

Seventh Sunday after Pentecost – July 19, 2020

Introduction

As we move into mid-summer, we continue drawing our worship themes from the Gospel of Matthew. Summer is the time of growth as flowers come to full bloom, trees are covered by vibrant green foliage, and vegetable gardens began to provide food for our tables. It is no accident that this theme is picked up in the **Season of Pentecost**. Pentecost is regarded as a time of spiritual growth for those who follow Jesus as his disciples.

In the Common Lectionary that we follow, the Gospel reading take the form of parables that explore the nature of God's Kingdom and the community of faith. On this Seventh Sunday after Pentecost, Jesus talks about the origin of evil and how his disciples should deal with its effects in the world. Jesus tells the story of a farmer who seeds his field with 'good seed' only to have an enemy sow 'bad seed' in the same field at night.

Biblical scholars believe that the parable is rooted in Judean agricultural practice. Wheat, or a similar grain, is originally planted in the field. An enemy then sows tares in the field. Tare is a weed that resembles the young wheat plants so closely that one can hardly tell them apart. When the field workers ask if they should try to remove the offending weed, the master tells them to wait until the final harvest when the distinction between the plants is noticeable. The wheat will be harvested, and the weeds will be burned.

The parable is a warning to the newly forming Christian community. There are no 'purity tests' that enable us to separate good from evil. This does not mean that we should acquiesce to the evil that surrounds us; but rather, that we be cognizant of it and do what we can to mitigate its effects while realizing that God will deal with evil at the final harvest.

We live in a time of extreme polarization in our political and religious convictions. So much so that we can barely talk to each other and hear points of view different than our own. [See last week's sermon on the difference between listening and hearing.] One need only look at the controversy about social distancing and the wearing of masks in public as an example of this polarization. To reinforce our own positions, we often construct *purity tests* to guide our decision making. But tragically, we are incapable of being truly objective and often do unimaginable damage to people and community of faith as we seek 'purity.'

When Jesus explains the Parable of the Wheat and the Tares to his disciples, he reminds them that God will deal with evil and that God is also a God of grace. To quote my sermon: *Grace has everything to do with the way the redeemed practice what they have experienced when it comes to people they regard as sinners.*

Pastoral Note

We will be planning another parking lot communion service at Bethel Lutheran. Members of both Bethel and Immanuel are invited for this short, sacramental service. It is tentatively scheduled for **Wednesday, July 22 at 5: 30 pm.** [Don't forget your face masks].

We are also discussing the possibility of having a Sunday outdoor service at Bethel in a shaded area beginning sometime in August. Members of both congregations will be invited. You will be notified when this happens.

Be safe, continue to socially distance, and wear your face masks. May God bless you.

In Christ ✝,

Pastor Steve

Gospel – Matthew 13:24–30, 36–43

²⁴[Jesus] put before them another parable: “The kingdom of heaven may be compared to someone who sowed good seed in his field; ²⁵but while everybody was asleep, an enemy came and sowed weeds among the wheat, and then went away. ²⁶So when the plants came up and bore grain, then the weeds appeared as well. ²⁷And the slaves of the householder came and said to him, ‘Master, did you not sow good seed in your field? Where, then, did these weeds come from?’ ²⁸He answered, ‘An enemy has done this.’ The slaves said to him, ‘Then do you want us to go and gather them?’ ²⁹But he replied, ‘No; for in gathering the weeds you would uproot the wheat along with them. ³⁰Let both of them grow together until the harvest; and at harvest time I will tell the reapers, Collect the weeds first and bind them in bundles to be burned, but gather the wheat into my barn . . .’”

³⁶Then [Jesus] left the crowds and went into the house. And his disciples approached him, saying, “Explain to us the parable of the weeds of the field.” ³⁷He answered, “The one who sows the good seed is the Son of Man; ³⁸the field is the world, and the good seed are the children of the kingdom; the weeds are the children of the evil one, ³⁹and the enemy who sowed them is the devil; the harvest is the end of the age, and the reapers are angels. ⁴⁰Just as the weeds are collected and burned up with fire, so will it

be at the end of the age. ⁴¹The Son of Man will send his angels, and they will collect out of his kingdom all causes of sin and all evildoers, ⁴²and they will throw them into the furnace of fire, where there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth. ⁴³Then the righteous will shine like the sun in the kingdom of their Father. Let anyone with ears listen!”

