one invention in the past 50 years that was designed to give us less control over our environment and the world around us. It began with things like irrigation ditches that were built so that if it didn't rain for a long period of time our crops would survive and today we have the ability to set our DVR through our smart phone. I actually discovered an app the other day that will allow you to track your pets

through the microchip they have implanted in them at the vet, so I guess we can control our pets even!

The reality is that we have invented all of these things because we have a deep-seated fear of not being in control. We have sleep number bed because we are afraid we won't get enough sleep if we don't have the right number. We had irrigation ditches because we are afraid of what would happen if there wasn't enough rain. We have a television remote because we are afraid that the TV will be stuck on the bad channel while we are on the couch and the next thing you know we are having to watch "The Bachelorette" or a new television show I just saw advertised, "Desperate Househusbands."

If we are honest, having the power to control things is nice. We get so used to controlling things we get frustrated when he can't control people. Without even being aware of it we take a remote-control and try to point it at other people. We use our internal remote-control to put people in boxes and classify them so that we can better understand them and push them away when they annoy us. We can even use that internal remote-control to try and control what they think of us.

Today's Scripture passage contains Good News for those of us who have a hard time putting down the remote control. I want to invite you, if you haven't done so already, to take out of your bulletin your Message Notes and your Meditation Moments. I want to invite you to write down the things you might like to remember from today's message in the blank lines and you also can have the Scripture passage that we just read and refer back to it later. There are devotions and Scripture readings for you to use throughout the next week and I think you will find them to be a blessing if you will take these home and use them.

This sermon series is supposed to be a lighthearted trip through the fishing stories of Jesus and places where he referred to fish, or in the case of last week multiplying fish. But today's Scripture has weeping and gnashing of teeth which is not a lighthearted subject. I'm surprised that many of you didn't bolt out the building or go with the kids to children's Sunday School or Godly Play after you heard those words! "Weeping and gnashing of teeth," is probably the least favorite Bible passage alongside the phrase, "hellfire and brimstone," and the book of Lamentations which just sounds sad.

Today I want to give you a new way to look at this phrase, "weeping and gnashing of teeth," based on this story from Jesus. If you look at this phrase in light of this particular passage and story from Jesus then I think you will find it has

a different and more profound meaning for our lives today. The key to understanding this is the very first words out of the mouth of Jesus in this passage in which he says, "The Kingdom of Heaven is like..." We have talked before about the purpose of Jesus and his mission in this world and how it is not about getting people into heaven as much as it is about launching a movement to restore the world and all of creation. The heart of that message comes through in the stories about "the Kingdom of Heaven" and "the Kingdom of God."

The Kingdom of Heaven is not meant to be a reference about fluffy clouds in the sky where we go in sit and play harps after we die. The Kingdom of Heaven is about what happens on this Earth when God will and human actions come together and match. The Kingdom of God is ruled by the kind of King that Jesus is during his time on earth. It is the Kingdom which is marked by sacrifice and servant leadership and healing of the broken places in our lives and putting our own needs on the back burner sometimes so we can care for others. This is a message that Jesus preached from the very beginning of his public ministry as his first sermon was titled:

**SLIDE**        ***"Repent, for the Kingdom of Heaven has come near."***

These were meant to be dangerous words because another word for Kingdom is Empire. During the day of Jesus the Jewish people who heard this message were ruled by another Empire which was the Roman Empire. So when Jesus said these words what people heard was, "The Empire of God is descending upon us and coming into being as I speak." Jesus said that grows like, "Yeast in dough; like a mustard seed which is the smallest seed that grows into the largest tree."

The people would hear these words and know that the Empire would strike back. That is what Rome did and so the Empire of Rome could have their way and the way they did that was to throw around their elbows and show they were in control by force and domination. They would tax people to the edge of starvation to the point where 90% of the Roman Empire during the first century experienced some form of extreme poverty. In that Empire you have a man running around Galilee, the area north of the capital of Jerusalem, who claims to be God incarnate and preaching a message that, "Rome's days are numbered. Another Kingdom is approaching. Do you see it? Are you ready for it?"

The people who lived under the crushing weight of the Roman Empire began to get excited, but they got excited for the wrong reasons. They were confused on how that kingdom would come into being and what it would look

like. Many thought that it would be a violent revolution and some of those people who were confused were the disciples themselves.

