

July 20, 2008
Matt. 13:24-30, 36-43

JUDGE, SHEPHERD, SOWER SAVIOR

We had the most wonderful week here at the church. Every morning the sanctuary was full of children singing, dancing and laughing, not to mention a slew of adult—normally very dignified adults—doing the same thing. Every day had a different theme based on a Gospel story that taught the children that Jesus gives them the power to be thankful, to help others, to be brave, to live forever and to tell others how wonderful it all is.

A lot of people worked really hard for a lot of hours to make it fun and a lasting learning experience. We had about 50 kids in the program who don't go to this church in addition to our own children. Heather Kidd did an amazing job keeping those kids entertained, and keeping the whole thing from being a total zoo, which would have taken about 2 minutes without her management skills. She stayed cheerful and enthusiastic even when someone asked her if our VBS was Biblically based.

The question was such a disconnect that I think it caught Heather off guard. The answer is yes. And I don't know about other places, but VBS at Fellowship is all about the Bible and our VBS volunteers made learning fun and interesting.

Jesus used the same kind of tactics – he used a variety of methods to teach people and using parables was one of them.

So, the story today is about a farmer who plants a nice wheat crop with the seeds he carefully picked out from last year's crop. After the planting, he carefully tends the field and waits for the wheat to grow. But, when the wheat starts coming up he realizes something has gone amiss.

There are mass quantities of weeds growing right up with that beautiful, expensive wheat.

So, the farm hands want to go rushing off without thinking things through. Just tear those weeds up. But the farmer says no, if you try to do that, you will end up doing major damage to the wheat. We have no choice. We have to let both of them grow together until the harvest. Then, we'll separate the wheat out and get rid of the weeds.

Actually as parables go, this one is not the hardest understand. But apparently, it presented a problem for the disciples because this is one they want him to explain later on when they're in their small group session. So, Jesus tries again. He wants to be sure they get it.

Number 1—There is evil and there is good in the world. Number 2—At the end of the age, Christ will separate the evil from the good. Number 3—in the meantime, they are going to co-exist.

What is so hard about that? There is good and there is bad. We are the creatures, God is the creator. Those who follow Christ are children of the kingdom and in the end Christ will dispose of the evil ones while the children of the kingdom will shine like the sun. It's a beautiful, comforting thought.

Actually, there are a lot of things about this that are hard. For one thing, we all have this compunction to take on the evil ourselves. When we hear about evil in the world, there is something in us that says "we need to do something about that." We need to fix it.

In fact, we are *required* by our own faith in Christ always to seek justice especially for the poor and marginalized members of society.

Especially when the "we" we are talking about is not only the most powerful country on the face of the earth, it is a free country where we have

a voice in how it is run and we have the means and resources to work for the very kingdom that Jesus told us about.

But seeking justice which clearly Christ calls us all to do all times, is not necessarily the same thing as rooting out evil.

That does not mean the point of the story is that we can or should just ignore evil in the world. Remember, the Gospel of Matthew was not written for the purpose of informing the dominant segment of society. Just the opposite. Matthew was written by a 1st century Jewish Christian for 1st century Jewish Christians living in the Roman Empire. Everybody in that society, except Caesar himself, was seriously oppressed and the Jews were the oppressed of the oppressed. And it's pretty clear that those who were among the first to be Baptized thought they were signing on for the short course. That Jesus was going to return in the foreseeable future, and then they wouldn't be the oppressed any more. But by the time Matthew gets written down, maybe 45 years or more after the resurrection, they are starting to realize it may be awhile.

The message to them was don't be discouraged. The evil in the world can co-exist without sucking you down with it. Hang in there, be children of the kingdom while you are here and in the end, Christ *will* eradicate all of that evil and it will no longer exist to harm you.

And that message does apply today. Just like we taught the children in VBS, the knowledge of Jesus gives us the power to be brave and the power to live forever.

