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!
~~
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.

~~
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.

~~
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.
~~
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.
~~
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!

~~
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.
~~
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.

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.

~

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.

~

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.