

Weeds, Williams, and Us

Matthew 13: 24-30, 36-43

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Kyle Childress

*Men's consciences ought in no sort to be violated, urged, or constrained. And whenever men have attempted anything by this violent course, whether openly or by secret means, the issue has been pernicious, ...*

-Roger Williams, *The Bloody Tenet of Persecution*, 1644

*It is not possible for man to sever the wheat from the tares, the good fish from the other fry; that must be the angels' ministry at the end of mortal things. Yet if all cannot be of one mind — as who looks they should be? — this doubtless is more wholesome, more prudent, and more Christian, that many be tolerated, rather than all compelled.*

-John Milton, *Areopagitica*, 1644

Just last year, member of Congress Marjorie Taylor Greene said, “We need to be the party of nationalism and I’m a Christian, and I say it proudly, we should be Christian nationalists.”

Also last year, that moral exemplar, Representative Lauren Boebert said: “The church is supposed to direct the government, the government is not supposed to direct the church.” This was at a church two days before her primary election (and victory). She went on, “I’m tired of this separation of church and state junk.”

In times past, we might write-off such statements as extremist and wacko but public opinion polling shows that support for Christian nationalism is growing among people who identify as conservative Christian. In tumultuous times, Christian people have often sought a return to what is perceived to be a stable, moral, and religious society and civil state. They did so in the seventeenth century, and they do today.

I mention these quotes in the context of our congregation having a conversation about dropping the name “Baptist” but making sure we clearly remain “baptist.” Today I want to tell us why this is a big deal.

In 1644 the Massachusetts Bay Colony passed a law against all Baptists, or “Anabaptists” charging them with being “incendiaries of commonwealths and the infectors of persons in matters of religion.” Anyone opposing infant baptism or persuading others to oppose it, together with anyone resisting the magistrate’s rule in matters of religion, “shall be sentenced to banishment” (quoted in Edwin Gaustad, *Roger Williams: Lives and Legacies*, p. 60-61).

Why were the Baptists, or Anabaptists, as we were called in the seventeenth century, such a threat? What did we do to cause such laws to be passed?

Only 14 years before, the Governor of the Massachusetts Bay Colony, John Winthrop, had famously written, “For we must consider that we shall be as a City upon a hill. The eyes of all people are upon us ...” Winthrop, along with his Puritans sisters and brothers, fled Old England to escape religious persecution, and came to New England to build a “City upon a hill,” where true faith could be a light to all the world, including Old England.

They believed that Old England was supposed to be the elect people of God. The Protestant Reformation was liberating people and the Bible from a corrupt church and God was calling England to be a New Israel. In 1588, under the great Queen Elizabeth I, God had blessed England by turning back the Anti-Christian armada of Catholic Spain. This was a premonition of Armageddon and the Book of Revelation. England was favored by God in a role paralleled only by ancient Israel, an elect nation destined to lead the world back to God's true religion and end the tyranny of Anti-Christ. (see Edmund Morgan, *Roger Williams: The Church and the State*, pp. 6-10).

But then after the death of Elizabeth, the kings of England began to vacillate. King James I and King Charles I both supported an Anglo-Catholic Church of England, and opposed the Puritans, who sought to purify the Church of England. They certainly opposed the Separatists, who had given up on purifying, and decided to separate and start over with their own church, in a new place – which they did in 1620 by landing at Plymouth Rock. Ten years later, John Winthrop with his Puritans showed up in what they called Boston. Both Puritans and Separatists agreed that Old England was fumbling the opportunity to be the elect of God, so New England was now God's Chosen People.

This is important: They believed Old England was to be God's Chosen Nation but ruined the chance. Now New England was God's Chosen Nation, the successor to biblical Israel – which also meant that it didn't take long for all the American colonies to be seen as God's Chosen Nation, the "City upon a hill." Eventually, this developed into the notion that America was God's Chosen Nation and had a Manifest Destiny.

