Book 32

Sunday July 21, 1996

UNINTENDED CONSEQUENCES Matthew 13:2

4-30

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 not only true of us as individuals but it also applies to groups and to legislatures which pass laws in an attempt to solve complicated social problems. It's part of what the philosopher Nietzsche was referring 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 of all kinds. In addition to many other crimes which were punishable by death, a law was passed which made the crime of pick-pocke-ting punishable by death through hanging. In those days, hangings were public events and large crowds gathered to watch. Pickpockets do their best work in large crowds. To their dismay, government officials discovered that pickpockets actively worked the crowds who were watching those being hanged for the crime of picking poc-kets. The unintended consequence was that instead of decreasing the crime of pick-pocketin-g, the death penalty increased it.

Closer to home in the United States, Prohibiton brought about unintended consequences. The constitutional amendment halting drinking in the

United States 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." It also 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 the amendment. 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 heydey 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 cops on the beat, to senators, judges, mayors and governors on the criminal payroll. Thirteen years later, Prohibition was discontinued in 1933 by another Constitutional Amendment.

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

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

The perpetrators in both instances hope to increase the enmity between blacks and whites, 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 predominatly black church-

es on the same night have now 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 there quietly contributed to church rebuilding funds. Meanwhile, the very next Sunday white churchgoers worshippped with blacks in a show of racial solidarity in the damaged Friendship Missionary Baptist Church. Since that time, black and white church choirs have sung together and other progress in racial harmony has been made. The pastor of the Friendship Baptist Church said, "Who would have thought that something like this would bring out somethng so good."

Unintended consequences! Not long ago, I met

a woman who told me about a personality trait she had which sometimes got her into trouble. She said, "My biggest problem is that I always want to fix things too soon. I see a problem which 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 things worse." And then after a thoughtful pause, 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 only made matters worse."

That kind of quick "fix-it" action is a temptation for many of us. We want to take immediate action, rather than to have the patience to wait until the time is right or a solution is found that is not simply a reaction to our panic. 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 which Jesus told is directed. This little story, like all the parables comes straight from the life and work of the people of Jesus' 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 taking place. There was another hand at work. At first it wasn't visible. But one morning his servants reported to him that there were weeds growing and that they were all mixed in with the good grain.

The servants wanted to rush out and pull up the weeds, but the manager of the farm told them not to panic. He told them instead to be patient. He said if they rushed in too quickly they might do more harm than good. Their action would have unintended consequences.

If you are a parent, you know that story. You've raised your child or children as carefully as possible, cherished him or her or them with love and all in all believe you have done your very best.

You have tried with all your heart to sow only good seed. Yet despite your best efforts, you notice that something else has begun to grow in their lives. You see impulses and stirrings and habits in your children that you do not like. You hear language you hope they have not learned from you. Other influences have been at work in their lives; weeds are growing along with the good grain.

So what do you do? Do you panic and quickly try to root out the impulses you think are evil? Or do you have the patience to watch carefully what happens before you take quick action which might have unintended consequences?

Unmarried teenagers are now having children at a higher rate than ever before in this country. What's the solution? In panic some people and

government agencies are now suggesting that welfare in the form of child support for unmarried teenage mothers be curtailed. Others suggest that an unintended consequence of this would be an increase in abortions. In one way or another however it would be punishing the children instead of the parents and in the long run could do more harm than good.

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

First of all, the parable reminds us that there is evil at work in the world all the time and in every place. There is no perfect person, no perfect church, no perfect family, no perfect job, no perfect marriage. The best of our intentions can go

astray. Do not be surprised when you see weeds growing where you thought you had planted only good seed.

Movements to oppose violence can become infected with the very violence they oppose. Efforts to defend and extend the democratic way of life find themselves using undemocratic means. People tell lies to defend the truth.

Secondly, the parable teaches that our best intentions can have unintended consequences especially when we act in panic. To use the metaphor of the parable, our world, our lives, our good intentions always have weeds growing in them and these weeds are mixed in closely with the good grain. So Jesus tells 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.

Our very forward looking technology which has brought and continues to bring untold blessings to humankind, also and at the same time carries within it the seeds of destruction. In addition to enormous potential for good it also carries the potential for evil.

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

I did some research on the kind of weeds the parable is talking about. The weeds or tares in Jesus' time were known as bearded darnel and

they were one of the curses of the farmer in that region. In its early stages of growth, it looked so much like wheat that it was hard to tell one from the other. Darnel was called degenerated wheat. When both had matured, had headed out, the difference was obvious, but by that time the roots had intertwined, so that to pull out 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 wheat and the weeds. Eventually of course they needed to be separated. The darnel was slightly poisonous and bitter, causing dizziness and nau-

sea. The separation could best be made at the harvest, where the grain was spread out on trays and the workers could carefully pick out the different colored darnel. It was tedious, time-consuming, hard work. There was no easy way to do the job. Like those hired hands, our temptation is to do our best to avoid hard work and tough decisions. It's difficult to wait. We'd rather rush in with quick, simple answers and hasty action. We think God's ways are too slow.

In this country we sometimes seem to think that a quick constitutional amendment will solve almost any social or political problem. As I mentioned earlier, that's what we tried with Prohibition.

The parable carries a warning that we should not over-react to what we consider weeds or evil.

Sometimes it's better to wait lest we make the problem worse or cause new and bigger problems we hadn't anticipated. There is no quick and easy way to root out the evil in the world and in ourselves.

It takes patience and wisdom to avoid unintended consequences. Furthermore many times our panic judgments about what is good and what is evil are wrong. Appearances are often deceiving. To distinguish between the good people and the bad people is not as easy as some of the television dramas or movies would have us believe.

Of course there are times when decisions have to be made without any more waiting. A parent grows old, loses mental reliability and physical strength, but refuses to leave the family home.

The only child lives a thousand miles away. "If you move me out of my house, I'll never speak to you again," threatens the parent. And the child has to say to the parent, "If I leave you there, you may burn yourself or burn the house down fooling with the kitchen stove, or you might wander out of the house naked when it's ten below zero, or you could fall and break your hip, or have a stroke and be paralyzed in your own hallway."

There is no time to be patient with such decisions. You must take some action and live with the consequences.But 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 perspective in which to make those decisions. While the parable reminds us more frequently than not it is better to

be patient and consider carefully the options in making our judgments, it also tells us that you and I are not the final judges. It is God who is the final judge and God can be trusted above everything else. We need not panic because God is in ultimate control. An old saying goes: "The wheels of God grind slowly, but they grind exceedingly fine."

The good news is that like the farmer in the parable, God is infinitely patient with us. Jesus taught that waiting, proper timing is 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.