To understand how the disciples might have responded to today's story we have to get a bit of background about how they responded to other actions and stories of Jesus. In Luke 9, the disciples began a 10 chapter journey towards Jerusalem. They come across the Samaritans who are being inhospitable towards the disciples. We don't exactly know what they did but whatever it was the Samaritans really were bugging the disciples during this chapter and so the disciples asked Jesus, "Can we send fire down from heaven upon the Samaritans?"

The Old Testament translation of this request would be, "Jesus, can we please smite them? Pretty please Jesus, can't we do a little old-fashioned smiting of these unruly Samaritans? Just this once Jesus, can't we smite them, because we never get to do any smiting these days?"

That same day Jesus tells a parable about plants that are good which are growing alongside plants that are bad. In his parable the servants want to uproot the bad plants and they ask if they can please up route the bad plants. Can we please destroy the bad plants? Can we smite them? The disciples are very "smite" happy in Luke 9.

Jesus responds, "No, you don't get to call down fire from heaven on the Samaritans. You don't get to smite any of the people who live by Roman rules and who seem like bad plants."

For the parable of the weeds and the plants everyone is listening, but then he tells a parable just for the disciples a bit later in Luke's gospel. He is in a house with his disciples around the Sea of Galilee and he uses a story they can understand. Jesus talks about fish. He talks about the fish inside the Sea of Galilee.

Inside the Sea of Galilee are three main kinds of fish. The first kind of fish was a small sardine. In the miracle of the feeding of the 5000 that we talked about last week, where Jesus took five loaves and two fish and multiplied them, this is the kind of fish that is referred to in the story. There is a picture of this fish on the screen for you to see.

**SLIDE        Sardine**

The second kind of fish you see in this next picture.

**SLIDE        St. Peter's Fish**

St. Peter's Fish is also known as tilapia. Tilapia and sardines were both seen as kosher fish. Good, law-abiding Jews would be able to eat these two kinds of fish and maintain their dietary regulations in Judaism. The third kind of fish in the Sea of Galilee looked like this.

**SLIDE        Barbel**

That is the face that only a mother fish could love. That is not a pretty fish. It is called a *barbel* because of the barbs you see protruding below its mouth. This kind of fish was considered unclean and un-useful. You can't eat it and the disciples who were fishermen knew the drill. When you went fishing you threw the net over the edge of the boat and you gathered all of the fish together and put them down in the boat. You take the kosher fish which are useful, mostly sardines and St. Peter's Fish, and put them in baskets. When you came across a barbel you would throw it away because it was of no use to the fishermen. One was useful and the other was unuseful.

The disciples had this understanding and it was to them that he told this parable in Matthew's Gospel.

**SLIDE        *“Again, the Kingdom of Heaven is like a fishing-net that was thrown into the water and caught fish of every kind. When the net was full, they dragged it up onto the shore, sat down, and sorted the good fish into crates, but threw the bad ones away. That is the way it will be at the end of the world. The angels will come and separate the wicked people from the righteous, throwing the wicked into the fiery furnace, where there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth.”***

Most scholars believe this reference to the "fiery furnace, where there is weeping and gnashing of teeth," is a reference to a garbage dump outside of Jerusalem where the fires burned all day and all night as the trash of the city was incinerated in this valley. There would be dogs and other animals inside this valley, fighting with each other over scraps. You could hear them snarling and gnashing their teeth.

When Jesus is telling this parable he is not really talking about what happens after this life. Some people who read this Scripture think it is all about eternal damnation. If you continue with this line of reasoning then our ultimate destiny according to this parable is that we get eaten, because that is what happens to the good fish, right?

Instead, this is a parable where Jesus is saying that the future of this world

looks bright. While some might say the future of this world is about sadness and destruction, Jesus through this parable tells us that creation will be renewed. He says that, "On that day, when that Kingdom of God is running rampant on this Earth, people who are planting evil are obsolete. Hatred and cynicism are irrelevant and they go the way of the dinosaur. Violence in the Kingdom of God is as relevant as an 8-track player in today's world. There is no place for it."

Jesus is telling the disciples that they want to put their money and their lives on the winning side then he should choose him. "Choose me because I am the true king of this world. I am the one who will last. It is God's rule which is eternal and not Rome or any other person or people who try to act like Rome." Jesus is once again saying to the disciples, "Follow me."

This would have been good news for the disciples but the parable also carries a message of challenge for them and for us. Jesus makes it very clear that when it comes time to separating what is good and what is not good in creation as it is being renewed, the disciples do not get to decide. It is the Angels who do that work of separating the useful fish from the unuseful fish and he is basically telling the disciples to stop worrying about it because it's not their job. The disciples probably were shocked and maybe even a bit disappointed in this revelation.