This is called, “Christian Nationalism,” the merging and mixing of the church and the state. Christian Nationalism was the assumption of John Winthrop of Boston in 1630 and it has been a recurring undercurrent in American history. And when people feel society is falling apart, the stability and order of religion is very tempting, mixing church and state, putting chaplains in the public schools, and trying to funnel public money into private schools (most of which are religious schools) through what the governor calls “school choice” or vouchers. You can call it what you want but I’m calling it Christian Nationalism.

379 years ago, we were called, “incendiaries of commonwealths and the infectors of persons in matters of religion.” Small congregations, like Austin Heights Baptist Church, were threats to religious nationalism then and if we pay attention to our Bibles and to what’s going on around us, we will be now.

From 1631 when he arrived in Boston, until his death in 1683, Roger Williams was one of those the Christian nationalists considered “incendiaries of commonwealths.” He was a Baptist for only a short time – founding the First Baptist Church in America in Providence, Rhode Island in 1638 – but he was always a baptist (see James McClendon, *Doctrine*, ch.11). Williams is a hero of mine and is one reason why I’m still a baptist preacher and why this church remains a baptist church.

One of Williams’ favorite scripture passages was this one we just read. I want to talk about it this morning, with Roger Williams in mind, but of course, with us in mind, too.

Matthew’s chapter 13 is full of Jesus’ agrarian parables: the sower and the seed, the mustard seed, and in today’s lesson the parable of the wheat and the

weeds or as it is sometimes known the parable of the wheat and the tares.

Jesus says a farmer went out to sow good wheat seed in his fields. But somehow, during the night, someone came along and sowed weeds among his wheat. As the young plants grew, the farmhands noticed they had a pretty good crop of weeds growing along with the crop of wheat. So, they came in, a little indignant, “Boss, we’re getting lax around here. You’ve got weeds in your field. Are you ready for us to go out, pull them up, and throw them in the burn pile?! Give us a few days and we’ll have this farm looking good and neat again. Give us permission and we’ll get this society back on the straight and narrow. We’ll do away with all this ‘woke’ stuff and get us back to old-fashioned morality with restrictions on voting and a return to mandated prayer in public schools.”

The farmer said, “No, I want you to be careful. The weed infestation we have is *darnel*, and it not only looks like wheat, it grows right up alongside the wheat plant and intertwines its root system with the root system of the wheat, so when you pull up the darnel, you also pull up the wheat. Therefore, we are going to have to wait until harvest. You fellows lighten up and let it all grow up together and then at harvest we’ll reap all of it and separate it out.”

The farmhands went out, once more reminded of whose farm it was and that they were just servants, not rulers.

As in any parable of Jesus, indeed, in any parts of scripture, it is good to ask where we are in the story. Roger Williams was very attentive to such questions. In verse 38, Jesus says the field was the world. For Williams living in the world meant wheat and weeds live alongside one another, faithful Christians were to live alongside all sorts of people. Some were simply hypocrites, while others might be

heretics, false Christians, idolaters, backsliders, anti-Christians, and all the rest, and much of the time, like the wheat and weeds, you can't easily tell one from another. So here was a mixed and diverse society – a field with wheat and weeds all mixed together – and though the farmworker/civil servants/clergy – might want to pull up the weeds, persecute those who were not considered faithful Christians, Williams saw this parable as saying everyone was to live together peacefully. Someday, God will do the sorting.

Williams was no anarchist, as some accused him. If you broke civil law – you were a thief, got drunk and got in fights, or worse – then Williams said you needed to face civil justice. But civil law and justice had nothing to do with our faith and conscience.

If that was not radical enough for seventeenth century Christian nationalists, Williams even went further. Williams said this included living alongside and peacefully with the Narraganset indigenous people.

