Sunday, July 22, 1990
YOU MIGHT BE SURPRISED
Matthew 13:24-30

There was a newspaper photographer in Los Angeles who was called in by his editor and told of a fire raging out in Palos Verdes, a hilly area south of Los Angeles. His assignment was to rush out to a small airport, board a waiting plane, get some pictures of the fire, and be back in time for the afternoon edition.

He raced to the airport, drove his car to the end of the runway, and there he saw a small plane waiting with the engine running and ready to take off. He climbed in the open door, and the plane taxied down the runway and took off. At about five thousand feet, he began getting his camera out of the bag. He told the man flying the plane to get him over the fire so he could take his pictures and get back to the newspaper office. From the other side of the cockpit, there was a strange silence. Then he heard these unsettling words, “Aren’t you the flight instructor I was waiting for?”

Life is filled with surprises. Our lives are going along smoothly. We thought we were in control — and then, surprise. As my little granddaughter likes to say: “You never know. You might be surprised.”

To me, almost nothing is more surprising than the way people grow up and turn out to be quite different than anyone had predicted.

When Picasso was a schoolboy, he was terrible at mathematics, and his teachers didn’t think he would amount to much. For example, whenever the teacher had him write the number 4 on the blackboard, it looked like a nose to him, and he’d keep doodling to fill in the rest of the face. Everyone else in the class saw a number on the blackboard; Picasso imagined a face.

There’s another lesson to be learned here in addition to the fact that people surprise us by being different than anyone predicted. Everyone else in Picasso’s arithmetic class saw a number on the blackboard, whereas he saw a face. The lesson is this: sometimes we become so familiar with something — an idea, a method, or an object — that we can never see it as being anything different. Where creativity is concerned, that is the irony of skill: the more adept you are at something, the less likely you are to appreciate a varying interpretation; the greater your mastery of the skills, the less you will be tempted by new approaches. You get so good at doing something in a certain way that you don’t want to try any other way. Over a period of many years, beginning in high school and college, I became quite adept at writing papers and sermons by using a typewriter, first a manual and then an electric typewriter. When computers and word processors came along, I resisted getting one because I was pretty good at using a typewriter. Finally, after hearing so many people tell me how much easier and faster and more creative one could be by using a word processor, I got one — and I was surprised — they were correct.

I’ve also discovered that one of the main reasons I am sometimes surprised is because I have made a snap judgment, and such quick judgments can frequently turn out to be wrong. For example, I might judge a person too quickly and then discover that he or she is really quite a different kind of person than I at first imagined. Snap judgments or jumping to quick conclusions can also get us into another kind of trouble. Isn’t there an old wise saying—"Fools rush in where angels fear to tread?”

Not too long ago, I met an individual who told me about a personality trait she had that sometimes got her into trouble. She said, “My biggest problem is that because I think I know the answer, 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 attempt to fix or solve the problems of 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 went on to say, “I’m finally beginning to realize that in my panic to do good, I frequently mess things up.”

Jesus once told a story that speaks to this issue. He said, “A farmer sowed a field with good seed. He and his hired hands did the best they knew how. They could rest from their labors with a good conscience. But while they rested, an enemy came and sowed weeds among the wheat and went away. So when the plants came up and grain began to appear, the weeds were now noticeable, and they were mixed in with the good grain.”

How many of us as parents have had this problem? We have raised our child or our children as carefully as we know how, cherished them, loved them, and done our best to set a good example. 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 do not remember teaching them. We notice that other influences have been at work in their lives, and some of them look like weeds. What do you do? Do you rush in and try to pull out the weeds as quickly as possible? Or do you wait?

What happened in the story that Jesus told? The hired hands, upon noticing that weeds were mixed in with the good grain, asked the farmer two questions: first, where did the weeds come from? Did you not sow good seed in your field? The farmer said, “An enemy has done this.” Their second question was: “What should we do about the weeds? Don’t you want us to go into the field right now and pull them out?”

Aren’t those our questions too? Where do the weeds come from? What is the source of evil in the world and in the lives of people? It’s one of the oldest and most puzzling questions of all.

