

SERMON for Sunday, July 17, 2005
Romans 8:12-25, Matthew 13:24-30,36-43

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If Not Now, Then When?

"I want it, and I want it now!" How often have you heard, or thought, those words? Perhaps loudly from your demanding toddler who wants another drink of water, maybe spoken in the confines of your own car while you wait for yet another cycle of red-green-red before it's your turn to turn left, whispered in the silence of your heart waiting to hear the words from the doctor about the test results. Now, O Lord, fix it now! Whether in exasperation or in anxious supplication, we pray for answers. Now!

We are seemingly fixated, in this early decade of the twenty-first century, on the short term, and not very content with long - long anything. We seem to have no capacity for a long process of any sort, for long vision or for long-term goals. Just the other day as I was driving along University Avenue near Midvale Boulevard, I noticed that a building was being razed - in a short day since I had passed that corner it was just about down to level ground. And it occurred to me that the building was not that old - maybe thirty years or so. It had housed a bank, then an investment company, then a mortgage company. The bare lot will soon be the site of a new bank. How quick we are to declare things obsolete and in need of removal. And not just the physical things around us. What is 'hot', or popular, and what is not, is fleeting - fame in the world of movie stardom, top ten lists come and go before the print is even dry. And causes - certain diseases, social issues, needs of people - causes to tug at our heart and purse strings rapidly shift depending on which need gets the most air and press coverage.

And in the life of faith? We're not immune. Our moral outrage can be whipped up quite quickly, and can sneak upon our consciousness. Did someone steal? Punish her and throw her in jail. One, two, three strikes and you are out no matter what. Our jails and prisons are full to overflowing. An international incident of terror? We are quick to demand retribution before we know all the facts. In the church we want clean lines separating absolute right and absolute wrong, the exact way to interpret Scripture that leaves no room for questions, definitive answers to WWJD, What would Jesus do? We are a judgmental people, surprisingly so in a land of freedom and accommodating to many of all religions, nationalities, ideas and opinions. And we seem to have gotten less patient. Now here is where I might be getting into murky waters, for you might ask, Didn't Jesus throw the moneymongers out of the temple? Wasn't God impatient with the children of Israel when they began to glance at idols? What about the Ten Commandments and lying and cheating and committing adultery. Aren't they important? Of course, and to get incensed about injustice and to be filled with compassion about homelessness and hunger is a good thing, what God calls us to do and to be. So what we are about to learn from the parable of the wheat and the weeds should surprise and trouble us somewhat, and in our journey of faith seeking understanding, help us dig more deeply into the mind of God and the heart of Jesus.

The parables of this summer are all about the kingdom of God, here on earth and yet to come. Jesus teaches by these parables, using everyday images and objects, illustrations taken from the agrarian village lifestyle. Last week we talked about the sower, this week about wheat and weeds. The farmer had a field, Jesus said, ready for the wheat to be planted. Plant it he did, and was anticipating a good harvest. But

during the night, some nasty neighbor, holding a grudge over a fence line, and up to no good, sneaked over and threw weed seeds out in the field. Now these seeds were for a particular type of weed, the Greek word for them is *zizania*. As they grow, these weeds in English called *darnel* are about the same size as wheat and they look like wheat, but they are not wheat. So in the story that Jesus told, the weeds and the wheat sprouted and grew. Soon the servants that tended the fields noticed that what they thought was all wheat was not, and asked the farmer, "Are you sure you planted good seed? There are weeds! How did that stuff get in there? Should we go and pull it out? Let's get rid of it!" But the farmer gives a surprise answer: "No. Let it go. If you try to pull out the weeds, because it looks so much like wheat, and stalks are growing so intertwined, you are sure to pull out the good wheat as well. Let's wait until the harvest." What a surprise answer, one that confused the disciples who were listening. The explanation that Jesus gave was that the good seed is the Word of God, the weeds represent the presence of evil in this world, the poor choices we make, the anger and hate we disseminate, the ruination of our natural resources - everything that we lump under the umbrella of sin. "Let it go," said Jesus, and I'll take care of it later."

