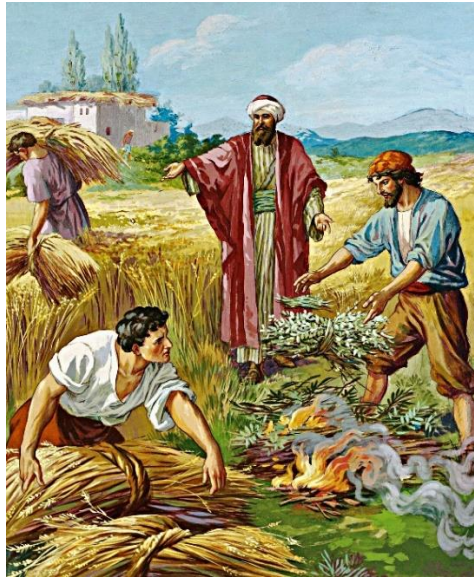


Sermon – July 23, 2023
“Allow both to grow together until the harvest”
The Rev. John C. Wright



Text: Matthew 13:24-30, 36-43

Pray with me: Father, let the words of my mouth and the meditations of my heart be acceptable to you, O Lord, my rock and my redeemer. Come, Holy Spirit, come, and visit, filling open hearts and anointing the sharing of these words, making them a blessing for your people that ignites our continuing transformation into Christ’s image and leads us to fruitful labor as we follow Jesus into his mission right here, right now. Amen

Good morning! Today marks the eighth Sunday of the season of Pentecost. If we are not careful, we will begin to forget the bright colors that marked our celebration at the start of the season of Pentecost and the arrival of Holy Spirit. Let us seek throughout the season of Pentecost to be those with hearts open to fresh wind and fire from Holy Spirit. Let us strive to be those whose hearts are open to Holy Spirit guidance and are out sowing extravagantly in the fields of Northumberland County as Holy Spirit leads. Please keep our Five-Day Club in your prayers this week as we seek to share the love of Jesus with the children and adults in our community.

Jesus tells the crowd and his disciples another parable. That should be no surprise in the midst of Matthew’s parabolic discourse. We might notice when Jesus begins the parable that he uses the words, “The kingdom of heaven may be compared to” Jesus is seeking to help us understand something he has experienced but for which there are no words or images in our lives

that he can use directly to help us understand the kingdom of heaven, so he compares something he knows, the kingdom of heaven, to something we know, a wheat field, as an attempt to bring us into a deeper understanding of the kingdom of heaven. Those who are given visions of heaven have this same struggle as they seek to describe what they have seen in their visions using images we are familiar with that may help us gain insight into what they have experienced but yet are different from what they experienced. The word “like” is often found in the books of Revelation and Daniel when those writers seek to share the things of God that they have experienced with those who have not experienced them. They lack words and images in common with our earthly experiences to share, but they can point to words and images that are “like” what they have seen in their visions. Here, Jesus is teaching about the kingdom of heaven. The kingdom is not something we understand or grasp, but it is like a field of wheat sown by Jesus. After Jesus shares the parable with the crowds, the disciples don’t ask about the use of parables to teach the crowds; instead, they ask for the meaning of the parable. The disciples and the crowds had an idea of what the coming kingdom of God will be like. They expected the kingdom to immediately come about when the Messiah arrived. They thought that with the Messiah’s arrival, Rome would be defeated and a new earthly kingdom with the Messiah as the leader would be stood up in Israel. Jesus is among them, and the crowds and Jesus’ disciples are beginning to think he might be the Messiah, but the kingdom of God has not come as they expected, nor is it apparent that it is coming, nor does Jesus seem to be doing the things they expect he should do to start its arrival. The evil of Rome is still very much in their midst. Jesus’ teaching in the parable begins to address their misconceptions about the kingdom of God.

If we think back to the parable of the four soils and the seeds sown there, we should realize that the use of sowing and seeds as metaphors are not always used in the same way by Jesus when he teaches with parables. In the four soils parable, the seed was the Word extravagantly sown by Jesus, and the seed grew in the people who heard it. In this parable the seed refers to people.¹ We do need to listen carefully to how the elements of the parable are used. One background idea that might help us understand this parable is to know about darnel. Darnel is a plant that, as it grows, looks very much like wheat. It is difficult to tell the difference between darnel and wheat until the heads of grain are formed and then the darnel heads are easily seen as smaller, and the seeds are different from the wheat. Darnel seeds are also poisonous and if they are not separated from the wheat seeds, then when they are ground into flour their

presence will ruin the entire harvest. The resulting flour is not edible. The undetected presence of the darnel plants in the harvest may result in death and the harvest is ruined. In the Roman corpus of laws, there was a law that prevented one from sowing darnel in another person's field.