I imagine they began talking amongst themselves, *"Didn't you just tell us a story about fishing? This is what we do for a living so we ought to be able to do this. You just look at the fish and you decide which one goes in the basket and which one you get rid of. It is very easy to divide good people from bad people because you can just look at them. Why can't we do that? The ones that dress like Rome and the ones that talk like Samaritans are on the outside and go in the bad pile."*

Jesus tells the disciples clearly: *"You don't get to make that decision. You don't get to draw the line. You don't get to control who was on the inside and who is on the outside."*

Neither do we—and that is a hard message for some Christians to hear. It is so difficult that we often avoid hearing it. Christians throughout history have been trying to do what the disciples tried to do, which is draw lines around who is in and who is out. We draw lines based on what denomination a person is or how they celebrate baptism or how they were baptized or what version of the Bible they use or how they do communion or who gets to do communion. We make judgments based on how we worship and how we sing songs. Do we bow our

heads quietly or do we raise our hands and sing praises? We act as if one of those is a spiritual act of worship and the other is not.

We divide for all of those reasons and 1000 other ones as well. Christians sometimes try to divide and draw lines based on what people have done. When it comes to mercy I tend to want that for myself. Is that how you feel? Don't you want mercy for yourself?

But for other people we often clamor for justice. If we are honest, most of us respond with, "Mercy for me, justice for them." It doesn't matter how long ago they did the dirty deed that we are upset about. It doesn't seem to matter if they have had a change of heart sometimes. Our belief is that there is a line between who is in and who is out and we think it is pretty easy to define who is in and who is out based on our own perceptions that we build up.

It's easy because all you have to do is look at them. The ones that dress in ways that we don't understand are out. Maybe someone who talks with an accent or talks like a sailor should be out. People who have a different view than we do on the hot button issue that we hold so dearly we think should be out. When we try to draw the line we are in good company because the disciples tried to do the exact same thing.

The disciples wanted the ability to smite but I think on a more profound level they felt this way because they weren't sure they could trust God to take care of that part of life. It would be better if God would just leave us in charge of those kinds of things, don't you think? Not to mention the fact that is much easier to ask God to rain fire down on people that we don't understand or who are different than it is to love them.

God's grace is wild and it is offensive. God's grace cannot be controlled and it cannot be domesticated. God's grace blows where it will and his extravagant. That unnerves us many times as Christians if we are honest. It makes us uneasy if we can't clearly mark that we are on the inside and another group is on the outside. We draw lines to give ourselves some sense of security that, "Yes, I am safe where I am and they are in trouble where they are."

Jesus tells the disciples then and now in this parable that we don't get to be the ones who decides who is in and who is out. Instead, Jesus says, put all your effort into being a good fish who is pursuing the Kingdom of God by loving God with all your heart and loving your neighbor as you love yourself. Be a good fish. Don't worry if others are getting more grace than you think they deserve, but be a good fish and let your actions show that Jesus is King and his kingdom are what



you are ultimately going to follow.

We humans are interesting when it comes to classifying people. We try to control people by putting them in categories and boxes but we also try to control people by only letting them view us in a certain way. We try as hard as possible to give people the image that we want to portray so they will view us the way we want them to view us. Do me a favor and get out your Message Notes if you haven't done so already, along with a pen or pencil. I want to invite you to write down this phrase.

**SLIDE**        **"If I am good enough, I will get the love that I deserve."**

Instead of the word "good" you might write another word or phrase that fits you and how your mind works such as, "work enough, wealthy enough, skinny enough, look young enough, sacrifice enough." Choose your word or phrase that fits whatever tape you have playing in your head.

When we live with that phrase in our head, "If I'm good enough, I will get the love that I deserve," it leads to all kinds of behaviors that can be damaging and self-destructive. If I believe that how good I am determines whether or not I will be loved then I will not share with anyone my imperfections or my faults. If I share my mistakes with others it will give them more reasons not love me. If I believe that a person's ability to love me is based on my performance or good works than I will try to do as many as possible so they can see and I can earn that love that I need. I practice my faith before others so they will see me as holy and pat me on the back. I will do whatever I can to get that accolade that I'm looking for, even if it means sacrificing my principles. I will set aside the rules so I can gain wealth. I will jeopardize my health so I can look the way the culture says I should look.

