

“God Pulls Weeds, Too.”

Matthew 13 : 24-30, 36-43

When I was in seminary, I remember a few of my classmates who were practicing attorneys who had decided to go into the ministry. I was curious about the legal profession, and so I had many conversations with them over coffee between our seminary classes in Greek Language and Systematic Theology.

One of the reasons I am glad that I went to seminary rather than to law school is because of the testing and grading procedures. At the law schools they told me about, there is only one exam per semester in each course. And if you happen to have a headache that day or did not sleep well the night before, that's just tough. You get only one grade; it's what you make on that exam. Most law students believe in a Judgment Day because they experience a bit of it every semester.

The idea of a final Judgment Day followed by an eternal heaven or hell seems alien to our present-day culture. Ours is a "three strikes and you're out" culture, but if you whine a bit, we will give you four or five strikes. We even curve the grades on the Scholastic Aptitude Test so that the outcome will look better. Many schools have many valedictorians rather than one because we don't like to have winners and losers. In such a society, it sounds strange to hear about a final Judgment Day and eternal punishment and weeping and gnashing of teeth.

Jesus told two simple parables or stories to illustrate the truth about Judgment Day. These stories were designed to be familiar to people who depended on agriculture and commercial fishing for a living. A farmer planted good wheat seed in a field. But, under cover of night, an enemy came in and planted weeds. At first no one noticed. There was a common weed in Palestine called bearded darnel, which was a common curse of farmers. In its early stages it looked just like the wheat. But when both had "headed out" or produced seeds up top, the two could be distinguished by color. Then the darnel had to be separated from the good grain because its seeds were slightly poisonous. The farm hands came to the owner and asked, "Do you want us to pull the weeds?" "No," said the owner. "If you try, you might damage the grain in the process. Let the weeds alone. At harvest time we will separate the two."

The second story has to do with fishing. Commercial fisherman on the Sea of Galilee used a large square-shaped drag-net. They pulled it behind a boat, trawling. They caught all kinds of fish. When the fisherman of Galilee had been trawling for a while, he dragged his net to the shore and then began to separate the good, useful fish from the bad. Similarly, said Jesus, a time is coming when a great separation will take place. It will be on the day of the final Judgment.

We do have a spiritual enemy.

In verse 25, Jesus says, "An enemy came and sowed weeds among the wheat." In verse 39 Jesus tells us plainly that the enemy is the devil. Some modern Christians consider themselves too sophisticated to believe in a devil. I'm not saying that there is a guy running around in a red suit, with horns, a tail, and carrying a pitchfork -- but the Bible teaches that there *is* an intelligent, active spiritual presence in this world opposing God.

We touched on this last week. The spirit world exists, and not all of it is benign. This is where negative energy comes from. And it is this particular negative-energy, spiritual presence that tries to connect with the original sin in all of us, attempting to separate us from God and make this world resemble hell.

The late Methodist Bishop Ken Goodson of Virginia was considered a staunch conservative. He had a very liberal Methodist lady in his conference named Tess Hoover. One day Tess said to him, "*Bishop, you're so conservative that you probably believe in the devil.*" "*Yes I do,*" he said, "*and I don't like her at all.*"

God is patient and kind.

In Jesus' parable, the owner of the farm does not clean out the weeds right away. God is amazingly patient with people. Listen to this word from II Peter 3:9: "The Lord is not slow about his promise, as some think of slowness, but is patient with you, not wanting any to perish, but all to come to repentance." God will never allow someone to be condemned to hell unjustly or undeservedly. And God gives to most people many chances to repent of sin and claim Jesus Christ as Lord and Savior.

ONLY CHRIST AND HIS ANGELS ARE AUTHORIZED TO JUDGE.

It's not up to you nor is it up to me to say who goes to heaven and who goes to hell. That isn't our place. But we do need to see that in Jesus' parable, He does refer to both places.

That great preacher at City Temple in London, Leslie Weatherhead, made this profound observation: "*Jesus Christ, the person with the gentlest lips in history, said the most terrible words about sin ever spoken. It was gentle Jesus who referred to people as 'lost.' He described hell as the everlasting fire, the shut door, and the outer darkness where there are endless tears and gnashing of teeth.*" *Jesus did not slant judgment and hell toward those who were broken and imperfect, but toward those who proudly refused God's mercies, those who were too self-satisfied to repent.*"

This is a tough subject for me to preach on. I am after all, a UCC minister. But the Revised Common Lectionary has brought us today one of Jesus' most difficult teachings.

I will not speculate and try to tell you exactly what hell is like, but neither will I sugar-coat it and tell you that there is no such a place. It is apparent that Jesus believed there is a hell. In the New Testament we can find Jesus mentioning hell no fewer than nineteen times.

What hell really is, in its very essence, is the state of being separated from God. And no, God doesn't send people to hell -- people go there by their own choice they made while in this life.

Hell was not prepared for people. It was prepared for the devil and his angels. So, for a person to go to hell is to go against God's plan. God does not desire that a single person be lost. Judgment and hell are the fate of persons who choose to live apart from God. Hell is the chosen place of the person who loves self more than God. Final judgment is that moment at the end of life on earth when God looks sorrowfully at the rebellious person and says, "I won't contend with you anymore. Your choice will be honored."

The doctrines of a final judgment and an eternal heaven and hell are hard doctrines. But without them, our freedom of choice is denied. Real love forces choices between good and evil. Real love is a woman saying to an alcoholic husband, "*I force you to choose between the bottle and me. I will not coddle that liquor which can kill you.*"

We are a congregation of the United Church of Christ. Our roots go back as a German Reformed Church. As such, we are children of the Protestant Reformation. Our Reformed roots passed down to us by Martin Luther and Philip Melancthon, John Calvin and Ulrich Zwingli, tells us a particular theology. It tells us that a Way has been made a way for us to avoid being separated from God. That is, to place our trust in the Son of God Jesus Christ, whom God has sent.

My wife, Edit, tells a story about a minister who had a strange dream. He dreamed that he had died and was trying to get into heaven. When he approached the pearly gates, St. Peter told him he needed 100 points to get in. Proudly the minister said, "Well, I was a pastor for 43 years." "Fine," said St. Peter, "That's worth one point." "One point? Is that all?" cried the minister. "Yes, that's it," said St. Peter. "Well," said the pastor, "I visited lots of shut-ins." St. Peter responded, "That's worth one point." "I worked with young people," said the pastor. "That's worth one point," said St. Peter. "I made it to most of the consistory meetings," said the minister. "That's worth one point," said St. Peter. "You have four points now. You need 96 more." "Oh no," said

the minister in a panic. "I feel so helpless, so inadequate. Except for the grace of God, I don't have a chance." St. Peter smiled and said, "Grace of God--that counts for 96 points. Come on in!"

Our passport to heaven is simple. It is by God's grace given to us through Jesus Christ. AMEN.