

Sermon by Reid Murchison at St. James, July 20, 2008

Texts: Psalm 86: 11-17; Romans 8: 12-25; Matthew 13:24-30,36-43

If you were being polled about the state of the world, how would you answer these polling questions:

Is the world getting safer?

Does the future look brighter than the present?

Is America on the right track?

Are the relationships in your life as good as they used to be?

According to recent surveys of Americans, many feel unease. As a whole, we American consumers are less optimistic about the future than we have been in 40 years.

As a Christian, I might wish for a quickening of God's Kingdom. I might wish that God would come in like a good western sheriff, take charge and clean up the mess by getting rid of all the corrupt, incompetent, heretical or downright malicious bad guys.

But that may not be the way things work in the Kingdom of God, this side of Jesus' second coming.

In the parable we heard this morning, Jesus issues a word of caution about trying to root out the bad guys and trouble makers. He says the Kingdom of God is like a farmer who sows good seed in his field, but one day wakes up to see his beautiful wheat field full of weeds. When the field hands ask if they should go pull up all the weeds, he says, "No". He points out that in gathering up the weeds they would inevitably uproot much of the wheat as well. So they are to let the wheat and the weeds grow together until the harvest, when the wheat and the weeds will be separated. The wheat will be stored in dry barns and the weeds will be thrown into the fire.

Jesus goes on to explain the parable to his disciples this way: The Son of Man, a title often used for Jesus, comes into the world sowing good seed. The stalks of wheat into which the good seed grows are the children of the Kingdom. They're the good guys (and some of us may want to count ourselves among them). In their midst, the devil has sown weeds, who are the children of evil. They're the bad guys.

Now, like in any good western, we would expect this story to end with the vindication of the good guys and the defeat of the bad guys. And that's exactly how this parable ends: The bad guys will be thrown into the furnace of fire where there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth. The good guys will shine like the sun.

One tack this sermon could take at this point would be to stress the hopeful point that good will triumph over evil. And thereby encourage us to keep up the good fight, enduring our sufferings, for God's victory and glory await his children-the children of the Kingdom-at the end. This is part of what St. Paul was saying in the passage we heard from his letter to the Romans.

Another tack would be to try my hand at fire and brimstone, issuing a stern warning to all of us that if we want to avoid the fires of hell we better make sure we're on the side of the good guys and oppose all evildoers.

But what I have been most struck by in this parable, as I have lived with it over the past couple of weeks, is what Jesus seems to saying to me-and perhaps to you-about how we are to live in relation to evil-in relation to all the weeds crowding in around us-in the here and now.

When asked by the workers if they should get rid of the weeds-the evildoers and troublemakers-the owner rather emphatically says, "No." Let them grow together with the wheat. In this response, I hear Jesus saying to me, who would like to a child of the Kingdom, 'Your job is to be good seed, to bear good fruit, to help build up the kingdom. Your job is not to worry about the weeds. Your job is not to get rid of the weeds, or even to spend time trying to figure out who the weeds are. That's God's job. And he'll handle it in his own good time.'

That's what I hear Jesus saying to me. And it really goes against my natural grain. Just as his teaching about turning the other cheek, or praying for my enemies, or removing the log in my own eye before pointing out the speck in another's does.

Why would Jesus so emphatically tell us not to try to get rid of the weeds? Why would he tell us not to try to root out the bad guys?

The answer given in the parable is that we would wind up taking out a lot of good with the bad. In war, the military calls that collateral damage. If you see the new Batman movie, "The Dark Knight," you will see lots of collateral damage accompanying the effort to root out the mob and the rest of Gotham's underworld. Jesus says the collateral damage is too great. It's not worth it. We may even do more harm than good.

Jesus' life, teaching and intimate knowledge of Hebrew history point to other reasons: first, he knows it won't work. You get rid of one problem person only to find yourself with another. This happened over and over again to the Hebrews in relation to their leaders. It happens in most political revolutions-take Robert Mugabe in Zimbabwe for example.

It happens with our politicians, or corporate CEOs, and even church leaders. I was involved in a ministry once that had among its senior staff and board a couple of difficult, obstructive members who seemed to be causing all our problems. They were eventually eased out. But many of the same problems persisted. I remember one

exasperated board member, a seasoned bishop, ask, "We got rid of the poison, so why are we still toxic?"

It also happens at the personal level. One man who had left his wife for another woman confided in me not too long ago that he had traded in one set of problems for another.

Second, Jesus knows why it won't work. When asked by the angry crowd if they should proceed to stone the woman they had caught red handed in the act of adultery, as Moses had commanded, Jesus eventually gives into their blood thirst by saying "whoever is without sin should cast the first stone." One by one the crowd disperses, leaving the adulteress alone with Jesus. None is without sin.

Jesus knows that my heart is full of weeds. That's why he says "Judge not lest, you be judged." Alexander Solzhenitsyn expressed what Jesus knew when he said "the line between good and evil runs through every human heart." The Joker in the new Batman movie knows this, and he uses the knowledge that no one is without flaw to cut down Gotham's hero, the good, decent DA, Harvey Dent.

That's why vigorous efforts to clean up society, or make the world safe for democracy, or purify the church by getting rid of weeds, evildoers, heretics and troublemakers won't work.

It's not what Jesus came to do. He said, "I did not come into the world to condemn it." He came to save it. He said, "I did not come for the well, but for the sick. I did not come for the righteous, but for sinners."

It's not what the psalmist asks God to do when he's best by arrogant who rise up against him. He doesn't ask God to do away with his opponents; he asks for a sign of God's favor so that his opponents might be ashamed-and change.

Though Jesus opposed evil and stood up to his opponents, and pointed out the errors of their ways and their thinking, he never sought to get rid of them. He came to convert them-he was constantly calling people to repent, to change their way of thinking and living. He came to redeem them. He came this way because he loved them.

In this time of great strife within our Anglican Communion, it is well to remember that Jesus' parable of the wheat and the weeds is not a description of the world; it is a description of the Kingdom of God.

I can easily imagine Jesus saying, 'the Church is like a wheat field that is full of weeds. Let them grow together. For I have come to redeem the weeds. I have come in love to change the hearts of the bad guys, and so transform them into something good. When you search for evil don't forget to look into the mirror. Relax, I will take care of whatever remains unredeemed on the last day. That's my job, not yours.'

I can imagine hearing Jesus saying to me, 'Reid, I know your heart is like a wheat field that is full of weeds. Don't try to smother them or rip them out. Let the weeds and the wheat grow together. I have come to redeem the weeds. So acknowledge them; submit them to me; let me convert them into something good. And I will take care of whatever remains unredeemed on the last day. That's my job, not yours.'

Amen.