“99 and 44/100% pure . . .”

My pastoral prayer this morning is from Psalm 103. This Psalm is a part of the Service for Individual Prayer and Confession. Let us pray.

*The Lord is full of compassion and mercy,
slow to anger and of great kindness.*

*He will not always accuse us,
nor will he keep his anger forever.*

*He has not dealt with us according to our sins,
nor has he rewarded us according to our wickedness.*

*For as the heavens are high above the earth,
so is his mercy great upon those who fear him.*

*As far as the east is from the west,
so far has he removed our sins from us.*

*As a father cares for his children,
so does the Lord care for those who fear him.*

*Glory be to the Father, and to the Son, and to the
Holy Spirit; as it was in the beginning, is now, and ever shall be. Amen.*

Brothers and sisters, grace to you and peace from God our Father and from the Lord Jesus Christ. Amen.

Marketing campaigns make or break a product. Just hearing a simple tune or the first words of a familiar jingle gives us instant product recognition. If you were to hear the words, ‘I would like to teach the world to sing in perfect harmony,’ you would immediately think of **Coca-Cola**. How about ‘Double your flavor, double your fun?’ . . . You undoubtedly would think of **Double Mint Gum**.

Some slogans actually tell you something about the product. **Ivory Soap** is a good example. **Proctor and Gamble** has used two facts to sell their product. You heard them in commercials. First: ‘Ivory soap — It floats.’ And second: ‘Ivory soap — It’s 99 and 44/100th’s percent pure.’

In the late 1880’s Americans, it seems, had a problem. They couldn’t find their bath soap because it always would sink to the bottom of the bathtub. The urban myth is that a

production error at **Proctor and Gamble** in the manufacturing process caused more air to be whipped into the soap mixture before it hardened — thus making a more buoyant, floating soap. This new, exotic soap took American by storm and **'It floats'** became a by-line for Procter and Gamble's new soap.

Then in 1881, Harley Proctor cemented his product's place in America's heart. He labeled his **'Ivory Soap'** as **'99 and 44/100th's percent pure.'** Interestingly however, there were no standards for soap at the time. The new soap was like all the other soaps in the world because it was made out of two components that sounded especially uninviting — *fatty acids and alkali*. But Proctor believed that if he could market his soap as *'purer'* than other soaps, he would win the market. His chemists told him that his Ivory soap had: *.11% uncombined alkali, .28% carbonates, and .17% mineral matter*. If you subtract this from 100%, you get 99 and 44/100th's percent purity . . . a number slightly better than his that of his competitors. What Mr. Procter did was set the standard for purity that matched his soap . . . And then he made it the point of his marketing campaign.

This is all well and good for soaps, cosmetics, and pharmaceuticals, but I think that it becomes problematic when an organization or a nation focuses on 'purity' to define itself. In late 1940's and early 1950's, our nation and its government was torn apart by the *'anti-Communist'* scares prompted by the House Un-American Activities Committee and hearings led by Senator Joe McCarthy of Wisconsin. The lives of many prominent Americans, actors, scientists, union representatives, and university professors, were ruined by allegations that they were *'communists or fellow-travelers.'*

Similarly, 'purity' discussions in the church are not productive. More often than not, it's like a *'circular firing squad.'* No one ever wins these discussions . . . Church history is littered with casualties as one side insists on purging the other. So, we face tough questions: *What does it mean to 'pure enough?' Is 99 and 44/100th's percent purity enough to be pure? Does this mean that there is a pure doctrine . . . a pure faith . . . a pure morality . . . a pure ethics? Are there standards to which we must adhere to be the 'true Church.'* And what happens when we aren't 99 and 44/100th's percent pure?

You know the answer as well as I do. As one looks back on church history, God's people haven't done well in tolerating those with whom they disagree. Let me give you a classic example of a purity discussion gone awry. Consider the witchcraft trials in colonial Salem, Massachusetts. There was a mindset that God's people had to be *'holy,'* And it was believed that a person's holiness could be observed by the way they lived. To be the *People of God* meant that they must be pure; and such a purity could only be achieved if the impure were destroyed. The charge of witchcraft was all that was

needed. Soon, those who were judged to be unacceptable by the citizens of Salem found themselves accused of witchcraft. Petty grievance, personal hatred, and innuendo fueled the developing madness. They knew for certain God's people would return to holiness only when the witches of Salem were destroyed. But unfortunately, those who sought holiness and purity in others, did not possess those qualities themselves.

