

Isaiah 44:6-8; Romans 8:12-25; Matthew 13:24-30, 36-43

Grace and Peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ. Amen.

You may be aware that the scripture we use each Sunday is based on a three-year cycle of Biblical passages. The Revised Common Lectionary, as it is called, is used by the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America and other church bodies including the Episcopalian, Presbyterian, and United Methodist denominations. Since we follow that three-year reading cycle, it means that in the summer of 2002, these same lessons were read in worship.

Occasionally I remember my previous sermons on a specific text. But I could not recall the sermon I preached three years ago. So I looked back into my files. Not in order to use it again. Sermons are very much “in the moment,” colored as they are by the events of a particular time. I usually can’t re-use a sermon. But I was curious what I had done with it. Apparently, I didn’t preach at this 10:45 service three years ago—must have been on vacation. I did, however, preach on this Gospel lesson at the Thursday evening service.

You got the gist of the lesson, didn’t you? We have Jesus telling a parable about God’s kingdom. Jesus says the kingdom of heaven can be compared to a landowner who sowed good wheat in his field. But enemies of the landowner have secretly sown weeds in that field. As the weeds and the wheat begin to grow and it becomes obvious to all that weeds are present, the slaves implore the landowner to let them get the weeds out of there. The slaves are ready and willing to do so. But the landowner forbids them, telling them they might uproot the young wheat along with the weeds. Instead, he tells them to wait for the harvest, and only then will he send the reapers to take the weeds and burn them, and gather the wheat into the barn. Then Matthew, our gospel writer, adds a second layer to the story—an allegorical interpretation which assigns a particular identity to each object or character. His take on the parable is this—the field is the world, the Son of Man (Jesus) is the landowner who has sown good seed, the devil is the enemy who has sown evil. The children of God are the good seed, but now there are enemies in their midst. At the end of the age, the Son of Man will collect the weeds—all sin and evildoers—and destroy them. Then the righteous will shine like the sun in the kingdom of God.

Three years ago I focused on those last lines of the parable’s interpretation. I spent most of my sermon proclaiming how God would be the final judge and arbiter of our world. That was a faithful sermon for that time. And I can see now why I focused on those last lines. It was the year after 9/11. Most of us were still struggling to make sense of the slaughter of innocent people and the terrorists who gloried in it. Those last lines provided some comfort and a sense of future justice at a time when we felt vulnerable, lacking any kind of control in a chaotic world, unable to see wrongs being righted and perpetrators punished.

Three years later, I study these texts and discover I’m not drawn to those final lines at all. Even with the London bombings, even with news stories that still tell of chaos in this world, that’s not where I’ve been focusing. In fact, I find myself almost recoiling from those last lines. Not because God isn’t judge and arbiter over all creation. He is. God as judge is a powerful and prevalent image in scripture. Rather, I find myself recoiling from those lines because it would be all too easy to revel in them. The thought of the wicked getting their just deserts is very satisfying. The Gospel lesson states all that is evil will finally find itself the focus of God’s divine

retribution, and my human instinct is to say, “You go, God! Yeah, give them their comeuppance! Can’t wait to see it—just bring it on!”

Look— isn’t there a similar cathartic effect when we watch certain movies? Growing up, I saw “Walking Tall” and “Billy Jack”—we cheered as they routed the bad guys. There was Charles Bronson in “Death Wish” and Clint Eastwood in “Dirty Harry.” They were our heroes. They were judge, jury, conviction, and punishment all rolled into one. And what we especially liked about them was that they didn’t wait for the real judge and jury to act.

On a much less violent note, the movie “Willie Wonka and the Chocolate Factory” satisfies those craving not just candy but justice. I’m referring to the older 1971 version of the film with Gene Wilder as candy factory owner Willie Wonka. (The updated version with Johnny Depp was just released on Friday.) The story is that five children get the chance of a lifetime to tour the Wonka factory. Four of the children are—can’t be nice about this—brats. Selfish, spoiled, gluttonous, obsessed with television, demanding constantly to be satisfied. But the fifth child, Charlie, is kind to his grandparents, loyal, sensitive, and generous even in his poverty. I won’t go into details, but the four bratty children get into trouble when they disobey Mr. Wonka’s rules. And that’s what people like about this film—the good kids get rewarded, and the bad kids get what’s coming to them.

If we choose to focus on the last lines of Jesus’ parable and Matthew’s allegorical interpretation, we fashion Jesus into a sort of Willie Wonka. Doing so satisfies our desire to see justice done, wrongs righted, goodness rewarded.

But there is more to this parable than its conclusion about a final judgment. Perhaps it is time to focus on the landowner’s words that the slaves are not to pull up the weeds—that it is dangerous to do so. Case in point.

In my children’s pre-school years, it was not uncommon that they would bring home a plastic cup filled with potting soil with the slightest burgeoning of some sort of flower poking its head out of the soil. Often it was a marigold as evidenced by the leaves. Sometimes I wasn’t sure what it was, but I always planted the flower in our garden.

One time I planted that flower quite early in the season. I hadn’t yet planted any other summer annuals, and wouldn’t get to that for a few weeks. And so it was that I forgot about the flower I planted.