We do all of these things so we can control the way other people look at us and the way other people treat us so we can get the love that we so desperately want. The thought is that if people saw the real me they would run away. I share this with you because I have this struggle in my own life. I do the laundry at my house in frantic fashion, not so that our family will have clean clothes so much as they will tell me what a good job I did! I imagine my wife might say this to me someday.

**VIDEO**        **Jeff's Wife**

**SLIDE**        **Going Fishing Logo**

*"You did how much laundry today? I'm so lucky to have you. Only God could*

*be a better husband or father."* I have grand illusions! It's only laundry but it is close to saving the world, isn't it? I not only have an imagination about what my wife might say but I have a dream about what my kids might say.

**VIDEO**      **Jeff's Kid**

**SLIDE**      **Going Fishing Logo**

*"Thanks for grounding me last week dad. I never thought about it that way before and now I understand. I wouldn't have learned that lesson without you grounding me. You're the best dad ever."* We have this dream that we will be appreciated like this by her families and our friends and even extends into work. I imagine I might hear something like this.

**VIDEO**      **Jeff's Boss**

**SLIDE**      **Going Fishing Logo**

*"Hi Jeff, you are doing such a great job with the message this week, and you have a beard, and your shirt is untucked! How cool is that!"* The hope is that we do something and then people would pat us on the back. We get more love because we did something good. I was visiting recently with a member of our church we talked about how she would do anything she needed to do to avoid conflict so people would like her. Many times she wouldn't share her opinion because she was so worried that people wouldn't agree with her and then they won't like her or love her anymore. She is afraid she will lose friends and as a result she finds that she has no true friends and she loses her identity in trying to please everyone else. "If I was only invisible and compliance enough I would get the love that I need."

We often hide our own imperfections because we believe that people will love us and so in our head we hear this over and over again, "If I am flawless enough then I will get the love that I need."

At a woman share with me once that she got her hair colored, cut and shaped to match her husband's favorite actress. "If I was just pretty enough, I would get the love that I need."

I had a man tell me once that he gives compliments and encouragement to other people, not because you love them but because he wants them to love him. Good deeds and kind words can simply be good deeds and kind words, but they can also be instruments of manipulation and control. We use our behavior to project an image of ourselves to twist and distort a person's view of us because we need them to love us. Our fear is that if they knew the real us they would not

really love us.

What words do you hope someone will say to you? Do you need to hear words from a coworker or a boss or a spouse or a child or a classmate? What are the words that you fantasize about hearing one day? How do you use energy and effort to get that person to say those words to you?

One day you may get to hear those words and it will bring amazing satisfaction. But it may never happen. Is that what you want to wait for all of your life? Here is the hard truth. You cannot parent your kids in a way that you are hoping you will get their approval. You cannot make your father say, "I am proud of you." You cannot make a person forgive you. You cannot make your adult children call you. You can't make a person believe in Jesus. You can't make your friend take his medicine. You can't make that cool person at school notice you. You can't make your spouse love you.

Those of you who are students getting ready to go off to a new school or college, don't choose a boyfriend or girlfriend that you think you can fix. And don't choose a boyfriend or girlfriend because you think they will fix you and fill some holes inside of you. Both of those are acts of control and they lead to pain and hurt. You can't make somebody love you.

The Good News is that you don't have to. God, who has wild and offensive grace that pours out and goes every which way is the same God that gives grace to you, that can fill you until you're overflowing. Jesus said:

**SLIDE**        ***"I came that you might have life and have it to the full."***

If you were to imagine your heart as a glass and God's love as water, would you describe your glass today as half empty or half-full? The reality is that your glass is too small to hold God's love. The ocean is too small to hold God's love because God's love is poured out on all of us and the God who created you is the God who sent his only Son to live, teach, preach, heal and die on the cross for you—so you can have a relationship with God and not need to control everyone around you or how everyone around you sees you.

Jesus died on the cross but then three days later was resurrected to give you a concrete picture of God's Kingdom and force is greater than what Rome can do. God's Empire is greater than the Roman Empire. The resurrection is about Jesus triumphing over the other kingdoms of this world. That kingdom and that power is in the midst of us right here and now.

Our responsibility is to allow that grace to take root in our lives so that we

find ourselves caught up in the story. You don't have to live your life as if there is a scarcity of love within you, thinking that you need to grab love from this person or pull love from that person or beg for love from this other person. Your heart is meant to be filled with the truth of the Gospel which is that you were made by God to be loved by God.

