

Reverend James D. Dennis, Jr.

July 17, 2005

Sermon Text: Matthew 13:24-30, 36-43

Before I begin my sermon, this is a sermon that comes with a preface and a warning. If you only half-listen to it and some of the examples that I give today, you may come out thinking that I am being a flaming liberal or a flaming conservative, but I tell you that I'm being neither one. I am trying to be on fire for the truth of Christ and the Gospel instead, but use some examples, which may illustrate a larger point. So please, listen carefully.

Now, when we talk about sowing good seed and bad seed, one of the classic preacher illustrations, which I love, and has very little to do with my sermon, but, and the older folks among us will understand, many of us in our youth have sown wild oats, and in our old age, pray for crop failure. I love that one. Good seed produces what it produces – good, and bad seed produces what it produces – bad.

An arrogant astronomer once approached a minister at a party, “Pastor,” said the astronomer smugly, “wouldn't you agree that all of Christian theology could be summed up in that simple little song, “Jesus Loves Me This I Know?” The pastor said, “Well, yes, if you would agree that all of astronomy could be summed up in this song, “Twinkle, Twinkle, Little Star.”

You see, there is nothing more important than knowing that God loves us and loves others, and Jesus made us in flesh, made known the love of God in a powerful way so “Jesus Loves Me” is an important song, but faith involves a response to knowing this, a response, which results in Christ-like actions toward others. Love is the seed of the Gospel. Seeds are only potential, they are only the beginning. To see what they will produce, you must let them grow. Seeds must grow. They must be tended to. They must mature, and then they will produce a crop. Good seeds, nourished and watered, produce good fruit. Bad seeds produce sometimes poison fruit or troublesome things or briars, which clog the ground. Sometimes it is hard to tell until the fruit matures and manifests, such as the wheat or the imitation or counterfeit wheat, the Bible recognizes as darnel. It looks like wheat until it fruits out, and then it is poison. If you start carelessly pulling up what you think may be weeds, you'll destroy the good with the bad, and so, in the language of this parable, you leave the weeds alone, and that's troublesome to us. You let them grow, and soon enough, when their fruit begins to show, you'll be able to tell which is which. You let them grow because in a larger context it is God's job to decide which is which, and it is God's job to decide when is the harvest. The fruits or the actions will reveal what is good and what is evil. Christ-like actions such as love and compassion and forbearance and encouragement and prayer and to feed and to stop and help when there is need and to forgive and to warn someone when they are near the edge, these things are Christ-like, but self-centered and self-gain and complete detachment from others and wishing harm and delighting in judgment of others and ignoring the cries of the poor and the hurting, these things are evil, and in the language of the parable, the fruit of bad seed. See, beliefs do matter. They bear fruit, and they lead to actions of one kind or another, and none of this seems strange except the part about not weeding or not judging prematurely, the part about just allowing the weeds to grow. We want to be

