

A Sermon Preached by Gregory Hall at Clarence Presbyterian on July 10, 2022

THE PARABLE OF THE WHEAT AND TARES

Let both of them grow together until the harvest; and at the harvest time I will tell the reapers, Collect the weeds first and bind them in bundles to be burned, but gather the wheat into my barn. Matthew 13:30

The lesson from our core story from Jesus' teachings is one that our present-day culture needs to hear. You and I live in a nation and culture that is splintered into small tribes that continually judge each other. The polarization seems to be found in every aspect of our lives. Even in entertainment and sports we are asked to choose sides in some controversial issue. It seems every public person or organization is subject to being cancelled or having people show up to protest outside their homes. We fight over who should be allowed on "Twitter."

The goal of seeking to erase the other side and make small issues larger than they really are is found on all sides in our societal divides. Many times, there are conflicts over things that seem ridiculous. I will not sight any examples in our country for fear of appearing to take a partisan side. So, a story from Australia.

Several years ago, the West Australian Opera Company announced it was dropping Carmen from its schedule. The state-owned opera company cancelled George Bizet's masterpiece from its repertoire because it depicts smoking.

Carmen, set partly in and around a cigarette factory where Carmen works, was dropped from the opera company's schedule and replaced with a different opera.

The opera's first act takes place in a Seville square outside a cigarette factory, and features smoking in the setting, action, direction and the libretto and there is even a smokers' chorus. The spokesperson for the opera company is quoted as saying, "We care about the health and wellbeing of our staff, stage performers and all the opera lovers throughout WA, which means promoting health messages and not portraying any activities that could be seen to promote unhealthy behavior." She said smoking remained the single most preventable cause of chronic disease and early death. "The portrayal of smoking on stage, in film and on TV normalizes smoking and presents it as being attractive, which could dissuade smokers from quitting and encourage young people to take it up," she said. "In addition, new trends such as smoking electronic cigarettes may re-establish smoking behavior in our community where the majority of people are non-smokers."

The Prime Minister of Australia, at the time, ridiculed the deal as "political correctness gone crazy". Opera is "an exaggeration and if we are running around looking to take offence or looking to spread some politically correct message, just about every opera would be forbidden", he told Melbourne Radio 3AW. "We don't stop the theatre from running 'Macbeth' because it promotes killing kings," Abbott said.

I share this story because it represents an increasing mindset of judgment that runs rampant in western culture. Increasingly men and women seek to make critiques about

issues and people that lead to division and judgment. If something is not 100% perfect it needs to be rejected. Carmen may contain beautiful music but it may lead to smoking so out it must go. There is a growing mindset that we should seek to only associate with people or groups that have come to the same judgment as ourselves.

This is very apparent in politics. When I was in high school there were people called Rockefeller Republicans and others called Jackson Democrats. The Rockefeller Republicans came largely from the northeast and had many different positions on domestic issues from their fellow members of the GOP from other parts of our country. Jackson Democrats were democrats who took a much stronger view of foreign policy than their fellow democrats. For many years these diverse groups could co-exist in the same party. Just think of the radical diversity in Franklin Roosevelt's coalition. He held together Democrats who passed and enforced Jim Crow laws in the south and Black Civil Rights workers in the north. For many years the two political parties were broad diverse groups where tolerance was required.

This seems to be no longer true. Over the last forty years the political parties have increasingly become monolithic. Each party has a long litmus test on positions one has to hold in order to be acceptable. There has been an ever-growing movement for ideological purity. This has happened for many reasons. One of the great drivers of this polarization has been re-districting. Most of our congressional districts are overwhelmingly dominated by members of one party. Thus, the only way a sitting member of congress is going to be defeated is in a primary. Usually the opponent charges the incumbent with apostasy. He or she has not supported the party's litmus test on issues, thus they must be replaced. This has driven the Republican Party further to the right and the Democrats further to the left. The quest for ideological purity makes living together and making compromises extremely difficult.

Unfortunately, this same dynamic has been at work in the Christian Church. In the first twenty years following World War II the Protestant Christian denominations in America were large bodies of relatively diverse people. Each of these bodies contained men and women of different backgrounds, theologies, approaches to Scripture and understanding of the Church's role in the world and economic backgrounds. With the big exception of race, the denominations had representations from a broad spectrum of society.

This is no longer the case. Over the last forty years instead of drawing large inclusive circles to include all who seek to follow Jesus, denominations and congregations have sought to draw tighter and smaller circles to determine who is acceptable and who is not. Churches have created larger and larger litmus tests to make the judgment of whom and what is acceptable and who is not. This is true of congregations at both ends of the theological spectrum.