When it comes to other people, they have their choice to make and they can either join in the fun and receive that gift of grace or reject it. You cannot control what they do or how they do it, all you can do is live your life as a good fish by loving God with your heart, soul, mind and strength and loving your neighbor as you love yourself. Other people can enjoy loving you for all of the parts that make you unique and wonderful or they can miss the boat.

We can't earn God's grace and we can't control God's grace. God's grace is wilder than the wind and deeper than the ocean. Jesus' message in this parable is to not worry about having to separate the good fish from the bad fish but simply strive to be a good fish living in the Kingdom of Heaven. If people like you for it, then that is wonderful. If people don't like you for it then it is their loss.

You can't control people. You can't control who is in and who is out. You can't control whether another person likes you or not. Instead, just be that good fish. Instead of judging people as others on the outside, just be a good fish and love your neighbors and your enemies and let God be God.

Instead of loving people with strings attached, trying to control the way they view you, be a good fish whether people are watching or not. Don't try to control people's perceptions of you because you can't do it and you will stress yourself out. Just be a good fish and let them decide their own response.

Jesus wants us to follow him and not worry about anything else. Jesus is calling all of us today into that kind of relationship. The King has said, "Follow me." He is asking for all of us today to take a remote-control, place it on the coffee table and stop pointing it at other people, and walk the walk, or swim the swim of the good fish.

This is a good message that offers us freedom through God's grace from our Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ. Would you pray with me?

**SLIDE          Prayer**

*God, in this moment help each of us to have some honest communication with you. We don't have a reason to show off or project a different image because you know us through and through. As we talked to you in the silence we pray that*

*you would forgive us when we judge others. Lord, we especially lift up those that we have put in the category of, "other."*

*Pause... Forgive us Lord.*

*Forgive us for the way that we have deceived and manipulated others to get them to love us...*

*Lord, give us faith which allows your grace to break through those lines that we have been trying to draw around ourselves and others. Give us grace so we can accept ourselves the way we are. Give us the eyes of faith so we can see that we are enough and we don't need to earn your love or anyone's love.*

*On this day we commit to calling you our King and no one else. Help us in this prayer to follow you more closely no matter what else happens in the world around us. You are our King and we are your people, and we choose to follow you. In your holy name we pray. Amen.*

**Sermon Series: Going Fishing – The Fishing Stories of Jesus**

**Sermon Title: "Parable of the Nets and Fish"**

**Matthew 13:47-50**

***"Again, the Kingdom of Heaven is like a fishing net that was thrown into the water and caught fish of every kind. When the net was full, they dragged it up onto the shore, sat down, and sorted the good fish into crates, but threw the bad ones away. That is the way it will be at the end of the world. The angels will come and separate the wicked people from the righteous, throwing the wicked into the fiery furnace, where there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth."***

Things I'd like to remember from today's sermon:

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## Meditation Moments

**Monday, July 16** – Read Ezekiel 40:1-4, 47:1-12. The parable we heard about in last weekend’s sermon (and will read on Thursday) is part of a whole set of parables Matthew collected in chapter 13 of his gospel. He started the series with this story. Most of the hillsides around the Sea of Galilee were used for growing crops. Jesus might well have pointed to a farmer out broad-casting seed as he told this story.

- **Jesus said the good soil stood for “those who hear [the word about the kingdom] and understand, and bear fruit and produce” (verse 23, *Common English Bible*). How did you first hear the word about Jesus and his kingdom? In what ways have you deepened your appreciation of it? What kind of a crop is the word producing in your life?**
- Jesus also outlined, in verses 19-22, three factors that can make human “soil” barren, and keep us from responding to Jesus’ love. Which of the three issues Jesus identified has posed the biggest challenge to you in being a Christ-follower? What steps do you take to keep your heart receptive, good soil for the word about the kingdom?

**Tuesday, July 17** – Read Luke 4:31-32, 4:38-5:3. Jesus told this story of a furtive “enemy” who deliberately filled a farmer’s field with darnel, a poisonous rye grass that looked just like wheat until the wheat heads formed. Contrary to the popular saying, it’s not “all good”! But Jesus used the story, not to say we must ruthlessly root out heretics or enemies, but to remind us that judgment is God’s job, not ours.

