Sunday, November 17, 1974
DON'T PANIC!
Matthew 13:24-30 (12,2,4,68)

Often if we see something going wrong, or at least not going the way we had planned it, our first tendency is to rush in and straighten things out. We're ready to take quick action. We're impatient.

But can the act of rushing in to try to fix things too soon, even though our motives are good, sometimes only make matters worse? To put it bluntly, doing good or what we think is good, sometimes only does more harm. Are there times when we should not panic, but be patient with what we think is evil?

It is to such questions that the parable we have just heard read from the Bible is directed. And this story like all the parables Jesus told, comes straight from the life and work of the people of his own day.

A man sowed a field with good seed and then went to sleep. Having done his work, he could sleep with good conscience. But something else was happening. There was another hand at work. At first it wasn't visible. But one morning he was bewildered to discover that weeds were growing and were mixed in with the good wheat.

How many of us as parents have had this situation? We have raised our child as carefully as possible, surrounded the child with a good atmosphere, cherished him or her with love and all in all believe we have done our very best. Yet despite all of this, something else begins to grow. Strange things happen to the child. We see impulses and stirrings in him or her that we do not want to see at all. Other influences have come beaming in and some of them look like weeds that should be pulled out immediately. So, what do we do? Do we panic and try to root out the impulses we think are evil immediately? Or do we wait it out for a while?

Let's look at this parable in more depth in an attempt to find some answers. What is the parable saying to us?

1. First of all the parable reminds us that there is evil at work in the world all the time and in every place. In the very moment in which the word of God sounds from the pulpit, that sinister power is at work sowing its toxic seed among the furrows. In the best of us there is evil at work. In the best of our intentions and actions, evil is lurking. There are no fields or gardens in this world where only grain or flowers grow.

It is very strange how everything, the greatest and the smallest — mysteriously spoils and decays. Nonviolent movements can become infected with the very violence they oppose. In the effort to get textbooks out of the schools in West Virginia which some consider immoral, immoral tactics are used and the damage to society may even be worse than if the textbooks had remained in the schools.

So, the parable reminds us that our best intentions may be used in evil ways. Our world and our lives always have weeds growing in them and these weeds are mixed in closely with the good grain. There is no perfect person, no perfect marriage, no perfect job, no perfect church, no perfect nation. The parable is further saying, "Don't be surprised by the presence of evil in the midst of the good. And above all, Don't panic, because of it."

If we are shocked by the presence of evil in the midst of goodness and in the midst of our best intentions, then maybe we are too tender for the struggle. If we hope to find a field without weeds, then maybe we are too naive. If we think we are perfect and without fault, then is when we are in the greatest danger.

Our very forward-looking technology which has brought and is bringing untold blessings to human beings, also and at the same time carries within it the seeds of destruction, for with the very same technology we may very well destroy the world and all of us with it.

2. But the parable is saying much more than just reminding us that there is always evil in the world amidst the good; that weeds are constantly being sown and usually while we are asleep, so that they go for a while unnoticed and then one day we are surprised to find weeds in our field.

The parable deals next with what our reaction is to be toward what we consider the weeds when we are made aware of them. It deals with our response to what we consider evil, with our response when things go wrong and with God's response.

In the parable, the servants at first wanted to go immediately out into the field and pull out all the weeds. And we can understand the angry reaction of the servants. They had worked hard to put in a clean crop and now they discover weeds.

Our response, too, is often that of wanting to immediately root out all the evil, get rid of it as fast as we can; deal with it quickly and harshly. But the Master in the parable knew better and God knows better. He told the servants, "Don't panic! Don't rush in too quickly. Wait until both the weeds and the wheat grow and are ready for harvest. Then they can be more easily separated, and the weeds can be destroyed." It's a matter of the proper timing.

But why, we ask? Why should we wait? And in the parable Jesus gives us several good reasons.

1. First of all we are not to panic, because in the early stages of growth in particular, it's very difficult to tell the difference between the weeds and the good wheat. Evil is not always that easy to recognize, although we usually think it is. Most of us are convinced that we know for sure what is good and what is bad. The fact is however, that good and evil are quite often closely intertwined in this world. And in our haste, in our snap judgments we may find that we have really pulled out the good grain in-stead of the weeds.

Many times, our panic judgments about what is good and what is evil are wrong. Appearances are often deceiving. To distinguish between the good guys and the bad guys is not as easy as some of the television programs would have us believe.

In fact, the people we think are the bad guys at the moment may turn out in God's judgment to be the good guys. This is certainly what happened in Jesus'. time. He heard the word sinner applied freely to persons around him. And it was more than a word then. It had a real bite to it. It indicated someone you could not associate with or exchange greetings with, even though you knew the person by name. To call a person a sinner was to make him an outcast, and you were supposed to separate yourself voluntarily from all relationships with that person.

It is a striking fact that our Lord paid little or no attention to the distinctions that were supposed to separate sinners and saints. On the contrary, you remember, his harshest words were for those who considered themselves the righteous.