Unfortunately, Salem Village is not an isolated incident; God's People have often sought to eradicate the unholy from their midst . . . To become, '99 and 44/100th% pure,' if you will. But each time, the result is the same: innocent people get hurt **And God is not served when innocent people die.** Early in his ministry, Jesus had challenged those who sought to limit the type of people accepted by God. Pharisee and Zealot alike, felt the sting of his words. There was no way to separate the 'good' from the 'bad' or the 'holy' from the 'unholy.' To illustrate his point, Jesus told the Parable of the Wheat and the Tares.

The parable drew upon the experience of those who heard Jesus. At one time or another, everyone had sown a field of wheat. And undoubtedly, they also had the misfortune of watching weeds come up with their wheat. In the parable, an enemy had sown the weeds in the field after the good seed had been planted. The servants questioned the master, **"Sir, did you not sow good seed in your field? How then has it weeds? . . . Do you want us to go and gather them?"** The master replied, **"An enemy has done this . . . let both grow together until the harvest, lest in gathering the weeds, you also root up the wheat. I will tell the reapers, 'gather the weeds first and bind them into bundles to be burned, but gather the wheat into my barn . . .'"**

The words of Jesus are addressed to all who consider themselves to be God's People. They are directed to Pharisee, Puritan, and to anyone today who is concerned about the God's people being '99 and 44/100th% pure.' And today, Jesus speaks to us. His parable is as simple as it is direct. God's world has been sown with goodness, but an enemy has deceitfully sown evil in the same field. Both goodness and evil emerge in the world and grow up together. Both good and evil are manifested in the lives of God's people. But God will not allow the rooting out of the evil because, in the process, the good are also destroyed. In the harvest, it is God who will separate the two.

I think that this is word of warning to God's people. Who is saved and who is not saved is the Lord's concern . . . Not ours. In baptism, in the hearing of the Word, and in the eating of the Supper, we are called to faithfulness . . . We are called to live as witnesses to the live-giving grace of God. But we are not called to judge others.

The life-giving good news of this parable is the word of assurance from Jesus. Despite the presence of evil in the world, God will bring his Kingdom into being. He will not be delayed. God is in control and he still ordains the beginning and end of all things. We and our broken world are safely in God's hands. And in these troubled times, we need to hear this promise again and again.

Then we find a word of caution. We are not to take upon ourselves the task of separating the good from the evil. Jesus is emphatic about this. This task belongs to God alone; and to no one else. Today it seems as if the righteous are all too ready to claim this task as their own. As in Salem, the list of those who are identified as being evil suit the prejudices of the moment. This list currently includes AIDS-patients, Arabs, Roman Catholics, Lutherans, born-again Christians, AFDC mothers, LGBTQ+, military people, peace advocates, blacks, whites, the Taliban, Iranians, Americans, the wealthy, the poor, Republicans, and even Democrats. *It all depends upon who is making up the list.* In our rush to judgment, violence is done to the Kingdom and God is not served. There is a touch of irony here. Those who would limit attendance at the banquet of life, may well find themselves without invitations.

And finally, Jesus' parable tells us something about God. He is a God of grace. ***Grace is*** really about God reaching out to a sinful world and receiving sinners . . . ***Grace is*** God forgiving sinners when everything else, and everyone else, says that they will die . . . ***Grace is*** God saving people who have difficulty even admitting that they are sinners. ***Grace is*** God reconciling sinners to Godself and making them whole. So, let me give you another way of thinking about grace: ***Grace has everything to do with the way the redeemed practice what they have experienced when it comes to people they regard as sinners.***

We've come a long way this morning — from Ivory soap to purity in the Church. One more fact about Ivory Soap: *Procter and Gamble* claimed that the inspiration for the soap is Biblical. In one particular translation of Psalm 45 one verse read: 'All thy garments smell of aloes and cassia out of ivory palaces.' It's the image of purity. But notice there is no qualification — no '99 and 44/100th%' pure because ***GOD SO LOVED THE WORLD THAT HE GAVE HIS ONLY SON, THAT WHOEVER BELIEVES IN HIM SHOULD NOT PERISH BUT HAVE ETERNAL LIFE.'***

This means that God is a God of 100%. It is God's will that no one be lost. There is no rush to judgment because God is a patient and a forgiving. And God waits, ever hoping that just one more sinner will be saved. Amen