The parable does not give us the answer as to the source of evil. It only says, “An enemy has done this.” Instead, Jesus wants to remind us that there is evil at work in the world all the time and in every place — even in us. There is no perfect human being, no perfect church, no perfect family, no perfect job. In the best of our intentions, evil is waiting to go to work. Our best intentions can be used in evil ways. Non-violent movements can become infected with the very violence they oppose. Sometimes in our efforts to defend and extend the democratic way of life, we find ourselves using undemocratic means. There are also times when we tell lies in our attempt to defend the truth.

I did a little research on the kind of weeds the parable was talking about. The weeds or tares in Jesus’ time were known as bearded darnel, and they were one of the curses of the Palestinian farmer. In its early stages, it looked so much like wheat that it was hard to tell one from the other. Darnel was called degenerated wheat. When both had headed out, the difference was obvious, but by that time, the roots had intertwined so that to pull the one was to damage the other.

So what should we do about the weeds, the hired hands wanted to know?

The farmer knew it was unwise to try to pull them while they were growing because of the danger of damaging the good wheat. He also knew that in the early stages of growth, it was virtually impossible to tell the difference between the weeds and the wheat. Eventually, of course, they had to be separated. The darnel was slightly poisonous and bitter, causing dizziness and nausea. The separation could best be made at the harvest, where the grain was spread out on trays, and the workers picked out the different-colored darnel, the tares. It was tedious, time-consuming work. There was no quick, easy way to do the job. And that's exactly what Jesus had the farmer suggest to the hired hands in the parable. He said, "Don't rush out into the field now and try to pull out the weeds — you will only damage the wheat at the same time. Let both grow together until the harvest: then they can be separated, and once they are separated, we can destroy the weeds."

Hasn't it been your experience, especially in the early stages of growth, that it is sometimes hard to tell the weeds from the wheat? A child who couldn't write a complete sentence in the third grade turns out to be a Pulitzer Prize winner in literature. Another child who never got into any kind of trouble while growing up turns out to be an ax-murderer.

It takes patience to wait until the harvest to separate the weeds from the wheat. Have you noticed how often we want to immediately root out all the evil and get rid of 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.

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 dramas would have us believe, or even as some churches would have us believe. You might be surprised. The people we think are the bad people at the moment may turn out in God's judgment to be the good people.

What a difference it would make in our society if there were fewer of the 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. With good intentions, they want to root out all 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 people are quite oblivious to the fact that evil is also at the same time at work in them, and they, in their zeal, destroy some of the very basic rights they are intent on protecting.

The parable carries a warning that we should not overreact to what we consider weeds or evil. Sometimes it's better to wait, lest we make the problem worse. For example, I personally believe there is an overreaction among some people on the "flag-burning" issue. Flag-burning is not our number one national problem. How many flags have been burned in protest in the last few years? We may discover in the long run that those who wrap themselves in the flag in

an over-show of patriotism have been doing more harm to our democratic way of life than the one or two individuals who have burned the flag in protest of some government policy.

There is no quick and easy way to root out evil in the world and in ourselves. And to rush in and begin pulling weeds here and there may do more harm than good. Oftentimes, it takes patient waiting, and then it's time-consuming work.

Sometimes, of course, there are decisions that have to be made without any more waiting. A parent grows old, loses mental reliability and physical powers, but refuses to leave the family home. The only child lives a thousand miles away. "If you take me away from here, I'll never speak to you again," threatens the parent. To which the child can only think, "But if I leave you there, you may burn yourself up fooling with the stove or wander out of the house naked when it's 10 below zero, or you may have a stroke and lie conscious but paralyzed in your own hallway." What to do?

There is no time to be patient with these ambiguities. You must make a move. Soon.

But perhaps this is the point at which the parable is more helpful to us than we ever dreamed. It will not make our day-to-day decisions for us. But it gives us a perspective in which to make those decisions. While the parable reminds us that more frequently than not it is better to be patient in making our own judgments, it also reminds us that you and I are not the final judge. And God can be trusted as the final arbiter.

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.