

July 20, 2014

In the name of the Father, Son and Holy Spirit. Amen

When first-time visitors slip into A Trinity pew before or during our Sunday service , they are much more likely to be noticed than if they were attending one of the so-called Mega Churches in the Chicago area.

I am told that newcomers usually arrive with a number of anxieties. Will I look out of place? How will I be treated? Will I do something to embarrass myself? And those of us with a more limited understanding of the American English language...will I understand what's going on in the service?

Along with these practical worries, there are those with more serious spiritual anxieties. I have read that "church shoppers" are sometimes on the verge of giving up on Christianity because their experience is that many churches have a narrow view of what's acceptable in the world, and they have heard their quota of baloney filled sermons.

Church-shoppers are on guard for signs of a so-called "arrogant certainty." Spiritual confidence when coupled with humility can be inspiring, but claims of absolute certainty in knowing the truth about God can be a real negative to those of us with some doubt and looking for reassurance about the existence of God.

If the pastor or congregants claim absolute certainty regarding the ultimate destiny of others – who will be welcomed into God's kingdom and who will not – then if I was the newcomer I would run for the exit.

I have seldom if ever heard it in this community but in some where I have assisted, I have heard people who are self-satisfied and certain of who is saved and who is lost. I have asked myself in the past: "Why is it that those who tout this divide with such certainty always seem to be speaking as members of the "in" group and never consider that they themselves might be on the outside of the Kingdom?"

The Gospel of Matthew today appears to be one of those passages that speaks of a divide between those received into God's eternal kingdom and those condemned to the outer darkness.

Jesus tells a parable that begins in a similar fashion to last Sunday's passage, The Sower and the Seeds. Only in today's parable, the focus is neither on the Sower nor the abundant crop that results.

Today's parable tells of the evil one who slipped into a farmer's field under the cover of darkness and sowed weeds among the wheat. As the wheat begins to grow, weeds appear entwined in with the healthy crops.

When the farmhands see the weeds they are puzzled, so they march up to the farmer and say, "Master, didn't you sow good seed in this field? Where did these weeds come from?"

The farmer responds, "An enemy has done this." The farmhands quickly volunteer to come to the rescue. They say, "We will straighten things out. C'mon, boys, let's pull out all those darn weeds!"

"Not so fast," says the farmer, "That won't work. If you yank out the weeds, you'll pull up the wheat along with it.

Why don't we do this.....let them grow together until harvest time. Then, I'll send out the reapers with instructions to bind the weeds in bundles to be burned, and to gather the wheat for the barn.

Like the parable of The Sower and the Seeds, this parable comes with an attached interpretation, but this week it is our Lord that provides the explanation.

Jesus explains to his disciples that the one who sows the good seed is the Son of Man. The good seed represents the children of the kingdom and the weeds are the children of the Devil.

At the end of the age, the angels will collect all causes of sin and evildoers and pitch them into the fire. Then, the righteous will shine like the sun in God's kingdom.

Well that sounds all well and good doesn't it? There is good and there is evil. There is the good young man, Harry Potter and there is the evil wizard Lord Voldemort. There is Luke Skywalker and Darth Vader. Batman and the Joker. Cowboys in white hats and bad boys in black hats.

We all know this story.....it is easy....we know who is wheat and who is weed. The wheat is us here in the church and the weeds are those who are elsewhere on a Sunday morning.

If we live under that illusion we are in for the biggest shock in our lives.....

In Jesus' day, kings were powerful and ruthless. They demanded obedience and enforced it with the sword. When Jesus announced that a new kingdom was dawning – the kingdom of God – he was announcing the beginning of a revolution that would overturn the kingdoms of this world.

Some Old Testament prophets indeed foretold a day when God would set the world right. The oppressed would be set free, the hungry would be fed, hostilities would cease and peace would reign.

Jesus announced that with his ministry, the long awaited revolution was now underway. Those who were suffering were delighted to hear of the revolution, but those who were benefitting from the way things were.... were less than enthusiastic.

According to Matthew, those who followed Jesus and supported his revolution were the wheat. They were right with God and they did what was right to others. Those who opposed him and resisted his revolution were the weeds. They were sorely lacking in the justice and mercy department.

The key to understanding this parable is to remember that Matthew wrote his gospel for a beleaguered minority who were trying to remain faithful in the face of persecution. He was assuring them that despite their current suffering, and what appeared to be the triumph of the enemies of Christ, there would be a day of reckoning when God would sort it all out and reward those who remained faithful.

In our day, we can quickly jump to false conclusions if we take the parable out of its original context. We run the risk of imagining that we possess more insight than is humanly possible as to who falls into the categories of good and evil. Haven't we all known someone we thought was a wonderful human being until we discovered their dark side? And haven't we also known dubious characters who surprised you by their acts of compassion?

Russian writer and winner of the Nobel Prize in literature, Alexander Solzhenitsyn, was arrested, sentenced to a forced labor camp and eventually exiled from the Soviet Union. He witnessed cruel acts and experienced harsh punishment. He could have easily written about the clear distinctions between people who were good and people who were evil.

Instead, he wrote these words: “Gradually it was disclosed to me that the line separating good and evil passes not through states, nor between (social) classes, nor between political parties, but right through every human heart...

This line shifts. Inside us, it oscillates with the years. Even within hearts overwhelmed by evil, one small bridgehead of good is retained; and even in the best of all hearts, there remains a small corner of evil... If only there were evil people somewhere insidiously committing evil deeds, and it were necessary only to separate them from the rest of us and destroy them. But the line dividing good and evil cuts through the heart of every human being.” Is not this the reason that Jesus taught us to pray, “Lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from evil”? Our motives are not always pure and we do not always do what is right.

We must turn to a greater power in order to be forgiven and delivered from evil. Rather than handing us a justification for declaring who is wheat and who is weed, this parable “is a cautionary tale, warning us to beware of the weed pulling impulse – the moral need to improve the field based on our own limited judgment.” That is why the farmer prevents us hired hands from yanking out the weeds. He knows our perspective is skewed and our judgments are often faulty.

Moreover, when we take the full gospel story into account, we see a much more complex situation than simple stock characters that are either wheat or weed. In fact, rather than avoiding the weeds, Jesus sought them out; rather than condemning. Our Lord is in the business of transformation; He was constantly healing the ill, finding the lost, extending forgiveness and turning lives around.

Some years ago, a colleague of mine, Vivian, told me what happened in her home state of Georgia a few years ago when a state representative stood up and spoke to the legislature. The elected official said that during the 19th century, “all of his ancestors owned slaves. His great-great grandfather had fought for the South in the Civil War. He and his third-grade classmates had cheered when the news was announced in his classroom that President John F. Kennedy had been shot. His college fraternity had ostracized six of its members when they discovered they were gay.

He told of the African-American woman who had raised him, changed his diapers, and taught him more than anyone else the difference between right and wrong. He told them how one day when he was a boy leaving for school she had leaned over to kiss him on the cheek. And he had averted his head because he assumed that a white boy should not allow an African-American woman kiss him.

He spoke of the shame he had carried over that incident. He said, 'On the day we buried that magnificent woman, I pledged to myself that never again would I look in the mirror and know that I had let prejudice or hate or indifference to negatively impact another person's life.' Then he said, 'I finally figured out that the only way we are ever going to make progress is when people take a stand against injustice. I urge the House to pass this hate-crimes bill to protect racial minorities and gays.' And so they did."There are weeds lurking in the best of us and wheat to be discovered in the worst of us. May we resist the temptation to rush to judgment, knowing that God can burn away the weeds in each of us and harvest what is good in all of us.

.Amen