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judge and jury and executioner for the weedy among us. Even in the children’s sermon today, they wanted the weed eater. They wanted to kill the weeds, pull the weeds, get rid of the weeds, and one of our young children, I forget whom, said maybe the weeds could change. We want them up and out though, and Jesus’ parable seems to say let them grow and let God sort it out. The harvest will come. The harvest will come. From Jesus’ life we know the story of Zacheus, who was a crooked tax collector. He changed his ways late in life. The woman, caught in the very act of adultery, found in the Gospel of John, who was given by Jesus a second chance to go and sin no more. The thief, who repented while dying on the cross next to Jesus. Who is to say when to pull the weeds, when it’s time to judge? The parable says, yes, you can tell obvious evil by its actions, but it is not yours to judge or to uproot. It is God’s to do and it will be done in God’s time, not ours, and yet we struggle. We struggle with the fruit of bad seed all around us, and we wonder when will God do something. We want the kingdom of God to begin now, in our time, and I’m paraphrasing Jonathan Edwards, that famous preacher from Massachusetts, I’ll paraphrase it and move the locale to here, “We want the kingdom of God to begin now in our time, and if in our time, certainly in America, and if in America, certainly in the South, and if in the South, then why not this pleasant place with South in its name, South Carolina. Today’s reading came from a section of Matthew in which, over and over and over, Jesus drives home the point that the kingdom of God is not here. Not just another military governmental creation, not propped up on earthly leaders, or earthly standards, or earthly rewards, God’s kingdom is not based in power and might and wealth as worldly kingdoms are, instead, the kingdom in Scripture is described in these various ways, a sower who cast seed everywhere and some grew and produced fruit, and some did not, or like a mustard seed, so tiny, but up from it grows something beyond all expectation. A bit of leaven the kingdom is described as, that leavens and changes the whole lump, or it is shown also, the kingdom in the trusting faith of a child or the kingdom is like the maidens waiting for the bridegroom, and some had enough oil for the darkness and some did not, or the kingdom is for those who visited and fed and had compassion on the least and the lost and the hurt as if on Jesus himself, or those who forgive their enemy from their hearts are echoes of the kingdom, or the kingdom is the good seed among the weeds or the treasure hidden in a field or an unexpected pearl of great price, or a rich man who cannot buy his way in or a poor man for whom the kingdom belongs, and yet the kingdom is also in the midst of us, not fully here, but revealed in Christ. Even with bad seed, there is good seed in there somewhere. Even in darkness, there is a faint persistent light of God that cannot be put out, and even though we try to localize and claim God for ourselves and judge others as outside, judgment belongs to God. We cannot pretend that there is no such thing as good and evil, but neither can we pretend that we have the right to judge and uproot. Somewhere in this mess, somewhere in this mess we have made of the world, God’s kingdom, which is not of this world, is growing and bearing fruit for God. It is God’s world. It is God’s harvest. It is for God to judge.

Yes, beliefs have consequences and evil thoughts lead to evil actions, in the Book of James that is very clear, but Jesus warned us not to do evil in the name of God by presuming to judge on our own. Now, certainly all of us would agree on the poison seed

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of Nazism. Hitler, who created his own Nazi faith, many people don't realize, with Nazi baptism and Nazi marriage and Nazi funeral rites. He sought to establish an earthly kingdom, a master race, and to weed out those who did not fit his vision. Earthly kingdoms based on power and might are deadly to those defined as outsiders. Japanese Shinto worshiped ancestors and nation and the emperor as God, and so for ancestors and emperor as God, kamikazes were willing to die, steering their planes into allied ships. Earthly kingdoms based on power and might are deadly, not only for others, but also for followers sometimes. You remember Jim Jones, the cult leader in Guiana in the 70s, if you are old enough, and all those followers served his will and his whims and his needs until finally he willed them all dead and they drank the poison Kool-Aid and they died. And you remember more recently, 1999, Eric Harris and Dylan Klebold, they decided who was worthy of living and dying in Columbine. Charles Manson and his followers after that. Stalin, who starved and executed millions in an attempt to bring about his vision of Heaven on earth, or a Chinese general last week, who frighteningly stated on the record that they would use nuclear weapons against the U.S. if we intervened on the side of Taiwan. Earthly kingdoms based on power and might are deadly. Now, fundamentalist Muslims remember Mohammed as teacher and warrior. Combining his roles as general and prophet, he motivated his warriors with the promise of instant paradise if one dies defending the faith against enemies. Radical Muslims, born and educated in London with middle class lives, died while killing for this very reason in the past weeks. Mohammed Bouyeri, who murdered a Dutch filmmaker for making a film, which only criticized the treatment of women in Islam, and he in court last week, turned to the murdered man's mother and said, "I don't feel your pain. I don't have any sympathy for you. I can't feel for you because I think you're a non-believer." The Islamic radical admitted killing Mr. van Gogh, the filmmaker, but he said he was driven by his religious beliefs, and he claimed he would do the same again. Now, of course, there is more to Islam than this, but the fundamentalists and the radicals and the martyrs cling to violence in its name, violence and death by which they hope to please God and enter paradise. Beliefs have consequences, and earthly kingdoms based on power and might are deadly to those defined as outsiders. The Ku Klux Klan distorted Christian faith and combined it with race pride and with nationalism, and came up with self-righteous justification to judge and do violence against others. Beliefs have consequences, and earthly kingdoms based on power and might are deadly to those defined as outsiders. Yes, Jesus refused to act in any of these ways. He said, "My kingdom is not of this world." In John 18:36, Jesus said, "My kingship is not of this world. If my kingship were of this world, my servants would fight that I might not be handed over, but my kingship is not of this world." Earthly kingdoms feel so confident destroying the weeds among them, and though our nation, from time to time, has been accused of acting in the same way as other nations and other earthly kingdoms, it cannot do so in the name of Jesus Christ. No one can kill at Christ's command. We may feel justified that self-defense is the reason, or we may feel that duty to nation justifies it, but we cannot justify it in the name nor at the command of Jesus Christ. Even though Jesus' disciples wanted and expected Jesus to be a military Messiah, he refused to be, and even though he had produced miracles for others, he refused to save himself from the cross, the cross upon which he died to show his love. That cross, at the same time, reveals that