Just prior to last week's meeting of world leaders in Scotland, the G-8, which was dramatically interrupted by the bombings in London, world religious leader, South African Bishop Desmond Tutu, spoke of one of the major issues facing the world. It is Africa, which British Prime Minister Tony Blair called "a scar on the conscience of the world. Africa is the only region in the world where people are poorer than they were thirty years ago. More than 40 million African children will never set foot inside a classroom. More than half the population live on less than a dollar a day, and poverty is grinding and grueling when exacerbated by disease, corruption and poor governance and violence. Ten million children in Africa are orphans because of HIV/AIDS. Tutu spoke of small signs of hope, with some commitments of aid from G-8 nations. He concludes, "Failed countries and regions are breeding grounds for disaffection and violence. We live in an interdependent world, and what happens in Africa will affect all of us. The opportunity must be seized, and the time is now." Now, not later.

What are the opportunities we have, now, and not later? And what can wait? Our gospel leads us fairly directly to judgment, and the word is that it is not up to us to judge, to grasp the evil weeds and toss them out. That is for God to do. We are called rather to patience and tolerance in dealing with others, not jump to conclusions, and practice living with a certain amount of ambiguity. And as we take the gospel, and Desmond Tutu, seriously, we will seize the opportunity to "act now". Not in judgment, but in love. Pastor Jim Somerville, currently of Washington, DC, illustrates. At his previous church in North Carolina, he asked the people to imagine what would happen if they adopted a policy of weed-pulling, drew a circle around the little town, and vowed that no evil would grow within its borders. Admittedly, it would be hard, if not impossible to keep out drugs and alcohol and pornography and gambling. But what if they could? He concludes, "We would have a town characterized by the absence of evil, which is not the same as a town characterized by the presence of good. And maybe Jesus was saying that it's better to have a wheat field with weed in it than a field with nothing at all." This same church began a ministry to the children of a nearby trailer park. Instead of concentrating on the evil, and chasing down deadbeat dads and confiscating handguns, they put up a basketball hoop, told stories from the Bible, and went Saturday after Saturday to play with the kids. After about two years of this ministry, a note was put in the pastor's mailbox, "Adrian wants to be baptized." Pastor Somerville tells it, "Adrian.

The terror of the trailer park. That little girl who had made our work most difficult during the previous two years. Who would have guessed? Instead of pulling weeds in the field where she lived, we just tried hard to be wheat, and somehow Adrian saw that and fell in love with it and wanted it for herself. After she was baptized, there was a little more wheat in the field. And because she was there, soon there was even more."

When my kids were younger there was a penny candy that came in little wrapped squares called 'Now and Later'. It was like a taffy, that was hard and impossible to chew when you first put it in your mouth, but which would soften and then you could chew it without hurting your teeth. Eventually it could be swallowed. Quite a bit of goodness from a small bit of flavored sugar, and what a value. It lasted a long time and you could savor it now, and later. As I was thinking about this sermon title, "If not now, then when?", (which you must understand is picked earlier in the month or week and long before the sermon is written which means the connection is occasionally more tenuous than at other times), I thought that good subtitle might be "Now and Later", or "Heaven can wait." And it can. Oh, not that we are very good at waiting. We are not good at idle waiting. And that is good, because idle waiting has nothing to do with the gospel. Our desire for judgment may have to wait for God's good time, but there is plenty to do in the meantime.

I was reading about a Bible project called the St. John's Bible, which is the first handwritten, illuminated Bible, the New Revised Standard Version, commissioned since the printing press was invented 500 years ago. It has been hailed as a major artistic, cultural and spiritual endeavor, of great beauty. This extraordinary project originated at St. John's Abbey, a Benedictine monastery, and its connected St. John's University, both in Collegeville, Minnesota. Donald Jackson, one of the world's foremost calligraphers, was commissioned to begin this project in 1998. There will be seven large volumes by the end, expected in 2007. It will be exhibited around the nation, and part of the exhibit will be telling the story of its creation, the use of quills and vellum, ancient hand-ground inks, and gold and silver gilding, along with computer design technology and other modern tools. Those who are involved in this project say that this Bible has the potential to "ignite the spiritual imagination of believers worldwide."

Now I cannot imagine embarking on such a project, which takes so long to complete. Who could have this vision, I wonder. And of what value? I would rather have my works printed at the press of the print button on the computer. "I want it, and I want it now." But God tells us to wait for the eternal, for that which leads to joy, leads to justice, leads to peace. It will take a long time, but it is worth waiting for, and working for, and praying for. Heaven can wait, and in the meantime...we are entrusted with the Word of the Lord, to sow, to tend, to share. Thanks be to God. Amen.