

**Separation Anxiety**  
**Matthew 13:24-30, 36-43**  
**Rev. Steve McCoy**  
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**First United Methodist Church**  
**Marquette, MI**

This past week we observed our Father-Son tradition of watching the festivities of the Baseball All-Star game. Particularly intriguing was Texas Rangers outfielder Josh Hamilton. He participated in the Home Run Derby contest and set a record for the most hit in a single round with 28. Impressive yes, but so what? Well the so what is that for the last 3 years he was out of baseball completely. Hamilton had a drug and Alcohol problem that threatened to stymie his career let alone his life. No team would take him on so he was keeping up his baseball skills by putting coins in the machine at public batting cages. Finally he made commitment to Christ, got himself clean and sober, and a personal coach, and made his way back into baseball this year and has been the feel good story of the summer. Of note is the fact that he says even when he goes out to restaurants or to a teammates house or anywhere for that matter, he always takes someone with him. He does not trust himself that he won't slip up and go back to his old habits. He will carry those daemons of addiction with him for ever. Because of that he is ever cautious of how subtly that enemy in his life can plant a seed. He is always on guard.

Hamilton is a good life example of the good seed that too often can get tangled up in the weeds. The weeds will be there forever, and cannot be fully plucked because that would also destroy the good that is there. So careful attention must be paid in order that they don't take over but that the plant survives.

All of us have those things we depend on, and when we are parted from them we experience a separation anxiety fearing consciously or unconsciously, what life would be like without them. Now some of these things do good in our lives and others are destructive, yet we cling to all of them equally, because we don't know what else to do. It is part of our make up as human beings.

Jesus knows this and he knows what can happen if those things are not separated in the correct way. Lives and livelihoods can be destroyed if we do not take care to handle those things with the proper attention. How many times have we sought to pluck out that part of our life or to help another in some way only to have utterly destroyed what we were seeking to preserve.

An editorial by Bill McNabb in The Door some years ago briefly elaborated on this idea:

I had an old seminary professor who began and ended his apologetics lecture with one sentence: "You defend God like you defend a lion -- you get out of

his way." God, it seems, has never had much trouble with his enemies -- it's his friends who give him fits. . . . The theologian Karl Rahner put it this way: "The number one cause of atheism is Christians. Those who proclaim God with their mouths and deny Him with their lifestyles is what an unbelieving world finds simply unbelievable." Perhaps the best defense of God would be to just keep our mouths shut and live like He told us to. The gospel would then have such power and attraction that we wouldn't have to worry about defending it.<sup>1</sup>

In Seminary a student pastor was relating a story of a woman who called him concerned for her husband. He had lost his job and also had a drinking problem. She was concerned this situation might tip him over the edge. The supervisor asked him how responded to the problem. He said that he sat the man down and told him flat out that he had an obligation to his family and he had better make sure he stayed on the narrow path or there would be a judgment waiting for him. The flabbergasted supervisor said why on earth would you have said that! Because it's the truth and no matter hard the bible says it will set us free. The supervisor said yes the truth can sometimes be harsh and it will set us free but when we are ready to be set free. There is also an old saying of not kicking a man while they are down. I'm not sure what happened after that but the lesson was clear, we must be careful in plucking out the weeds of life, and not ripping up the good root as well.

The English author, C. S. Lewis, in one of his books, points out that when people become Christians, if they are not careful, their sinning often shifts from the overt, outward, visible sins of lying, cheating, stealing, cursing and swearing, to the more inward, hidden, non-apparent invisible ones ... and among them he lists "a critical spirit" ... a spirit of judgmentalism, a censorious attitude. In fact, he points out that this sin is one of transgression which is more commonly committed by church people than by those who are not. So prevalent is it in churchly circles, that it is sometimes labeled "Christian cruelty."

In the church we can inadvertently practice this as well. Churches plant good seed all the time. We tend it help it grow but then after a while take these things for granted. Weeds can grow in them and they can become overrun. But to separate ourselves with these things can be a difficult process. They have always been there (or so we think) so some will attempt to nurture it again only to find that we wind up nurturing the weeds rather than what we seek to preserve. Others will want to come in and get rid of it completely. That action also causes problems too as we have demonstrated, because they all are attached to one another. When we separate that from the rest of our life, then there is too drastic a change and we can kill the whole thing. When the time is right, it will be time to take what we have and let it go. We will have to separate out what is good in our

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<sup>1</sup> *Bill McNabb, quoted by Brian Stoffregen, Exegetical Notes*

church and what is not. However, we must be mindful to discern when that time is. Some will always be anxious about change, so we may cater to them too much and end up feeding those weeds of judgment and doubt. Some will want to move too fast, and we will lose the roots, the foundations that make us who we are. But if we are listening for God's time, then we will move ahead with some anxiety, but will be ready to say goodbye to that which can no longer help us grow, plant new things that will help us grow, and be mindful to not let our anxieties get in the way of what God might have us do. We know the bad seeds will be planted and we must tend to those, but also not be discouraged. Let us not be anxious but hopeful, about what God can do in all of our lives, if we trust in the grace of Christ.