

Sermon: Year A, Proper 11

Texts: Wisdom 12:13, 16-19

Romans 8:12-25

Matthew 13:24-30, 36-43

Not far down the street from the property Trish and I have in Hatfield, Massachusetts, one of our neighbors maintains a sign in his front lawn, on which he posts Christian messages. His house is in the very center of town, on Main street, across from the public library and town hall, next to a small market and a grand, old building that used to be the elementary school. It's a prime location, and his sign is prominently placed. Last week, as we passed by, it read: "Take heed, lest you forget the Lord your God, by not keeping his commandments and his ordinances and his statutes, which I command you this day."

This is the usual fare – like so many Christian bumper stickers, billboards, and church signs. They register warnings, stern messages that are intended, I suppose, to prompt us into choice and action. As Paul himself cautioned: "The wages of sin is death." Or as the Gospel reading this morning threatened: "The Son of man will send his angels, and they will gather out of his kingdom all causes of sin and all evildoers and throw them into the furnace of fire; there men will weep and gnash their teeth." This, it often seems, is the primary face of Christianity in our time. We live in the shadow of the judgment of God and time is short. Our eternal fate is in our hands, balanced precariously on the decision of faith, apart from which we are subject to God's wrath.

Each time I see such messages, I marvel at how unforgiving the message of forgiveness has become. And I feel that, in the eyes of others, because I'm unambiguously a Christian, I'm supposed to nod in agreement or show some clear alignment with these Biblical quotations. But they profoundly disquiet me. I never feel less Christian than when I see such Christian declarations. I want to cross to the other side of the street, or, even better, I want to imagine that all these messages are just sad accidents. They aren't really the expression or the trust of any church or any Christian believer. They must have been left unfinished, tragically incomplete. For they are really no more than shrill accusations, indiscriminately aired, and as such, they reveal far more about us, as human beings, than they reflect the intention, the will, or the character of God.

Yet most damning of all, it is these very sentiments, misquoted and misused, that sabotage the very heart of the Gospel and thereby obscure God and the joy of God's kingdom – which isn't just a far off hope, realized at the end of this world and this time. It is present to us now if we have eyes to see it and heart enough to concede that God's forgiveness truly exceeds all our stingy demands that it cannot be that generous, and that the primary word of the church is not warning but outright celebration.

Of course, one way of reading the parable we have heard this morning is to allow it to fall lazily within the expectations we ourselves have construed for God. We do live in a world divided between good and evil. This is simply apparent. And justice demands that each person receives what each is due, in accord with how one has lived. Rest assured, there will come a time – so the parable seems to say – when this will occur – conclusively and devastatingly. But does this

reading really open the fullness of the parable to us? It points ahead, to some distant moment, well beyond the scope of our lives, when God's power will finally be exercised, but this is a pretty thin hope, which provides little for us now except threat and the strange satisfaction of retribution that will ultimately be taken against others who never heeded the signs we posted.

I cannot read the parable this way. It not only shrinks God into a tyrant of revenge. It also shrivels faith into fear. When, quite to the contrary, this very parable, read another way, exudes God's pleasure with our world and God's delight in a redemption of such measure that only God can fathom this justice. Good seed is sown, but weeds appear. And the text is very precise. This is not the consequence of the sower or the seed. It is the interjection of an enemy, foreign and unnamed. The field is compromised. But the instruction of the householder is to allow the good seed to grow in spite of the weeds. The field is not to be plowed under. This is a decision that is the constant witness of the Old Testament. As early as the story of Noah, we are told that judgment does not issue justice. All the world is destroyed, except Noah and his family, who were deemed righteous. But the desolation of the flood does not render satisfaction, and the righteousness of Noah's family proves as fragile as all the rest who perished. Even such comprehensive judgment as wholesale destruction fails. And thus, something else must take judgment's place. Justice must come by another, surprising means.

According to the parable, that something is patience. God waits, we are told – not for us to grovel and plead and change for the better. God waits simply for us to grow, to reach fulfillment. Such patience is a deeply luxurious thing. It posits our worth in God's eyes and informs us, by the richness of the time given us, that God's satisfaction comes not by imposing an objective standard of rectitude against us but by affording us the grace to live into his righteousness, which is God's redemption of all of creation. For patience is never empty. It's never merely the boredom of waiting for waiting's sake. It's rather the mark of one's confidence, one's favor, one's expectation that there is something good yet to emerge. It informs us that time is beautiful. It's the unhurriedness of allowing things to unfold, things that are marvelous and mysterious, that continually remind us that we are part of the self-expression of God's own glory, now, as we are, as the whole continuum of time stretches forward and extends and multiplies the creation's abundance.

All that we are and all that surrounds and sustains us, day by day, is the form and substance of God's patience in waiting, allowing infinite desire and infinite hope to find expression in the slow revelation of time. It has been billions of years already, of which we are the product. By our best measures, there are still billions of years to come, by which God's love may be made manifest in spectacular variation: as evidenced in the immensity of the cosmos, the intricacy of life, and, in Jesus Christ, the supreme intimacy of forgiveness that triumphs over every offense and injury and evil – even death.

If you read the parable closely, it isn't a tragedy. The good do not fall. Evil does not win. What was planted as weeds is harvested as weeds. Evil itself is done in and removed. What God has planted still flourishes.

I'm not sure how to put this stupendous Good News on a sign or how to condense it into a catch phrase or a sentence that can nicely adorn the bumper of a car. Inevitably, every attempt to

capture goodness in reduction seems trite or horribly, irreverently banal. Slogans only do damage, even such well-intentioned proclamations as “God is love” or “Jesus is Lord.” For what they end up expressing, more than all else, is our impatience, our want to have things clearly defined and comfortably contained, so that, once spoken, this can be postulated, assumed, and then largely removed from the drama of our lives. It is once again a judgment – a rule and generalization – that makes God static and squelches the dynamic complexity of patience and love.

I don't keep a Christian sign in my front yard. I can't imagine one that would offer the right message. What I try to do is to be enthralled by the patience of God, in the opening of each day, in the grace and mercy of every relationship, in the vast display of history, in the resilient hope by which the future is envisioned. I try in every way to perceive God's incredible waiting for me and in me, so that, perhaps, I can be the means by which God's patience is seen – in the surprise of love and the gift of forgiveness, which is always messy, but which is more righteous than right. Don Saliers' words, printed in the bulletin's margin notes, are well chosen and lovely: “God is faithful and waits,” he wrote. “So the liturgy in its whole range – from daily prayer, to initiation rites, to Eucharist, to burying the dead – waits patiently for our humanity to be opened to it. The liturgy waits patiently, like the Scriptures, like Jesus, like the whole life of God who, as Tolstoy observed, ‘sees the truth but waits.’” This is the message of Christian faith.

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