

A Sermon for the Fifth Sunday after Epiphany, February 5, 2006

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One can learn about the spiritual life in the yard. One lesson I have learned is that it takes effort to plant and grow desirable things, but weeds just appear. One must loosen the soil and carefully plant, water and fertilize for healthy growth to occur. Even then, there is danger that a new life won't take root and develop. But if one does nothing at all, one is assured a good crop of undesirable things.

The parable of the wheat and the tares is based, in part, on a similar observation. A man planted seed in a field—which means his workers did it for him. They prepared the soil, sowed the seed and watered the ground. But when the first growth was evident, they discovered that there were tares growing along with the wheat. Their question was, “Where did these come from?”

Tares are not ordinary weeds. The word is literally “darnel” which is a kind of mock wheat. The darnel, in its early stages of growth, looks like wheat, but it bears no fruit. This is why the landowner told his workers not to pull it up. There was danger that in attempting to weed out all of the darnel, the workers might mistakenly pull up some good wheat. Let both grow together and the good would be separated from the bad on the day of harvest.

Now, this is one parable for which Jesus gave the interpretation. His interpretation is not a part of today's gospel. It is given later in the same chapter of Matthew. Matthew 13:36 tells us that the disciples came to Jesus and said, “Explain to us the parable of the tares in the field.” Jesus said:

He who sows the good seed is the Son of Man. The field is the world, the good seeds are the sons of the kingdom, but the tares are the sons of the wicked one. The enemy who sowed them is the devil, the harvest is the end of the age, and the reapers are the angels. Therefore as the tares are gathered and burned in the fire, so it will be at the end of this age. The Son of Man will send out His angels, and they will gather out of His kingdom all things that offend, and those who practice lawlessness, and will cast them into the furnace of fire. There will be wailing and gnashing of teeth. Then the righteous will shine forth as the sun in the kingdom of their Father. He who has ears to hear, let him hear! (Matt.13:36-43)

This parable teaches us that there is evil in the world and that the evil often bears an outward resemblance to the good. It is not always easy to distinguish those who genuinely belong to Jesus Christ from those who are not of sincere faith. It is not always easy to distinguish between those whose motives are pure and those whose malicious or selfish motives are cloaked behind a pretense of purity.

This is one reason the tradition rejects the notion of a “pure” church. As Article XXVI of the Articles of Religion states, “In the visible Church the evil be ever mingled with the good” (BCP 608). To be sure, we teach and encourage people to live by the standards of God's Word; we attempt to administer church discipline inasmuch as there are outward and visible breaches of God's commandments; we ought to hold one another accountable, in love, if we see another falling; and we pray that the Holy Spirit will work in each heart to root out the evil and confirm the good. But, we do not make final judgments before the Day.

The parable teaches that there will, indeed, be a final day when Jesus will do what he now forbids us

to do. He will judge each person and separate those who are his from those who are not his. This is the express biblical teaching of Jesus—“The Son of Man will send out his angels and they will gather out of his kingdom all things that offend and those who practice lawlessness and will cast them into the furnace of fire.”

These are hard words, but they are his words. The same Scriptures that tell us that God so loved the world that he gave his Son, the same Scriptures that tell us that Jesus has gone to prepare a place for us in his Father’s house, these same Scriptures tell us that Jesus will come again in glory to judge the world and separate those of true faith from those who are impenitent.

In fact, the world, as God’s creation, makes no sense without judgment. One of the problems of evil is that people seem to be getting away with it. No one seems to see. There seems to be no consequences to evil deeds. The Scriptures tell us that God sees and God will judge. Though God is patient beyond human understanding and slow to anger, his judgments can nonetheless be seen as time passes and will be ultimately seen, in a full and final way, at the end of time.

The topics of judgment and hell are mostly absent from modern sermons. This is an unfortunate omission, whatever reason is given for it. We must know that the Day of Judgment is coming because, well, it is coming whether we like it or not. We need to know that a day of judgment is coming because we need to know that we are playing for real money. The Christian life is lived for real rewards to be won by real sacrifices. And there are real risks and dangers that we might fall short if we fail to persevere in faith and obedience.

One reason some dismiss Christianity is that they see no point in it. They see no point in it because of the common belief that all will end up in the same place no matter what they do or believe. Jesus did not teach this. Jesus said there are two places people might end up—inside his kingdom and outside his kingdom—and that we should strive with all our might to enter his kingdom by the narrow gate (Matthew 7:13-14).

If we understand it rightly, we come to church not as a mere project of self-help or self-improvement; we come not merely to fulfill some religious duty or to make us feel good about life. If we rightly understand it, we come to church because we are in the process of being saved from sin, death, judgment and hell. We are in the process of being transformed from fallen children of Adam and Eve into glorious and eternal children of God.

This process of spiritual growth involves labor just as it takes effort to plant and grow good seed in a garden. Being a tare requires no work. Evil happens by default. But growth and fruit bearing require effort. It takes effort to make good confessions, to make new and better choices, to practice spiritual disciplines, and to bear fruit worthy of our repentance.

Let us not grow weary of doing these things as we look forward to the Great Harvest Day.