A few weeks later, when I purchased marigolds and petunias, vinca and portulaca—the only things that survive southern exposure in our backyard—I prepped the garden, loosened the soil, and dug up the weeds. Deeply satisfied with my gardening efforts, I brushed the rest of the dirt off my hands, and then I realized . . . I had dug up the flower. Must have thought it was a weed, or else I had so mutilated it with the hoe that it was positively unrecognizable. I felt very guilty, and hoped the child who had given it to me didn’t remember.

Had I been more careful in my hoeing, had I been more discriminating in my weeding, had I just waited a little while longer—that flower would have bloomed alongside the other annuals I eventually put down.

In the parable, the slaves want to do something about the weeds **now**. See, that’s our instinct. But the landowner knows that an all-out attack on the weeds might just destroy the wheat. Instead, the landowner waits . . . patiently. If the kingdom of heaven, as Jesus says, is like this

landowner, whose field has been sown with both wheat and weeds, and this landowner forbids the slaves to remove the weeds, and waits patiently for the harvest to come, then God, judge of all creation, is obviously not the rush-to-judgment type. He's not Charles Bronson or Billy Jack, hungering for revenge. He's not Willie Wonka, dispatching his Oompa-Loompas to deal with children who are contrary. He is willing to wait, committed to preserving the weeds along with the wheat, until the wheat is fully developed. He wants us to wait as well. Leave the weeds to me, Jesus is saying. Leave the judgments to me, he is saying.

For the truth is we make some poor judgments. We look at someone and assume something about their character, but we may be wrong. We often have unrealistic expectations of those around us, and they can't help but disappoint us. We label others as less Christian or less productive in society or less American than we. And all the while we assume we're the wheat.

Let's put a typical Lutheran spin on this—we are both wheat and weeds, saints and sinners, as Martin Luther recognized. That fifth child in the Wonka movie, Charlie, did have some wonderful qualities. But at least in the first movie, he was no poster child for perfection. He and his grandfather break one of Mr. Wonka's rules and drink the fizzy pop. And Wonka, in his initial haste to judge Charlie, is ready to dismiss Charlie from the factory with no prize at all.

What if God were really like that? Ready to toss out the weeds the minute they poke their heads out of the ground? Not one of us would have any reason to hope for life lived in his kingdom.

But we learn from Jesus' parable, and Jesus' loving actions that God is patient. Look at the people Jesus dared to talk with and eat dinner with, the people he dared to touch. They surely were weeds by society's viewpoint, and some surely were sinners by God's. Yet Jesus was willing to go to any length to heal them and their broken lives. They were not judged and condemned by God, but in his great patience, they were given time for repentance and growth in faith—and that does take time.

In the book *If Grace is True* by Philip Gulley and James Mulholland, one of them recounts how he felt when he was to officiate at the funeral of a woman he knew named Sally. He was reluctantly officiating, as he had often judged her, sometimes condemned her, and never respected her. He saw her as a woman who made bad choices. Abused as a child, she ended up seeking love in all the wrong places. When drugs and alcohol became one particularly bad choice, she awoke from a drug-induced stupor to find her young toddler had drowned in the neighbor's pool.

This pastor admits he despised Sally after that. He saw only a mother who had failed her child.

Oh, but be patient, as God is patient.

In the days after her daughter's death, Sally repented. The author says it wasn't that she fell on her knees before the altar and confessed her sins out loud. It was that she did what repentance truly is—she turned. She slowly turned from what had been death and destruction and despair. Over the next five years, Sally became clean from drugs and alcohol. She found a job, bought a house, built a life in a community. And in the month before she died of a sudden heart attack, she confided to a friend "I think I'm going to look for a church."

And so the dilemma for this pastor officiating at her funeral: By the world's judgments and the church's judgments she was still a weed. Far from perfect. No church-goer. Still struggling with old demons.

But the pastor found he could no longer rush to judgment. He wrote, “I was torn. I’d once thought hell a fitting end to her life. But when I learned more about her, that judgment troubled me. Sally had spent her life climbing out of hell. How could I wish for her return? Though it defied the formula I’d been taught, I wanted God to be gracious to Sally . . . I began to pray, asking God to welcome Sally to heaven, to make a way for her to experience the truth of what I’d told her: ‘God loves you. He knows your pain. You’re not alone.’ I thought about that for awhile. The longer I thought, the clearer the answer became. God loved Sally far more than I. He’d been there when she cried herself to sleep as a little girl, when she was abused and rejected by those around her, when her efforts to find happiness led only to more misery, and when in her moment of greatest despair she determined to keep trying. If the little I knew had changed my heart toward Sally, why was it so hard to believe God was even more gracious?”

Our lessons this morning call us to patience as we live our daily lives. St. Paul tells the Roman Christians just that. He recognizes that we, the people of God, wait longingly to be redeemed and made new by God. We wait to be adopted, as Paul puts it, and share in God’s kingdom. We wait, hope-filled, for a future with God, glimpses of which we see now. Shouldn’t we also hope that those around us will share such a future with God? So, in our patient waiting, rather than being quick to judge others, we ought to actively pray for them, pray that as God is patiently at work in us, he would also be patiently at work in them. AMEN.