

Sermons at
First Lutheran Church (ELCA)
Reggie Denton, Pastor

July 23, 2023 (Proper 11, Year A)
Matthew 13:24-30, 36-43

I saw a meme the other day that highlighted that when we were kids, our parents just sent us outside, and didn't expect us BACK until supper, or later, but today's parents need to know where the kids are going, how many people will be there, what they will be doing and who the adult will be, as well as the cell phone numbers for everyone. I laughed because I have kids too, but SADLY, I ALSO thought, "But that was before children being TAKEN was so COMMON."

Today's gospel reading points out a reality we are ALL too aware of: evil lives among us. We'd love to stamp evil out, but most of the time, we can't tell the DIFFERENCE between the good and the bad. We can't tell the difference between the friendly stranger and the child KIDNAPPER and WORSE. We can't tell between a regular, anonymous person and the mass shooter. We can't tell between the good religious person and the fanatic bomber. Evil lives among us. We live in a scary world.

Satan is subtle. He sows his bad seed secretly, and the weeds spring up, even in the most unexpected places. We're shocked to find them coming up all over the place—in the world around us, and even in the CHURCH. They CORRUPT the places we THOUGHT were safe. We KNOW PLACES of beauty and wonder, but the world also has dark places and cruelty. The church can be inspiring and courageous one moment, and petty and faithless the next. The good and the bad seem to come together; they grow up NEXT to each other.

So what are we to DO about these weeds? The servants in the parable thought THEY knew. They wanted to rush into the field and YANK OUT ANYTHING that even LOOKED like a weed. It seems like the natural thing to do. When you have a problem, you DEAL with it; you get RID of it. When we come across weeds, our first instinct is to RIP them out, immediately.

But the problem in the parable was that even the most EXPERIENCED farmer couldn't tell the DIFFERENCE between the weed and the wheat. A little background here: The weed was a COMMON weed in Palestine called bearded darnel, which was a CURSE for farmers. The weed had to be separated from the GOOD grain, because its seeds were slightly poisonous, but in its early stages, darnel looked EXACTLY LIKE the wheat. So in their haste, the servants might have ripped out the WHEAT, thinking it was a weed. And later, when both the wheat and the weed had "headed out" and produced seeds, the two COULD be distinguished by color, but by then, their roots had grown together and intertwined. So BY RIPPING OUT the weeds, they would have uprooted the WHEAT as well. The servants would have done more HARM than good. In their recklessness they might have damaged the whole crop.

It isn't so different in our LIVES, and in the CHURCH. In trying to do good, sometimes we actually do HARM, and we HURT people.

Remember the Crusades? The Crusaders set out with the mission to convert as many people as possible to Christianity. Their INTENTION was GOOD. But their METHODS were BRUTAL. They FORCED people to convert by the sword. Their philosophy was that if a person WOULDN'T convert to Christianity, their life wasn't WORTH anything ANYWAY, so they KILLED them. They SLAUGHTERED thousands. Sure, out of fear, they "*converted*" a lot of people, but BEHIND them they ALSO left a trail of intense HATRED of Christianity. The people in that part of the world never FORGOT the Christians' BRUTALITY, and, as a result, it took CENTURIES for the church to make any progress in those regions. The Crusaders' INTENTION was noble – they wanted to spread the Gospel – but they ended up doing more HARM than good.

The church now may not be MURDERING people, but conversion by fear is still a favorite tactic for many Christians. They tell people that if they don't take Jesus as their savior, they'll burn in

hell for all eternity. But a fear-based gospel, driven by the threat of punishment, is no gospel at all. It's not "good news"; it's control, manipulation and deception.

And these days there are also a lot of self-appointed morality police out there, judging and condemning people. But as the Rev. Benjamin Cremer put it:

Christianity SHOULD sound like, "Because I trust God and am grateful for Grace, I am committed to deepening my love for others and seeking their best"

Not...(as we seem to hear all the time)

"I am obsessed with how others are not conforming to MY own personal beliefs and I must MAKE them DO so by ANY means necessary."

Somewhere under all that hate, those Christians THINK they're doing a good thing – defending God and God's Word.

But God doesn't NEED to be defended, because He's GOD, and Christians who DO defend Him, are usually doing more HARM than good. One old seminary professor said this: "You defend God like you defend a LION – you GET OUT of his WAY."