That is still the important message even though, unlike 1st century Jews, we are not entirely without power to oppose the evil that surrounds us. The fact is, it still exists in spite of the spread of Christianity. And here we are, not the oppressed of the oppressed in the world, but the privileged of the

privileged. It is only right for us to want to do something about the evil we see happening in the world.

I say “we” have an urge to do something about it. But, when it comes to using force to uproot evil, the *we*, we are talking about tends to be the royal we. I’m not talking about personally exposing myself to any great risk.

My Dad used to tell a story about his mother that illustrates this point. He grew up hearing about how at the beginning of World War I, she went to graduate school and got her masters in chemistry so that she could take a man’s job thereby “freeing up” that man to go fight in the war. My Dad always bought into what a noble thing that was for her to do until he was a 20 year old man on the front in World War II (thinking maybe he would just as soon have been able to keep whatever spot he otherwise would have been in if it hadn’t been freed-up for him.) He and millions like him before and after put themselves in harms way to resist evil on behalf of people like me who will never have to.

My Dad would never talk about the specifics of his experience as a soldier. We knew that his hearing was permanently damaged by an explosion, or maybe multiple explosions too close to his head. The last thing he wanted was for his own children to be soldiers—so of course that was exactly what his first son became. He taught us that war was a terrible thing.

But he had no patience with criticism of the decision of the United States to join the allies in World War II, including the decision to develop and use the atomic bomb. He understood that the United States was a country of privilege and power and that there were forces of evil at that time that threatened the very core of the free world. Although he certainly did not have fond memories of being in the army, I don’t think he ever doubted that he—we as a country—had done the right thing.

But he knew that winning that war did not mean that we had eradicated evil from the world. He was all too aware, just as we all are, that evil continues to exist and it will continue to exist until that day when Jesus returns.

And that is why this parable still speaks to us. What I think Jesus is trying to tell us is that judgment in the grand scheme of things is his prerogative, not ours.

No matter how powerful we are, we are not going to kill all the weeds. *Not only that, since we don't know everything that God knows, it really is not up to us to decide who is a weed and who is a wheat. Most people are familiar with the phrase a little earlier in the Gospel of Matthew: "Judge not that ye be not judged."*

It's just like my front yard. James and I did major renovations on our house before we moved in six years ago that involved totally tearing up and re-planting the front yard. We have a little sidewalk that goes from the driveway to the front steps and—I don't know how this happened because this construction project was entirely James' responsibility—but there is a little corner of the yard on one side of the side walk with this beautiful perfect grass and then the whole rest of the yard is another variety. So, the first Spring we were in the house, this little corner of perfect grass pops up and at the same time the rest of the yard looks like it's more weeds than grass. It's all green, so it looks ok from the street but when you actually walk on it you can see there are only a few grass blades compared to all these little leafy plants, that I'm sure have some specific name, but they are not grass, so I call them weeds.

I was quite concerned about all these weeds and my cross examination of James as to why we had one little corner of perfect grass and a yard full of

weedy grass did not lead to any satisfactory answer. So, we went to Tallahassee Nurseries and we bought some expensive, hi-tech weed killer that was supposed to kill only the weeds and not hurt the grass.

But somehow, we never got around to putting that weed killer on the yard. And by the end of June, the whole yard was beautiful grass. Well, there were some weeds left, but really they were in the minority. And every year now it's the same thing. It took me a while but now when I see those weeds in the spring, I just ignore them because I know they are not going to be a problem in another month or so.

We water the grass, and of course we have to mow it (actually this is the royal we again because I have never pushed a lawn mower in my life) or it would turn into one big mess of inseparable weeds and grass. But mostly, we just need to gently care for it and let it go.

The point is, we have to concern ourselves with the weeds of the world. If left totally unattended, they could take over, but as far as day in and day out operations, our main job is to gently care for those that we can. Remembering that Jesus is the Judge, the sower, the shepherd and the savior. Those are the hard jobs. We are the lucky ones because all we have to do is be the nutritious wheat, the obedient sheep and the gratefully saved.