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his kingdom and God’s idea for this world is very different from what we have made of it. The cross is at once love for us and judgment upon us. Now think about this, we saw God in flesh, and we, we nailed him to a cross. We reject love, and we choose power and might instead, in that we are judged and the cross reveals that we believe more in violence and power than love. The cross reveals our sin and how far we have fallen away from love God and love neighbor as the essence of the Gospel. The cross reveals that we reject God utterly. Sin and self and mine and more are what we mostly worship. How can we judge others? By the grace of God, by the grace of God alone, we are saved, and by the grace of God alone can the seed of the Gospel even begin to grow and produce good fruits. Examine yourselves. Let us all examine ourselves. Are we indeed the good seed among the poison weeds of the world? Do our life and our faith reflect love and grace and life and hope for all, or is it a narrow set of rules and judgments where we feel comfortable judging others? Remember where rule-based faith ends up. Remember that Jesus did teach that when we judge, we judge ourselves.

There is a story that I wish to close with, a story about a tenant farmer, who had worked hard for many years to improve the production of the piece of land that he leased, and then something happened that caused him to be very bitter. It was time to renew his lease, and the owner told him that he was going to sell the farm to his son, who was getting married. The tenant made several offers to buy it himself because he had done so much work on that land, but it was all in vain. The day drew near for the farmer to vacate his home. His weeks of angry brooding finally got the best of him so he gathered seeds from some of the most pesky and noxious weeds he could find, some of the most persistent vines and briars and poison plants, and then he spent hours scattering them all through the clean fertile field of the farm along with trash and stones he had collected. Then to his dismay, the very next morning, the owner informed him that his son’s wedding plans had fallen through, and he would be happy to sell the farm to him after all. He would be happy to sell him this farm. The farmer, in an agonized scream, said, “Oh Lord, what a fool I have been!” The lesson is clear. When you serve a God who is willing to come in flesh and die on a cross, then we all better be prepared for more forgiveness and more grace toward others than any can imagine. Judgment and bitterness must not be a part of our faith. Weeding is not our job to do. We all have, as Jesus said, logs in our own eyes, and we must deal with them before we start to remove the speck in the eyes of others. Yes, evil is real, and it produces its own fruit, and we are called to be what we are in Christ even when surrounded by poisonous weeds. Remain who you are in Christ and trust the Lord of the harvest. In God’s time, God’s will will be done. This is what we pray for. God’s will is grace and mercy even when ours is judgment and bitterness. Do not let evil do double duty, do not let evil do double duty and claim a double harvest by planting within us a seed of bitterness and hate. No matter the bitter weeds you see, no matter the bitter harvest on the news each night, do not let evil have a double bumper crop by planting bitterness and hate within our hearts. Be what you are in Christ, a Gospel of love and hope and mercy, a Gospel of hope even as the young child said in the children’s sermon, even that the poisonous weed might change and become something else. Amen.