I remember working with one of the congregations in our Presbytery that was looking for an interim pastor. It took them more than a year because they had long lists of theological positions that would sift out those who would not be acceptable. This was a very conservative congregation. But I do not think Billy Graham would have been acceptable to them.

Even though we live in a time when people say we can't be judgmental – we act very differently. We live in a time when people are drawing boundaries and making judgments about people every day.

All of this mindset is challenged by the words of Jesus in our reading for today. Jesus tells a story about a field in which a person has planted wheat. This represents the teaching of Jesus planted in human hearts. But the devil comes along at night and also plants seed. The picture painted in this parable would have been quite clear to the Palestinian audience. Tares were a particular type of weed that was the bane of a farmer in that region. In the early stages of growth this weed so closely resembled wheat plants that it was impossible to tell the difference between the wheat and the weeds. When both had developed heads on the plants one could tell the difference. But the problem was that by that time the roots of the tares and the wheat had become so intertwined that if you tried to pull out the weeds you also pulled out the wheat.

The wheat and the tares could not be safely separated while both were growing, but in the end they had to be separated. This is because the grain produced by the tares was slightly poisonous. It has a bitter taste and could cause sickness. Thus, while the wheat and tares grew together, at the harvest they were cut down and then had to be separated. This was traditionally a job for the women. They would laboriously separate by hand the wheat from the tares.

I believe that this parable can be understood on two levels. One way to read this parable is understanding it as being directed to the community of faith. It reminds us to be very reluctant to judge each other. During most of the growing season it is not possible to distinguish between the wheat and the tares.

When we read the Old Testament, it is very clear that the people of God are not perfect people. In our reading for this morning from Genesis we heard how devious Abraham could be. Abraham was called by God to be the father of the chosen people. Yet in our story for today the people of Israel enter Egypt and Abraham tries to pass off Sarah his wife as his sister in order to protect himself and gain favors from Pharaoh.

As we read through the rest of the Old Testament we hear about heroes of the faith like Jacob, David and Elijah. Yet in their lives we hear about some very horrible things they have done. Jacob stole his brother's birthright; David stole another man's wife and had him murdered. Elijah ran away from his responsibilities and blamed God for not backing him.

Can you imagine if Jacob, David and Elijah tried to take leadership in a Christian Church today with their records? We would certainly judge them as not being true followers of God.

This parable teaches us to not be so quick with our judgments for a couple of reasons. We should not think we have all the answers about the faith. All too often we act as if our understanding of the Bible, or our theological reasoning, or our position on a controversial issue is ipso facto God's will.

It takes humility to say that while this is my understanding and position, that other faithful people can sometimes disagree. It is not my position to render judgment on everyone else's faith.

Secondly, we cannot know the condition of another person's heart. A person may appear to be good and faithful, but may in fact be very bad. And the converse is true; a person can appear to be bad, but is really doing the best with what he or she has been given. You and I cannot know what is going on in the deep recesses of another human being. We are much too quick to classify people and to label them good or bad without knowing all the facts.

The parable teaches us judgment does not come in this life, but rather in the harvest. And we are not the people who will separate the wheat and the weeds – that is God's job. So, let us leave the judgment business to God.

This does not mean we never set boundaries or rules in the church. But it does mean that our default setting in the church is to seek to include all who follow Jesus and who seek to love him. We are to draw the circle as wide as possible. We are to have the humility to leave the judging to God.

This parable also speaks to us at the personal level. We have both good seed and bad planted in us. We are not perfect people. We have a mixture of motives. We sometimes can do great acts of faithfulness and then the next day fail. We make spiritual progress and then take two steps back.

Sometimes we cannot tell the difference between the good and the bad in us because they look so much the alike. We are not always clear about what is the right thing to do. At other times the roots of the wheat and weeds get intertwined. If we try to rid ourselves of the bad it will also take out the good. For example, we might perform great acts of service because we like the public recognition. If we stop doing the service in order to become more humble it can mean no longer doing what is right. The good comes out with the bad.

I believe that the spirit of judgment can paralyze us and keep us from trying to do anything. We can so fear making a mistake that we won't act. We can be so afraid of making a wrong choice that we make no choice at all.

Remember we are not the judge – God is. So, we should live our lives trying to do the best we can. We are to love and serve Christ to the best of our ability. We will know victories and losses. We will grow in faith and yet stumble. We can be confident that it is our loving Father who will in the end be our judge.

In this parable Jesus encourages us to reject a life lived out of judgment of others and fear of being judged ourselves. Instead we are to boldly act out of love. We are to live reaching out to include others and to accept our own fallen nature and thus seeking to follow Jesus as best we can, assured of his forgiving love now and in the world to come.

I will close with words from Mother Teresa who sums up the parable: **“If you judge people, you have no time to love them.”**