- **An important principle in studying Jesus’ stories is that they are not “exact allegory” (*New International Bible Commentary*). Some details have symbolic meaning (usually to make a main point). Others are just part of the story. Read verses 37-39 again with care, noticing which details Jesus focused on, and what meaning he gave them.**
- The Salem Witch Trials, the Spanish Inquisition—Christians’ efforts to pull weeds before the harvest have done terrible harm to individuals and the whole church. How can you treat those who differ from you in ways that make Jesus’ love the driving force in your life?

**Wednesday, July 18** – Read Luke 5:4-7. In these compact stories, Jesus gave us two pictures of what it takes to be good soil, the crop worth keeping he described in the two previous stories in Matthew 13. He told of two people who “laid it all on the line” in order to have a one-of-a-kind treasure. Their actions, which seemed odd in the short term, were in fact a sign that their values were exactly right.

- **What things have felt (or feel) to you like the “costs” of following Jesus? Jesus’ stories taught that this temporary, temporal world is a drop of water in the spiritual ocean of eternity. How has Jesus added inner richness, meaning and beauty to your here-and-now life? In what ways are you growing into a deep-seated trust that eternity in God’s kingdom is worth whatever it might “cost” you today to follow Jesus?**
- Jesus said the man who found the treasure went “in his joy” to obtain the field. What parts of serving Jesus, and others in Jesus’ name, have brought you the most joy? In what ways is this joy deeper than the surface happiness this world tends to offer?

**Thursday, July 19** – Read Luke 5:8-11. A net catches anything the right size that swims into it. Even today, fishermen seek to lessen how often they catch dolphins in nets along with the fish they mean to catch. Jesus story was based on the same reality. As in the story about the wheat and the weeds, though, Jesus said we just need to be “keepers.” We can trust God to sort out the good from the bad.

- **One reason people give for avoiding church is that “some church members don’t live up to high Christian standards.” But we all find light and dark in ourselves. Bible scholar William Barclay said Jesus’ story showed “the Church...is bound to be a mixture of all kinds of people, good and bad, useless and useful.” How can God’s grace lead you to keep growing in the “good” without hating yourself for the “bad” you aim to outgrow?**

- **Does Jesus' picture that, at the end of the age, "the angels will come and separate the wicked from the righteous" (verse 49) trigger fear or confidence in your heart? In whom do you put your confidence as a Christ-follower (see 1 John 5:13)?**

**Friday, July 20** – Read Acts 18:5-11. Mercy is wonderful—when we receive it. In Jesus' story, the man who owed his king a vast debt had to have mercy. The *IVP Bible Background Commentary: New Testament* says it was "roughly sixty million days' wages"—an absurd amount used to make a point. The forgiven man found it much harder to offer mercy (for a much smaller debt) than he did to receive it.

- In *Forgive and Forget*, Lewis Smedes wrote that forgiving does not mean acting as if the pain someone else caused us didn't happen. Rather, it calls us to the life-long process of releasing the toxic inner demand that we must "even the score." How can Jesus' story about financial debts help you address the emotional issues of forgiveness?
- Do you believe Jesus meant for you to see yourself in this story of a man who owed his king an absurdly large debt? Do you believe that, having lived a decent life, you ever actually "owed" God a debt anywhere near that large? How does your sense of the debt's size affect your gratitude for God's forgiveness?

**Saturday, July 21** – Read Acts 26:1-2, 9-23. When Paul wrote to the Romans, some Christians were obsessing on the lesser details of their faith (much as the Pharisees had). They had lost track of the more important ideal of living a life of love. Paul reminded them that in the end everyone answers to God, and only God knows a person's heart. Judging another person's faith life is not only a waste of time, but spiritually harms us even more than those we might be judging.

- Today's media and technology make it so easy to see what others are doing and how they are doing it that we readily start making judgments about others in almost all areas of life. Have you ever been aware of someone judging you unfairly? In what ways has it strengthened your connection with God when you've been able to stop judging others? How have you found it freeing and energizing to focus on your own relationship with God, and to give others the freedom to do the same?

Family Activity: Jesus was an amazing storyteller. How often does your family share stories? Gather in a comfortable space in your home. Bring a favorite snack or two. Let everyone know ahead of time you will be enjoying a family story night and invite them to have a couple of family stories in mind to share. Consider telling stories of older generations, extended family, faith experiences and funny moments. Bring pictures, souvenirs and other items to help tell the stories if you wish. Consider taping the stories so people in future generations can hear them, too. Enjoy being together and remembering God's goodness and faithfulness throughout your lives. Thank God for stories and for calling you to be a part of God's story!