Sunday, July 19, 1987
PANIC OR PATIENCE?
Matthew 13:24-30

Not too long ago, I met a woman who told me about a personality trait she had that sometimes got her into trouble. She said, “My biggest problem is that I always want to fix things too soon. I see a problem that someone has, and I usually rush in and do my best to straighten things out.” She went on to say, “I seem to have solutions to everyone’s problems except my own.”

I asked her if she was usually successful in her attempts to help others, and she replied, “That’s the biggest problem of all. I’ve noticed that in my hurry to make everything right, I often make matters worse.” She continued, “I’m finally beginning to realize that in my panic to do good, or what I think is the best, I frequently have messed things up.”

I knew what this woman was talking about, for I have noticed a similar tendency in myself — the tendency to want to take quick action rather than to have the patience to wait until the time is right.

This kind of issue, which we all face, is addressed in the parable from the Gospel of Matthew. This story, like all of the parables Jesus told, comes straight from the life and work of the people of his own time.

The story is a very simple one. A man sowed a field with good seed. He did the best he knew how and then took his rest. He could sleep with a good conscience. But while he rested, something else was happening. Another hand was at work. At first, it wasn’t visible, but one morning, his servants reported to him that there were weeds growing, and they were all mixed in with the good grain.

How many of us as parents have had this situation? We have raised our child or our children as carefully as possible, cherished them with love, and all in all, believe we have done our very best. We have tried with all our hearts to sow only good seed. Yet, despite our best efforts, we notice that something else has begun to grow in their lives. We see impulses, stirrings, and habits in them that we do not like. We hear language that we are sure we have not taught them. Other influences have been at work in their lives, 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 have some patience and watch what happens before we take action that might do more harm than good? Panic or Patience?

Let’s look at this parable in more depth in an attempt to find some direction. What is the parable saying to us about ourselves and about God?

The Presence of Evil: A Constant Reality
First of all, the parable reminds us that there is evil at work in the world all the time and in every place. As one theologian put it, “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. None of us is perfect. There is no perfect church, no perfect family, no perfect job. In the best of our intentions, evil is lurking. There are no fields or gardens where only grain or flowers grow. And if we use too many herbicides and weed killers, we may do more damage to the overall environment than the weeds do in the first place.

It is very strange how everything — the greatest and the smallest — mysteriously spoils and decays. Non-violent movements can become infected with the very violence they oppose. Efforts to defend and extend the democratic way of life find themselves using undemocratic means. We find ourselves telling lies to defend the truth.

So, the parable reminds us that our best intentions may be used in evil ways or may become infected with evil. The Iran-Contra hearings illustrate this every day. Our world, our lives, always have weeds growing in them, and these weeds are mixed closely with the good grain. Jesus reminds us in the parable not to 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 the good 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, or that the movements we are part of and cherish so much are without fault, then that is when we are in the greatest danger.

Our very forward-looking technology, which has brought and is bringing untold blessings to humankind, 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.

The Importance of Patience: God's Way of Dealing with Evil

But the parable is saying much more than simply reminding us that there is always evil in the world, that it is frequently entangled with the good, and that weeds are constantly being sown — 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. We're usually not so surprised to find them in someone else's field.

The parable deals at its center with what our reaction is and what God's reaction is to what we consider the weeds, the evil when we are made aware of it. It deals with our response to what we consider evil, and with God's response.

In the parable, the servants panicked. They wanted to rush out into the field and quickly pull out all the weeds. They wanted to fix things. And we can understand their reaction. They had worked hard to put in a clean crop, and now they had 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. Let's round up all the people we consider criminals and put them in jail or, better still, execute them. Let's take all the people we consider unpatriotic or who oppose official government policy and call them traitors.

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 destroyed."

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

Patience in Judgment: The Danger of Hasty Decisions

First of all, don't panic, because in the early stages of growth, 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 often quite closely intertwined in this world. And in our haste, in our panic, we may find that we have actually pulled out the good grain instead 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 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 or her an outcast, and you were supposed to separate yourself voluntarily from all relationships with that person. Today, it's called "shunning."

It's a revealing fact that Jesus paid little or no attention to the distinctions that were supposed to separate sinners and saints. On the contrary, his harshest words were for those who considered themselves the righteous. Jesus spent a lot of his time associating with sinners or outcasts.

What a difference it would make if there were fewer snap judgments, less quick condemnations, and no more executing of character by hearsay and gossip when someone disagrees with us, even in fundamental matters. Instead, a willingness to let both grow together until the harvest; the infinite patience to let truth be proved in the event itself. This is the kind of patience God has, according to Jesus.

The parable calls for a willingness to let God be the final judge of people, and it warns us against attempting to play the role of God. Too often, in the past and the present, the church and well-meaning church people have too quickly damned people to hell.

This is 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 to 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 patience instead of panic as we try to sort out the evil from the good. Wait and think before you take action, because in the early stages of growth, it is not always easy to tell the evil from the good.

Patience in Action: Avoiding Greater Harm

In the second place, the parable cautions us to be patient and not to panic and be in a big hurry to pull out the weeds, not only because we cannot tell the difference between what is good and what is 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.

In other words, sometimes it happens that our best efforts to work at a problem or issue only make the matter worse. Some time ago, I came across a social law that describes this effect. It

is called Forrester's Law and states that "in complicated situations, efforts to improve things often tend to make them worse, sometimes much worse, and on occasion calamitous."

Dr. Jay Forrester, a professor of management at M.I.T., says that we can often expect surprising and dismaying results 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 on evil or to take no action at all when things go wrong. It is a plea for patience before we take action lest, along with the bad, we destroy the good.

Jesus said, "Let them grow together until the harvest." "By their fruits you shall know them," said Jesus. Don't panic. Don't act too quickly. Patience, great patience; patience akin to God's patience is essential to the building of anything worthwhile. Sometimes it's better to wait lest you take hasty action you will later regret.

The Good News: God's Infinite Patience

The Good News is that God does not panic but is infinitely patient with us. Waiting and proper timing are necessary if we are to deal effectively with the problems that confront us. We are to be as patient as God is with sinners like us, for with God, there is no quick writing off of any of us as being hopeless, lost, or worthless. Amen.