What a difference it would make if there were fewer of the snap judgments, less of the quick condemnations, no more of the hurrying to and from person to person stirring things up; no more executing of character by hearsay and gossip when someone disagrees with us even in fundamental matters. None of these but a willingness to let both grow together to the harvest; the infinite patience to let truth be proved in the event itself. This is the kind of patience God has. We've heard the saying, "The mills of God grind slowly, but they grind exceedingly fine."

The parable therefore calls for a willingness to let God be the final judge of people and it warns us as we attempt to play the role of God. Too often in the past and the present the church and good church people have too quickly damned people to hell.

This is often the tragedy of moralists. They want to root out vice, practice censorship and quickly rid the world of all sin. And as they set out in grim earnest on their virtuous crusades, these same good people are quite oblivious of the fact that evil is also at the same time working in them. The weed seed is being sown often at that very moment.

So, this parable speaks of a patience ·required in dealing with what we judge to be evil and with other problems as well. It says, "Don't panic!" Think before you act and often wait before you act too hastily. There is often an interval involved in the growth of good and evil to that point where they can be correctly identified and dealt with.

2. In the second place, the parable cautions us to be patient and not to panic and be a big hurry to pull out the weeds, not only because we cann9t tell the difference between what is good and bad, but also because in our hurry to tear out the weeds too soon, we may at the same time damage much of the good grain and kill it too.

In other words, sometimes it may be that our best efforts to work at a problem or issue only make the situation worse. Recently, I ran across a new social law that describes this effect. It is called Forrester's law and this maxim holds that "In complicated situations, efforts to improve things often tend to make them worse, sometimes much worse and on occasion calamitous."

Dr, Jay W. Forrester, a professor of management at M.I.T. says that we can often expect surprising and dismaying re-sults from naive reforms that fail to take into account the many and diverse ways individuals and groups can react to even the simplest, let alone, the most complex changes in the social environment. To put it simply, in our panic to improve things, we can make them worse.

So, for example, police refuse to shoot at a fleeing robber on a crowded street, lest more damage be done than good. Now to talk this way is not a poorly disguised plea to be soft with evil or to take no action at all when things go wrong. It is an open plea that we seek to be sure of our action before we move, lest we destroy the good along with the bad.

To go after dissenters with a vengeance, for example, may also in the end destroy freedom of dissent and freedom of speech along with it. Or to quickly want to censor everything we don't like, or which rubs us the wrong way may in the process do a lot of damage we had not counted on.

Every wise college president knows that he must always be on the lookout and guard jealously the right of his teachers to grow toward the full maturity of their thought. He must fight off misguided individuals, who have in their own mind the best of intentions and want to rush into a faculty and uproot the dangerous ideas and radical thinkers who are occasionally found there. Again, these well-intentioned individuals are like the servants in the parable who wanted to rush into the field and tear up the weeds. But the master cautions them not to do that lest they also tear up the good grain in the process.

Let them grow together until the harvest. By their fruits you shall know them, said Jesus. Don't panic! Don't act too soon. In the West Virginia school book controversy what's going to do the most damage — to leave some of the books in the school that some disagree with, or the mob action and violence which is tearing the fabric of that society?

Patience, great patience; patience akin to that of God's patience is essential to the building of anything worthwhile. Sometimes one of the partners in a marriage will rush into my office and say that they just found out something about their spouse and they want to take immediate action. My usual advice is like that of this parable — "Don't panic!" Wait before you take hasty action you may regret.

Again, it must be emphasized that the kind of patience we are talking about in this parable does not mean being soft with evil or sentimental about wrongdoing. Rather patience requires a firmness. But a firmness coupled with wisdom and a gentleness born of an awareness of the need for time in which the evil can be correctly identified and overcome.

A famous trial lawyer gives a similar kind of advice to people who come to him and quickly want to sue someone for libel or defamation of character or other similar grievances. He says, "If you cross the street on a rainy day and an inconsiderate speedy auto spatters mud on you, don't try to wipe it off immediately. You will only spread it all over your clothes. Wait a day or two until the mud dries and you can flick it off." In other words, "Don't panic!"

So, the master in the parable rejects the quick forcible intervention on the part of the servants for the same reason that Jesus forbade his disciples to call down fire from heaven to consume the hostile Samaritans. On that occasion Jesus said, "You do not know what manner of spirit you are of; for the Son of Man came not to destroy people's lives, but to save them."

Particularly in our time when people are tense and worried about many problems which are besetting us as individuals and as a nation, the advice, "Don't panic!" is important. Waiting, proper timing. both are necessary if we are to effectively deal with the problems that confront us. And remember, our judgments are not always the same as God's judgment. God's judgment is often full of surprises. The separation of the sheep and the goats, of weeds and wheat may surprise us. What we thought of as bad may turn out in time to be good, and what we determined was good may turn out to be bad. God does not panic. We are to be as patient as God is with sinners like us, for with him there is no quick writing off of any of us as being hopeless, lost or worthless. Amen.