When Jesus is away from the crowds, his disciples ask him to explain to them the parable of the weeds of the field. They don't ask why Jesus is teaching with parables because they have had that question answered, but they don't seem to understand the parable or they think the teaching is inconsistent with their ideas of the coming kingdom the Messiah is to bring, and so they ask Jesus to explain the parable to them. Let's look at the parts of the parable together. Jesus tells the disciples that the good seed sown by the Son of Man is the people of the kingdom of heaven. Jesus sows his seed in the field which he tells them is the world. The seeds of Jesus are those who hear his word and believe in Jesus, are trusting him, are seeking to follow him, and are cooperating with Jesus. They are in the kingdom of heaven present in the world. The weeds are the people of the evil one. These are those who do not follow Jesus. They are not seeking to be part of God's kingdom. They are not cooperating with God, but are cooperating with the evil one. They are those whom Jesus calls the children of the evil one. The enemy Jesus identifies as the devil and the seeds the enemy has sown in the field are put there to disrupt the growing of the good seed. Let us keep in mind that Jesus' depiction of Satan as an enemy is consistent with the biblical idea of Satan as a spoiler. Here in the field, Satan is seen as seeking to deconstruct the work of the sower of good seed.ⁱⁱ That Jesus mentions the devil in his explanation helps us to understand that the devil is real. The harvest Jesus speaks to is the judgment that occurs at the end of the age. It is a time when a righteous king, who is the Messiah, will come and judge all people in righteousness. And finally, we have the harvesters. They are angels. Not only does Jesus confirm for us that Satan is real and is at work in the world, but he also confirms that angels are real and will be under the command of the Son of Man. Angels will separate the good seed and the seed of the devil on the last day, the day of judgment.

There is a lot of unpacking from Jesus' explanation that we could do and need to do. Let's first look at one of the key ideas Jesus teaches in this parable, the source of evil. In John Wesley's notes on the New Testament about this passage, he writes that Jesus' explanation of evil gives "a plain answer to the great question concerning the origin of evil. God made men (as he did angels) intelligent creatures, and consequently free either to choose good or evil: but he implanted no evil in the human soul: An enemy (with man's concurrence) hath done this."ⁱⁱⁱ

Many people struggle with the idea of a loving God allowing evil to exist in the world and cannot accept such a God. They credit to God that which He has not done, not recognizing that evil is present from our own free will and our cooperation with the evil one. Evil will be present until the end of the age as long as any of humanity chooses to cooperate with the evil one. And remember that temptation is a strong draw to cooperate with the evil one in our lives. Jesus' comments on the source of evil and its presence among the good seed should help us to understand that evil is present around us from our free will and will be present in every generation until the end of the age. The devil is always planting darnel in the fields of the world through the children of the evil one, those who choose to cooperate with him.

The first century Jews expected the kingdom of God to return as it was when Solomon was king. They expected the Messiah to come and when he did, the evil of Rome's occupation over them would be set aside and they would once again be able to worship God as a free, independent nation. John the Baptist sent questions from jail, asking Jesus, "Are you the one to come or are we to wait for another?" John was expecting the Messiah to immediately establish the kingdom and Jesus is teaching that the kingdom of heaven does not arrive as the Jews expected. Jesus' own disciples may have this same confusion and that may in part be the source of their request for an explanation of the parable. In response to their request, Jesus has told them that separation from evil, for the Jews freedom from Rome, comes at the end of the age. Jesus is speaking to their confusion about the Messiah and the kingdom of heaven he has come to establish. We also have this same struggle with the presence of evil. Jesus has come, the gates of hell have been opened, Jesus is victorious over all things, even death, but evil remains. We see this in the news on our media sources. Evil is present. The seeds of the evil one are still being sown among the children of the kingdom.

It is not clear how the crowds understood the parable; nor is it clear how the disciples understood the parable even with Jesus' explanation. The idea that evil would be present until the end of the age, that Rome would be with them and not removed, would not be teaching they would easily accept. Our struggle today is that we also want evil removed, the kingdom of heaven to arrive, and all evil to be separated from us. Yet we live in a fallen world where the kingdom of heaven is breaking in but there are still those who cooperate with the evil one among us.

Jesus does teach that there will come a time when the separation of those who are good and evil will occur. That time comes at the end of the age. There will come a day, the day, when Jesus will judge. There will come a time when the Son of Man, the name Jesus uses in Matthew for himself, will send his angels and they will collect all causes of sin and all evildoers. Evildoers will be thrown into the furnace of fire, a place of weeping and gnashing of teeth. When the end comes, the righteous will shine like the sun in the kingdom of their Father.^{iv} Those who are children of the kingdom will enter into the glory of Jesus' kingdom.