If you use God's Word as a HAMMER to BEAT people down, then you're not USING it RIGHT. There's an old saying that goes: "God knows what to DO with his enemies; it's his FRIENDS that are the problem." The theologian Karl Rahner put it this way: "The number one CAUSE of atheism is CHRISTIANS."

There's a good REASON why we're not supposed to JUDGE others. We just LOOK at a person and make all kinds of SNAP judgments about them. We look at the way they're dressed, and we decide how much they make and how stylish they are. We talk to them for five minutes, and we think we know how intelligent they are and how spiritual they are. We make up our MINDS about a person before we really give them a CHANCE.

I know this from experience. When I was in elementary school, I was a really big and awkward kid. And with all the moving around my family had done in the military, I was having a hard time adjusting. I thought, "Why make new friends when you're just going to move again," so I didn't have many friends and I wasn't doing well in school. The people at my school were CONCERNED about me, so they sent me to a psychologist. The psychologist did a few tests, and do you know what he concluded? He was convinced that I was developmentally disabled—of course the words were much less politically correct back then—he said I was retarded. He recommended that I be taken out of my school and sent to a SPECIAL school immediately. The school was going to do it too, but my parents fought it. They got a second opinion and got me back INTO school.

Now, I don't know what that psychologist based his decision on, but I'm sure it had NOTHING to do with my intelligence. That ONE MAN'S decision, which I'm sure was made with GOOD intentions, could have made my life VERY DIFFICULT. A couple footnotes: That psychologist was FIRED, and when I graduated from high school, I was the class VALEDICTORIAN. All I needed was a little TIME.

It's a good thing WE are not allowed to judge. OUR judgments are TOO QUICK and MUCH TOO HARSH. We are merciless—without mercy. We want to rip out those weeds and throw them into the fire.

But there's something we keep forgetting. We forget that WE, too, are MIXTURES. We have weeds in US, WITH the wheat. The Gospel tells us that we shouldn't expect ANYONE to be PERFECT, ANY MORE than we can expect OURSELVES to be perfect. A PASTOR can't be perfect. Nor can a CONGREGATION consider ITSELF to be ONLY wheat, with NO weeds at all. NO ONE is sinless.

In all OUR MIXTURES of weed and wheat, what if WE were ripped out by the roots? If it weren't for the grace of God, who IS MERCIFUL, that would be OUR fate.

You know, JESUS didn't WEED OUT the DISCIPLES, and he CERTAINLY COULD have. At one point, Jesus says to Peter: "Get behind me, Satan! You are a stumbling block to me." (16:23) And

on the night of the Last Supper, he says, "This very night, you will deny me three times." He says to the disciples, "You will all become deserters because of me this night." He even washed JUDAS' FEET, and ate the LAST SUPPER WITH him, KNOWING what he would do. And Jesus DIDN'T WEED THEM out.

Thankfully, our LORD'S judgments are DIFFERENT than ours. The farmer in the parable knew that you can't tell the difference between the good and bad, until they BEAR FRUIT. We're not judged by any ONE thing we do; we're judged by our ENTIRE LIVES. God, in his MERCY, gives us time. Maybe the young plant, that LOOKED like a weed at FIRST, might MATURE into WHEAT.

And let's REALLY stretch this parable. God may even bring a MIRACLE and TURN the weed INTO wheat. I'm thinking about weeds like Justin Johnson and Rich Liljenquist, who battled their personal demons for YEARS. What if the morality police had gone after THEM, and tried to RIP them out – told them they were going to HELL if they didn't straighten up? Would that have HELPED them? No. But given time and REAL help, God CHANGED them into WITNESSES that were able to help OTHERS.

Praise the LORD that we have a PATIENT and MERCIFUL God, abounding in steadfast love. God, in his MERCY, gives us TIME.

Let's end with a prayer. This is by author Kelli Bachara. Let us pray:

(Lord,) When I'm feeling lost and not sure who I am, You still know me.
When I mess up for the millionth time, You still want me.
When I don't know how I could ever bring glory to your kingdom, You still call me.
When I'm broken and in pain, You still hold me.
When I keep falling into sin, You still desire me.
When I turn away because I think I know what's best, You still pursue me.
When I question you and your promises, You're still beside me.
When I absolutely do not deserve you, You still love me.
And that is what makes you unlike anything else in this entire world.
You, Jesus, are our greatest gift.

Amen. And amen.