Sunday, July 21, 2002
WEEDS AND WHEAT
Matthew 13:24-30

A few weeks ago, I was having a conversation with a church member on the subject of helping others. She said, “My biggest problem is that I always want to fix things too soon. I see a problem someone has, and I tend to 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 said, “That’s my biggest problem of all. I’ve noticed that in my hurry to make things right, I often make matters worse.” Then, after a thoughtful pause, she continued, “I think I’m finally beginning to realize that in my rush to do good or what I think is the best, I frequently have only made matters worse.” Maybe the philosopher was correct when he said, “No good deed goes unpunished.”

Trying to use a quick-fix action is a temptation for many people. You want to take immediate action to set things right rather than have the patience to wait until the time is right or a solution is found that is not simply a reaction out of panic. Every wise physician knows the first rule of good medicine: “Do no harm.”

It is to this issue, which all of us face from time to time, that one of the parables Jesus told is directed. This little story, like all of his parables, comes straight from the life and work of the people of his time.

A farmer 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 in the midst of the wheat, and they were not in a little patch by themselves but were mixed in with the little stalks of wheat.

The servants wanted to rush out and pull up the weeds, but the farmer told them not to panic. He told them to be patient and wait. He said that if they rushed in too quickly, they might do more harm than good. Their action would have unintended consequences. He reminded them that since the roots were intertwined, in pulling out the weeds, they would damage too much of the wheat. He might also have added that in the very early stages of growth, it’s difficult to tell the weeds from the wheat.

If you are a parent, you know that story. You’ve raised your child or children as carefully as possible, cherished him or her with love. All in all, you are convinced that 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 habits that you do not like. You hear them using 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 all the impulses you think are evil? How would you go about doing that? What actions would you take? Or do you have the patience to watch carefully what happens before you take quick action that might have unintended consequences?

Years ago in my pastoral work, I was called one Sunday afternoon by the father of a teenage young man who was in a state of panic. He insisted that I come to their home as soon as possible because of a family crisis. When I arrived about a half hour later, he told me that he had discovered a small amount of marijuana in his son's bedroom. He said that he had decided to sell their home in Lincoln and move to a small town in a neighboring state, where he was sure there would be no drug problem. As we talked together and then with his wife, his daughter, and finally his son, we all agreed that might not be the best solution to the problem. It was in danger of having too many unintended consequences.

Instead, we agreed that the family should begin counseling with a highly competent family therapist, which they did. In counseling, the family discovered a number of issues they had been avoiding, and now they were dealt with in a positive way. Everyone came out a winner.

About six years ago, Edward Tenner, a historian, wrote a book entitled Why Things Bite Back: Technology and the Revenge of Unintended Consequences. He was making some of the same points that Jesus does in this parable of the weeds and the wheat. Many times, in our best effort to do good, we discover unintended consequences. Here are some of his examples: Predictions that computers would lead to a "paperless office" quickly gave way to the reality of printers spewing out more paper than ever before. Add the technology of high-speed photocopying machines, and you have more copies than are needed simply because they are so easy to reproduce.

The increased use and sometimes overuse of antibiotics has bred resistant strains of "super-bacteria" that could leave us more vulnerable to disease than before. Pesticides that were supposed to eliminate destructive insects sometimes eliminated their natural enemies instead, leaving the pests more virulent than ever. Flood control measures led to more development along vulnerable coastlines, so the devastation was far worse when floods did break through.

Mr. Tenner is not anti-technology. He believes progress is possible and that we are gaining overall. What fascinates him is the way human behavior offsets technology, even though he admits that, on balance, technology has made our lives much better. He cautions us to remember that the unanticipated effects that often follow underscore the need for a healthy dose of skepticism as we pursue technological solutions for all of our problems. We can't assume that machines and devices will fix everything.

I appreciate the efficiency and ease of email, but it has its downside. I sent an email to a colleague on a subject I thought was important. After a month with no response, I called him on the phone. I asked him why he had not responded to my email. He said, "I get at least 200 emails a day and delete most of them without reading them."

It's ironic that sometimes our attempts to do good cause more problems than we anticipated. It's equally ironic that sometimes those who do evil things can bring about the opposite effect, which is what they least intended. On the night of Super Bowl Sunday in 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 hoped to increase 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 predominantly black churches 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 quietly contributed to church rebuilding funds. Meanwhile, the very next Sunday, white churchgoers worshiped 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 so bad like this would bring out so many good things?”

I’m convinced that the terrorists who crashed the airplanes into the World Trade Center and the Pentagon thought that their destructive acts would bring chaos to our nation. Quite to the contrary, these terrorist actions have united our citizens in many unexpected ways.

What else can we learn from this little parable of the weeds and the wheat about how God is at work in the world? Remember, Jesus began the parable by saying, “The Kingdom of Heaven can be compared to someone who sowed good seed in his field; but while everyone was asleep, an enemy came and sowed weeds among the wheat and then went away.”

The story is reminding you and me that there is always evil at work in the world, in every time and place, in spite of the fact that God is always sowing good seed and that God’s intention for creation is that it be good. There is no perfect person, no perfect church, no perfect family, no perfect job, no perfect marriage. The best of your intentions can go astray. Do not be surprised when you see weeds growing where you thought you had only planted good seed.

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

As I have already noted, the parable teaches that your best intentions can have unintended consequences, especially when you act in panic. To use the metaphor of the parable, our world, our lives, and our good intentions always have weeds growing in them, and these weeds are mixed in closely with the good grain, which makes them harder to recognize.

Patience and wisdom are required because there are times when your panicked judgment about what is good and what is evil can be wrong. Appearances can be deceiving. To distinguish between the good people and the bad people is not as easy as some television dramas and movies would have you believe.

Another way of understanding the message of this parable is this: in the fast-moving and quick-changing world in which you live, you will discover that one of your biggest temptations is to want to make progress instantly. That’s what the servants in the story Jesus told wanted to do. This parable reminds you that there are no shortcuts to long-lasting progress and improvements. Quick fixes rarely work in the long run.

The book The Millionaire Next Door describes the behavior of average people who have more wealth than you might suspect. The surprising conclusion is that most people who become what you would consider wealthy get that way because they spend less, not because they

earn more than the average. They hold off an extra year or two before getting a new car and are more likely to be wearing a Timex on their wrist than a Rolex.

Here's another example: In auto racing, designers struggle to make lighter and lighter cars. Perhaps surprisingly, the best way to trim 100 pounds of weight from a car is to find 1,000 places to trim a tenth of a pound. No grand redesigns, no massive overhauls, just relentless striving for incremental improvement. Similarly, the best way to improve your life and the life of those around you is to find numerous small ways to change for the better, and this will take time and patience.

This is a lesson that can be applied to all of life. How do you rid the world of terrorism? It's not going to be easy with one quick fix. It's going to take patient, long-term work. How do you restore trust in the stock market? It's going to take more than passing new laws, as important as that might be.

What does this tell you about the way God works in creation? The story says that like the farmer in the parable, God continues to sow good seed and expects you to do the same. It also tells you that God is infinitely patient with you and with creation, even when evil appears. God doesn't expect you to make big leaps of progress. With God, there is no quick writing off of anyone as being hopeless, lost, or worthless. Amen.