Jesus' explanation for not removing the darnel from the wheat is that the two are intertwined. The roots of the plants are among each other. Their lives are bound up in each other and to remove one would destroy the other. The world, those who cooperate with the evil one or don't believe there is a God or in his son Jesus, are part of our lives. Think of this as if we have a medical need like cancer and Jesus is using a non-believing doctor to bring about healing in our lives. If Jesus were to remove those who don't believe in him, our earthly healing would be in jeopardy. We are connected to those in the world. Also realize that we are to be out in the world sowing the good news of Jesus Christ. Those who are children of the evil one can move from the earthly kingdom they are seeking to life in the kingdom of heaven through repentance and belief in Jesus. The potential movement or transformation of children of the evil one into children of the kingdom of heaven should be a source of great hope in our lives. God is patient, desiring all to come to saving faith. The kingdom of heaven is like the wheat field where the darnel grows among the wheat. God does not will for there to be a separation until the full number has come into the kingdom of heaven, and until that day arrives, we are to be at work in the world as good seed sown there by Jesus.

For much of my life and whenever I encounter evil, my reaction is somewhat like the Jews who wanted the Messiah to come and remove Rome, the evil they focused on, from their midst. It was this same Rome that brought a type of peace and prosperity to the Empire of Rome that allowed Israel to grow as an occupied nation. I have often wanted God to hasten the day of judgment, for Jesus' glorious return to happen, for Jesus to send out the angels and remove all sources of sin and the children of the evil one. Yet, there are many whom I love who are today outside of the kingdom of Jesus. There are people in my life whom I consider loved ones who no longer cooperate with Jesus and are not citizens of the kingdom of heaven. There are all around us those who have not heard about Jesus and his great love for them and the transforming power

of Jesus' love. There are some within our churches who do not yet know Jesus as their Lord and Savior. Yes, I look in hope for Jesus' return in final victory, but until that time, my desire grows to be like Jesus and to seek to sow extravagantly into the lives of those who are children of the evil one, those who cooperate with Satan and those who are captive to the false teaching of the world. We are to be the children of the kingdom, those who are at work doing our part as coworkers with Christ. We should have in our hearts a growing sense of urgency for those we love in the world. Each day we live we are one day closer to Jesus' return in power. We should be those who are crying out to Jesus not only to come, but to work through us to bring about the release of captives of the evil one. We are not to focus only on those we know and love, but all who Holy Spirit leads us to and seeks to use us to share with them the Good News of Jesus Christ. We may not be called by Holy Spirit to be witnesses to those we love. God may not be using us in their lives at this time, but we are called to be those who are growing in the fields of the world among the children of the evil one, showing them the love of Jesus Christ and being loving witnesses in the field where Jesus has called us to grow. Evil will be present until the end of the age, but there will come a final separation of the wheat and dandelion, of the children of the kingdom and the children of the evil one. Don't miss that Jesus teaches that God is not the source of evil. Its source is the devil, and it comes from those who fall into temptation and cooperate with the evil one. Yes, Christ has come. He has gone to the cross and made a way for all to be part of his kingdom, a kingdom that is being established. God is at work in the world, in the lives of those we love who are in captivity and in the lives of those we do not know but who are growing around us. Until the final trumpet sounds and Christ returns, let us strive with all of our heart, mind, and strength to be at work in the in breaking kingdom of heaven, and let us lift our voices, crying out in travailing prayer for those in our lives who are lost and for those around us who live outside of the kingdom of heaven. There is always, until that day, the opportunity for what was grain to become weed or for that which was weed to become wheat.^v We do not know what they will be tomorrow, but we have the opportunity today to pray on their behalf, crying out for weeds to become wheat and for the guidance of Holy Spirit to be laborers in the in breaking kingdom of heaven.

Pray with me: Father, we desire to be among the righteous who will shine like the sun in your kingdom. Jesus, change our hearts to cry out for the children of the evil one that they might be transformed through your love into those who are children of the kingdom of heaven. Holy

Spirit, lead us today and until the last day to be good seed sown in this field and faithful witnesses in all the places you lead us right here, right now. Amen.

ⁱ Snodgrass, Klyne R.. *Stories with Intent: A Comprehensive Guide to the Parables of Jesus* . Eerdmans Publishing Co - A. Kindle Edition.

ⁱⁱ France, R. T.. *The Gospel of Matthew (The New International Commentary on the New Testament)* (p. 535). Wm. B. Eerdmans

ⁱⁱⁱ Wesley, John. *John Wesley: The Complete Commentary On The Bible* . Kindle Edition.

^{iv} NRSV Matthew 13:42

^v SERMON 73A.1.9 Augustine