Sunday, July 21, 1996
UNINTENDED CONSEQUENCES
Matthew 13:24-30

Perhaps you've noticed, as I have, that many times the actions we take to try to solve difficult problems bring about unintended consequences. In fact, many times the consequences are just the opposite of what we hoped to accomplish. This is true not only for us as individuals but also for groups and legislatures that pass laws attempting to solve complicated social problems. It's part of what the philosopher Nietzsche referred to when he said, "No good deed goes unpunished."

For example, many years ago in England, it was thought that capital punishment was the best solution to the increasing incidence of criminal activity. A law was passed making the crime of pickpocketing punishable by death through hanging. In those days, hangings were public events, and large crowds would gather to watch. Pickpockets do their best work in large crowds. To their dismay, government officials discovered that pickpockets actively worked the crowds watching those being hanged for the crime of picking pockets. The unintended consequence was that instead of decreasing pickpocketing, the death penalty increased it.

Closer to home, in the United States, Prohibition brought about unintended consequences. The constitutional amendment halting drinking in the U.S. was supposed to be an answer to social instability and moral decline. The 18th Amendment to the Constitution prohibited "the manufacture, sale, or transportation of intoxicating liquors" and cut off the import and export of beer, wine, and hard liquor.

In January 1919, the amendment became part of the Constitution when Nebraska voted in favor of ratification — only Rhode Island and Connecticut failed to ratify it. A year later, in 1920, Prohibition became the law of the land when Congress passed the Volstead Act to enforce the law.

Once in place, Prohibition proved virtually unenforceable. Few who wanted to drink were prevented from doing so. To make matters worse, organized crime increased by gaining control over most of the smuggling and distribution of illicit liquor — this was the heyday of Al Capone in Chicago. As an attempt to restore morality, Prohibition had unintended consequences. The willingness to break the law contributed to a wider decline in moral standards. Official corruption skyrocketed as organized crime spent millions in payoffs to government officials, from police officers to senators, judges, mayors, and governors. Thirteen years later, Prohibition was repealed in 1933 by another Constitutional Amendment.

It's ironic that sometimes our attempts to do good cause more harm. It's equally ironic that sometimes those who do evil things bring about the opposite result, which is what they least intended.

A front-page story in the Wall Street Journal illustrates this. On Super Bowl Sunday in 1995, three drunken white men hurled kerosene-filled beer bottles through the window of the predominantly Black Friendship Missionary Baptist Church in Columbia, Tennessee. The fire caused severe damage to the church but did not destroy it. That same night, another fire was started by arsonists at the Canaan African Methodist Episcopal Church.

The perpetrators hoped to increase racial enmity, but their crimes had the opposite effect — an unintended consequence. In Columbia, Tennessee, the heart of historic Ku Klux Klan territory, the attacks on these two predominantly Black churches brought the white and Black communities closer together than ever before.

In an immediate show of support, members of the Sons of Confederate Veterans chapter quietly contributed to the church rebuilding funds. The very next Sunday, white churchgoers worshiped with Black congregants in a show of racial solidarity in the damaged Friendship Missionary Baptist Church. Since then, Black and white church choirs have sung together, and other progress in racial harmony has been made. The pastor of Friendship Baptist Church said, “Who would have thought that something like this would bring out something so good?”

Unintended consequences! Not long ago, I met a woman who told me about a personality trait 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 someone has, and I usually rush in and do my best to straighten things out.” She went on, “I seem to have solutions to everyone’s problems except my own.”

I asked 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 things worse.” After a thoughtful pause, she continued, “I’m finally beginning to realize that in my panic to do good or what I think is best, I frequently only make matters worse.”

That kind of quick “fix-it” action is a temptation for many of us. We want to take immediate action rather than have the patience to wait for the right time or a more thoughtful solution. Every wise physician knows the first rule of good medicine is, “Do no harm.”

It is to this kind of issue, which we all face from time to time, that the parable Jesus told is directed. This simple story, like all parables, comes straight from the life and work of the people of Jesus’ time.

The story is straightforward: a man sowed a field with good seed. He did his best and rested. But while he rested, something else was happening. Another hand was at work, though it wasn’t visible at first. One morning, his servants reported that weeds were growing, mixed in with the good grain.

The servants wanted to rush out and pull up the weeds, but the farmer told them not to panic. He advised them to be patient, warning that rushing in might do more harm than good. Their actions could have unintended consequences.

If you’re a parent, you know this story. You’ve raised your child with care and love and believe you’ve done your best. But despite your efforts, you notice influences in their lives that concern you — bad habits, language you didn’t teach them. Weeds are growing along with the good grain. So, what do you do? Do you panic and try to root out the bad impulses immediately? Or do you have the patience to wait and watch before taking action that might cause unintended consequences?

Unmarried teenagers are having children at higher rates than ever before. Some suggest cutting off welfare or child support for unmarried teenage mothers. Others argue that an unintended consequence could be more abortions. Punishing the children instead of the parents may do more harm than good in the long run.

What can we learn from this parable about unintended consequences and how God works with us in solving problems?

First, the parable reminds us that evil is always at work in the world. There is no perfect person, no perfect church, no perfect family, no perfect job, no perfect marriage. The best of intentions can go astray. Don't be surprised when you see weeds growing where you thought you had planted only good seed.

Secondly, the parable teaches that our best intentions can have unintended consequences, especially when we act in panic. Jesus tells us not to be surprised by the presence of evil amid the good and, above all, not to panic.

Why are we cautioned not to panic? Because the parable tells us that in the early stages of growth, it's not always easy to tell the good wheat from the weeds.

I did some research on the kind of weeds Jesus referred to. In his time, the weeds were known as bearded darnel, one of the curses of the farmer in that region. In its early stages, darnel looked so much like wheat that it was hard to tell them apart. When both had matured, the difference was obvious, but by then the roots had intertwined. Pulling out one would damage the other.

The farmer in the parable knew it was unwise to try to pull the weeds while they were growing because of the danger of damaging the good wheat. Eventually, the weeds needed to be separated, but not until the harvest. At that point, it was tedious, time-consuming work, but necessary.

Like those hired hands, our temptation is to avoid hard work and tough decisions. We'd rather rush in with quick, simple answers. We think God's ways are too slow.

This parable warns us not to overreact to what we consider evil. Sometimes it's better to wait, lest we cause new and bigger problems we hadn't anticipated. There is no quick and easy way to root out the evil in the world — or in ourselves.

Furthermore, many of our panic judgments about what is good and what is evil are wrong. Appearances are often deceiving.

Of course, there are times when decisions must be made without waiting. A parent grows old, loses mental and physical capacity, and refuses to leave the family home. The only child lives far away. Decisions must be made, and actions must be taken. But even then, the parable is helpful. It gives us perspective. While it reminds us that patience is often necessary, it also reassures us that we are not the final judges. God is the ultimate judge, and God can be trusted. We need not panic because God is in control.

The good news is that, like the farmer in the parable, God is infinitely patient with us. Jesus taught that waiting and proper timing are necessary to deal effectively with life's problems. We are to be as patient as God is with sinners like us. For with God, there is no quick dismissal of anyone as hopeless or worthless. Amen.