Sunday, November 26, 1989
DON'T PANIC!
Matthew 13:24-30

The telephone call came on a Sunday afternoon at about 3:00 P.M. I had been relaxing and looking forward to a quiet afternoon and evening. The voice on the phone had the sound of panic. "Can you come over to our house immediately? It's an emergency!" I answered that I would be there within 15 minutes. There was no hint of what the emergency was. As I got to the front door, I had no idea what to expect.

The father of the family met me at the door and ushered me quickly into the living room where his wife was waiting. Both of them looked nervous and tense. Before I had a chance to ask what the problem was, the father said, "We're in a desperate situation. That's why I called you. I've just discovered some marijuana in our son's bedroom." The boy in question was about 15 years old. The parents had two other children, a daughter about three years younger, and another daughter about 9 years old.

I asked if this was the first hint they had had that their son was experimenting with drugs. They replied that they had no other evidence and had not had any cause to suspect anything before. I knew that their son had never been in any kind of trouble. He was an above-average student and was active in the church and in other extracurricular school activities.

The father, however, was in a state of panic. He talked of quitting his job and having his wife quit her job so that they could move out of the city to a much smaller town where maybe drugs would not be so readily available. He sounded as if his entire world had come apart. He was ready to pull up stakes immediately. I could see that about all I would be able to accomplish that afternoon would be to convince the parents not to panic further and perhaps thereby make matters even worse.

Finally, after about an hour, the four of us — the father, mother, son, and myself — were able to talk calmly together. As I listened, I became more and more convinced that the young man had only been involved in some mild drug experimentation. The family agreed to enter family counseling so that they could all begin to communicate with each other in better ways. And that's what happened. Some years later, the family did move to another city, but not because of any family problems. The young man has since graduated from college and is doing well in his chosen profession. I am convinced that he will continue to be an asset to our society.

Panic is something with which most of us are familiar. Frequently, it is the case that we see something going wrong, or at least not going the way we had planned it, and especially when we see something bad happening, our first impulse is to rush in and straighten things out. We want to take quick action.

But can the act of rushing in too quickly to try to fix things, even though our motives are good, many times only make matters worse?

It is to this kind of question and to the issue of panic that the parable read earlier is directed. And this story, like other parables Jesus told, comes straight from the life and work of the people of his day.

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

Those of us who are parents are familiar with this situation. We have raised our children as carefully as possible, surrounded them with a good atmosphere, cherished them with love, and all in all, believe we have done our very best. Yet despite all of this, we notice that something else is beginning to grow. Other influences come into our children's lives. We see impulses and stirrings in them that we do not want to see at all. Like the sower, we thought we had sowed good seed, but where did the weeds come from? So what do we do? Do we panic and try to root out the impulses we see as evil immediately? Or do we wait a little before we take hasty action we may later regret?

So let's look at this parable which Jesus told in more depth in an attempt to find some answers. What is the parable saying to us?

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 same 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 waiting.
Isn't it strange how everything, the greatest and the smallest, mysteriously spoils and decays? Non-violent movements can become infected with the very violence they oppose. Revolutions can come to embody the very tactics they want to be rid of.

So the parable reminds us that our best intentions can be subverted. 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 when you discover it, don't panic because of it."

But the parable is saying much more than reminding us that there is always evil in the world amidst the good and that weeds are constantly being sown and usually while we are unaware of it so that they grow 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 toward what we consider evil, with our response when things go wrong in our lives and in the lives of our family members, and with God's response.

In the parable, according to Jesus, the servants at first wanted to go immediately into the field and pull up the weeds. We can understand their reaction. 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 decisively. But the master in this story 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 proper timing.

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

First of all, we are not to panic and rush in and try to pull out the weeds because, in the early stages of growth especially, it can be very difficult to tell the difference between the weeds and the good wheat. Evil is not always that easy to recognize, although we tend to think it is. Most of us are convinced that we know for sure what is good and what is evil. The fact is, however, that good and evil are quite often closely intertwined in this world. And in our panic, in our haste, in our snap judgments, we may find that we have pulled out the good grain instead of the weeds, or the good grain along with the weeds.

Our panic judgments about what is good and what is evil can be mistaken. Appearances are often deceiving. To be able to quickly distinguish between who are the good people and who are the bad people is not as easy as some television programs would have us believe, or even some churches would have us believe.

In fact, the people we think are the bad people at the moment may turn out in God's judgment to be the good people. Jesus knew about this. He heard the word "sinner" applied freely to people around him. It indicated then someone you were not supposed to associate with or acknowledge even though you knew the person by name. A person who had been designated a sinner was treated as an outcast, and you were supposed to separate yourself voluntarily from all relationships with that individual.

It is a striking fact that Jesus paid little or no attention to these kinds of distinctions that were supposed to separate the sinners from the good people. On the contrary, his harshest words were for those who considered themselves the righteous.

What a difference it would make in our society if there were fewer snap judgments, less of the quick and panic condemnations, but rather a willingness to hear the other side of the matter.

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

This can be 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.

There is a patience that is required in dealing with evil, according to Jesus. Don't panic. Think before you act too quickly. Sometimes it is better to wait a bit.

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 in the early stages of growth it is difficult to 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.

The simplest example is that police officers refuse to shoot at a fleeing robber on a crowded street, lest more damage be done than good.

To put it another way, sometimes our panic and our haste and our overreaction toward solving a problem may only make the situation worse. I personally believe there was an overreaction among some on the flag-burning issue. Because one individual a few years ago burned a flag

and because the Supreme Court upheld that right under the U.S. Constitution, there was a rush to want to amend the Constitution, and then a law was passed without thinking through all of its implications, and more flags were burned than ever. Before our attempts to solve the problem, we hardly had a problem. But our hasty attempts at a solution seemed to cause more of a problem. Sometimes it's better to wait before rushing toward a solution.

To go after dissenters of any kind with a vengeance may 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 in the wrong way, or goes against our beliefs may in the process do other damage we had not counted on.

In the parable, Jesus said, "Let them grow together until the harvest." Don't panic. Don't act too soon. Patience, great patience — patience akin to God's patience — is essential to the building of anything worthwhile. Too often we have a tendency to want to rush in and knock a few heads together. We have to be careful lest we do more harm than good.

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 and punitive action. My usual advice is similar to that of the parable: "Don't panic!" unless there's a truly emergency situation. Wait before you take hasty action you may later regret.

Again, I want to emphasize that the kind of patience the parable is talking about does not mean being soft with evil or sentimental about wrongdoing.

So the master in the parable rejects the quick, forcible intervention on the part of the servants for the same reason that Jesus refused to listen to his disciples' demand that he call down fire from heaven to consume some people who had been rude to him.

Particularly in our time, when people are tense and worried about many problems that 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 judgments. God's separation of the sheep from the goats and the weeds from the wheat may surprise us. God does not panic. 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 or worthless. Amen.