Roger Williams had a facility for languages. Soon after arriving in New England in 1631, he reached out to the local indigenous people and learned their language. Eventually, his being able to speak their language developed personal relationships, opened trade opportunities, agricultural helps, and allowed him the diplomatic ability to peacefully work through conflict. Besides and perhaps most importantly, knowing their language opened a window into their culture and allowed Williams to see things from the Narraganset perspective.

In turn, when he was banished from Massachusetts Bay Colony in the winter of 1635 the Narragansets took him in and gave him shelter. In the spring, Williams purchased land from them to found what became Providence, Rhode Island.

Williams believed the local indigenous people were creatures of God just like everyone else and were to be treated with respect and dignity. He did not believe in the doctrine of discovery that said that European Christians could take whatever they wanted from non-Christian people.

Now Williams did not believe in some sort of live-and-let-live-everyone-is-spiritual-in-their-own-way. He had a strong doctrine of human sin and the only chance we have is by the grace of the living God. But the grace of God can only be known freely and non-coercively. You can't force it; you can't go around and pull up the weeds. You cannot and must not use violence. Williams believed that most of the corruption and sinfulness of the church and so-called Christian society over the previous 13 centuries was due to Christians using violence and persecution to force their way. Only a free conscience can respond to the grace of God and the grace of God only comes nonviolently.

In 1644, the same year that the Massachusetts Bay Colony outlawed the Baptists, Roger Williams was in England pleading the case of giving Providence its own charter so it would not have to answer to the Bay Colony. Williams wrote his most famous book that same year, *The Bloody Tenet of Persecution* in which he said, "Men's consciences ought in no sort to be violated, urged, or constrained. And whenever men have attempted anything by this violent course, whether openly or by secret means, the issue has been pernicious, and the cause of great and wonderful innovations in the principallest and mightiest kingdoms and countries" (p. 13). And he went on to say, "That cannot be a true religion which needs carnal weapons to uphold it."

Also, that same year, Williams' good friend John Milton wrote to the English Parliament, "Let [Truth] and Falsehood grapple; who ever knew Truth put to the worse, in a free and open encounter?" (*Areopagitica*).

Milton was pleading his case that the English Parliament should not be banning, censoring, and restricting books. For Milton, all truth comes from God and if you give Truth room and freedom, it will win out eventually.

Williams was saying the same thing about conscience. God is at work and does not need, indeed, does not want coercion or force. Leave conscience alone and let God work.

As I mentioned, Williams started a Baptist church in 1638. It was the first Baptist church in America. But the more Williams read the book of Revelation the more convinced he became that the true church would only come about when Christ came again. He eventually left the Baptist church, though he always defended and supported Baptists through all his and our trials and tribulations.

Williams wrote In his 1644 book, *The Bloody Tenent of Persecution*, that God had made "[A] hedge or wall of separation between the garden of the church and the wilderness of the world." He explained that every time, the state tried to interfere with conscience or with faith, that it was crossing the wall and interfering in God's garden. For Williams religious liberty, freedom of conscience, meant the state stayed out of it. God's intention is that there is a separation.

About a hundred and fifty years later, when Thomas Jefferson was President, he received a letter from the Danbury Baptists in Danbury, Connecticut. The Baptists wrote to Jefferson to commend him for his stand in favor of religious



liberty and to express their dissatisfaction with the church-state relationship in Connecticut. Religious liberty meant that church and state must be separate.

Jefferson wrote back, “Believing with you that religion is a matter which lies solely between Man and his God, ... I contemplate with sovereign reverence that act of the whole American people which declared that their legislature should ‘make no law respecting an establishment of religion, or prohibiting the free exercise thereof,’ thus building a wall of separation between Church and State.” (January 1, 1802).

So, do you have an idea of why the Christian Nationalists of Massachusetts Bay Colony outlawed the Baptists? Do you have an idea of why Roger Williams is so important?

Finally, hear me on this. I have a suggestion: We change our name to “Austin Heights Incendiaries of Commonwealths Church.”

In the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. One True God, Mother of us all. Amen.