

Matthew 13:24-43  
Saints or Sinners?  
WRCoB 2.12.23

You've heard the adage about church.

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

The imagery of both is not very 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  
"The church is full of hypocrites."

"There's as much racism, materialism, hypocrisy  
Just as much dysfunctional behavior  
Inside the church as there is outside"

Or you might hear  
"They're just a bunch of goody-two-shoes  
Completed out of touch with reality."

Like the two Puritans talking to one another.

*There is none so righteous as me and thee, and sometimes I worry about thee!"* (Quote 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 then, people would gladly come and 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!

Church is a messy business  
Full of sinners and saints.

~~

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?

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

Why do we do it?

The ONLY common thread holding us together is Jesus.

Tenuous? Yes!

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

It is my belief, God, through Jesus Christ  
Has ordained the church  
To be the vessel  
To herald in the kingdom of heaven

~~

Today's passage falls in the middle  
Of seven parables Jesus taught on 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.

On that particular day  
The crowd was so large  
Jesus had to climb into a boat  
To speak from the water.

I chose the parable of the weeds as our chosen lesson.

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

After he finished planting an enemy came  
And sowed weeds among the wheat.

They both grew up side by side.

When they saw the weeds  
The sower's servants went to him  
And asked if they should go pull them out.

Anyone who's farmed or gardened knows  
If you don't get the weeds out  
They'll 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 separate the weeds  
And bundle them to be burned.

Then they can gather the wheat and store in the barn.

~~

It's not a productive way of raising a crop is it?  
But this particular weed was extremely troublesome

It is Darnel

*lolium temulentum*

Farmers call it wheat's evil twin.

The KJV calls it, tares.

The problem with darnel is it looks exactly like wheat.

It is during harvest one can distinguish between them.

That is why Jesus' cautioned his disciples  
Not to start weeding out the darnel.

For it will only lead to wahala.

~~

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 it alone.

Don't try and weed them out.

God will do the separating.

Jesus says, leave it alone.

~~

The reality is . . . it's not all that clear-cut.

Within each of us there's a capacity  
For good and for evil.

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 heaven's detectives.

We're not the ones to determine  
Who's in and who's out!

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

We're the 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 stays and who goes

We'll become the very ones  
Jesus criticizes the most  
The legalistic church leaders.

~~

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.

*I hope your congregations are safe places for sinners!*

Well that got the Brethren's attention!

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

In reality we pretend otherwise.

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

We all want to appear like  
"hey, life is good, no problems here."

When the reality is  
That we are all complicatedly mixed up  
Between saint and sinner  
Personally, and corporately.

Just like the wheat and tares in the field.

~~

Now, what I am NOT saying is  
That the church shouldn't call out blatant sin  
When we see it. No!

When the church sees the sin of sexual abuse  
Racism, exploitation of women  
The abuse of power, etc.

We need to call it for what it is  
And hold the perpetrators accountable.

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've 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 extend the invitation  
To the higher echelons of society.



But they don't come.

The king, furious, has his servants  
Go out into the streets to invite 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 wheat and 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 the ugly weeds  
Might just become beautiful flowers

And because some of the beautiful flowers  
Might just become ugly tares.

But because God loves us all  
God will hold out as long as possible  
So as to give everyone a second or third 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.

~~

As God’s vessel, the church must create  
An atmosphere of trust and authenticity.

We must be sincere and honest in what we do

We must not try to be what we’re not.

We must figure out what it means  
To be a safe place for sinners.

We all have problems  
We all have sinned  
We all need God’s forgiveness.

And we all need a place where we can share and confess  
Find forgiveness and support to change.

But if the church cannot offer that safe place  
Then I am not sure we are doing everything  
We need to be doing

*By safe place I mean a place where it's not intimidating or uncomfortable to talk about our battle with sin. Too many times people come to church and feel like they have to act perfect, that we can't possibly let anyone else in the church know about the struggles we are currently facing.*

*This idea though goes directly against what the church is all about. The whole point of the local church is that it provides a place for us to work together to glorify God and to build each other up in Christlikeness (Ryan Retelle).*

~~

So why do we do it? Why do we bother?

Why sit in the same pew

Alongside a sinner, or a saint for that matter?

Why a Democrat and a Republican

Gay and straight

Liberal and conservative

Rich and poor

Black and white

Young and old

Why are we part of this thing called church?

Because Jesus Christ has called us to be the church.

May this whole motley crew of humanity

Sinners and saints alike

Grow more and more into the image of God!

We can't do it if we are not authentic, sincere, and honest  
With each other in a safe environment.

Let us be an authentic church  
For the glory of God and our neighbors' good