

Matthew 13:24-30, 36-43
Church: For Saints or Sinners?
WRCoB 2.17.19

You've heard the adage about church . . .

Is church a hospital for sinners or a museum for saints?

The imagery of both is not at all appealing.

Either it's an image of a bunch of low-life

Or an image of a bunch of decrepit self-righteous.

Neither of which are people we'd choose to hang out with.

And in some ways likely the reason

Why many don't come to church.

You've heard it . . .

"I don't go to church cause they're hypocrites."

"They're just as bad as those who don't attend church.

"There's just as much racism, materialism, hypocrisy

Just as much dysfunctional behavior

Inside the church as there is outside the church."

Or you hear . . .

"They're just a bunch of goody-two-shoes

Completed out of touch with the real world.

"They have this "better-than-thou" attitude

And look down their noses on everyone else."

Like the two Puritans talking to one another:

“There is none so righteous as me and thee,
And sometimes I worry about thee!”
(Quoted from William Willimon)

Either way, the thought being
If the church would just clean up its act

Sort out the good from the bad
The saint from the sinner
The saved from the damned . . .

Why people would gladly be a part of it.

And throughout history, the church has tried
To purge itself of the sin within.

But hey, as long as the church is made up of human beings
It’s unlikely to happen!

Like the Mennonite and Amish (and maybe the Brethren)
They appear so righteous . . .
Until you get close.

Church is a messy business
Full of sinners and saints.

Let’s face it, church is a real hodge-podge of humanity!
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So why do we do it?

Why bother?

Why would we sit in the same pew
 Alongside a sinner, or a saint for that matter?

And along that same line . . .

Why would a Democrat and a Republican
 Gay and straight
 Liberal and conservative
 Rich and poor
 Black and white
 Young and old

Why do they bother coming to this place called church?

The only common thread holding us all is love . . .
 The love of God through Jesus Christ
 And the love of neighbor.

Tenuous? Maybe!

But it has endured for better or for worse
 For 2000 years!

For it is our belief that God, through Jesus Christ
 Has ordained the church to be a vessel
 To herald in the kingdom of heaven.

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Today's passage falls in the middle
Of six other parables Jesus taught that day.

The parable of the four soils
The parable of the weeds
The mustard seed, the yeast
The hidden treasure
The pearl merchant
And the parable of the fishing net.

The setting is the Sea of Galilee.

The crowd around him so big
Jesus had to climb into a boat
And speak to the crowd from offshore.

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The parable of the weeds is our chosen lesson for today.

Jesus says the kingdom of heaven is like
Someone who sowed good seed in a field.

After he finished
The enemy came and sowed weeds among the wheat.

They both grew side by side.

The sower's servants, seeing the weeds, went to the sower
And asked if they should go out pull them out.

Any who has farmed or gardened knows
If you don't get the weeds out
They'll eventually choke out the intended crop

And Jesus' instructions . . . ?

Leave the weeds alone.

Let them both grow up together.

At the time of harvest

The harvesters can first collect the weeds
And bundle them to be burned.

Then gather the wheat and store it in the barn.

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It's not a productive way of raising a crop is it?

We wouldn't do that in our own gardens.

But as I have come to learn, the particular weed sowed
Was darnel, "lolium temulentum."

Farmers call it wheat's evil twin.

The KJV calls it, tares.

Shakespeare mentions darnel in several of his books.

The problem with darnel is it looks exactly like wheat.

It is only at harvest one can distinguish between them

Hence, Jesus' caution to wait until then
To separate the weed from the wheat.

Going back to our earlier discussion
Concerning whether church is for sinners or saints

Neither you nor I can make that call.

You start pulling up what you think is a weed
And low and behold you've just pulled up a wheat.

You leave what you think is a wheat
Only to find out later it's a weed.

You and I can't make that call, but God can.

And God says leave them be for now.

The other thing about a weed is perspective and prospective.

One person's weed is another person's flower.

I might go out and start weeding the garden
And Judith will come out and tell me to stop.

She'll say,
"Dave, you don't know what you're doing out there."

And later on, that same weed I was trying to pull
Is in a flower vase on the kitchen table!

Better to leave it for God.

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And the reality is . . . it's not at all clear-cut.

We all have a little sinner and little saint within each of us.

The lesson is that it's not for us
To make that judgment call.

It's not for us to separate the weeds from the wheat
The sinners from the saints.

We are not gatekeepers
Nor temple police
Nor spiritual detectives.

We're not to try and determine who should be in
And who should be out!

That's not our business
That's God's business.

We're church!
But it is not our church!
It is God's church!

And if we begin to dictate who's in and who's out
Who should stay and who should go

We'll start to look like the very people
Who ended up crucifying Jesus!

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I distinctly remember when Phillip Yancey
The well-known Christian author
Spoke at AC years ago.

The first thing he said
After looking out at the gathered Brethren
Was this . . .

“I hope your congregations are a safe place for sinners!”

Well that got the Brethren’s attention!

I think we give lip service to the idea
We are all sinners in need of a savior

In reality we’d like to pretend otherwise.

Yancey knew this and that’s why he said it.

We all want to appear like
“hey, it’s all good, no problems here.”

When really sinner and saint
Is all complicatedly wrapped up
Tightly woven within each of us.

Just as the wheat and tares in the field.

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Now, what I am NOT saying is
That we shouldn’t call out blatant sin when we see it.

No!

When we see the sin of sexual abuse
Racism, exploitation of women
The abuse of power, etc.

We need to call it for what it is!

I commend the Southern Baptist Church

For their work in bringing out the sin of sexual abuse!

They hid these cases for far too long.

And the same with the Catholic Church.

What I AM saying is that there is no way

That the church is able to purge all evil from its ranks.

The moment we think we have done it

Is the moment Jesus calls us out

As white-washed tombstones.

Beautiful on the outside

Dark and sinister and full of death on the inside.

The moment we begin to play God

We end up being the ones that needs purging.

~~

In another parable

Jesus likens the kingdom of heaven to a king

Who schedules a banquet in honor of his son.

The servants go out and extends the invitation

To the higher echelons of society.

But they don't bother to come.

The king is furious and has his servants
Go out to the highways and byways
And invites anyone, everyone
The good and the bad.

And the banquet hall is filled to overflowing.

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That's the call of the church.

Our job is to invite everyone we can to the banquet.

God will sort it out later.

It's not for us to try to distinguish
Between the wheat and the tares.

It's not for us but for God.
And it won't happen until the harvest is ready.

And the reason should be very clear . . .

Because some of these weeds
Might just become flowers

Because some of the wheat might never produce.

Because God loves them all unconditionally
And holds out as long as possible
So as to give everyone a chance.

Jesus says, "let them both grow together."

Sure there's hypocrisy in the church!

Sure there's good and bad in the church!

Jesus says, "let them grow together."

God will sort it out.

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And so . . .

Let the good and the bad
 The sinner and the saint
 Let them grow together.

Let the rich and the poor
 The able and the handicapped
 The black and white

Let the liberal and the conservative
 The social activists and the social misfits

Let the Democrats and Republicans
 The pro-choice and the pro-life
 The gay and the straight

Let them grow together.

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Let the whole motley crew of humanity grow together
 More and more and more into the image of God!

For the glory of God and our neighbors' good.