



Open Hearts - Open Minds - Open Doors

2111 Camino del Rio South, San Diego, California 92108 • 619-297-4366 • Fax (619) 297-2933 • www.fumcsd.org



Sermon of July 20, 2008 Dr. Jim Standiford

“ARE WE THERE YET”

Genesis 28:10-19a
Matthew 13:24-30, 36-43

Eternal God, pour out your spirit upon us, that we might be sensitive to your presence, attentive to your Word, and faithful always in your way. Through Jesus Christ our Lord we pray. Amen.

Do you know where the model for dialogical church liturgies originally arose? I don't know for sure, but one theory I have is they came from ancient family vacation travels. You know those liturgies don't you? The kids are in the back seat of the camel, or the chariot, or the car; and they call out, "Are we there yet?" The parents, in the front seat respond, "No!" Then, five minutes later or five miles down the road, which ever comes first, the children call out again, "Are we there yet?" The parents respond again, "No!" And so the liturgy goes, on and on. The early church picked up the model and applied it to our worship practices. This theory may not be historically accurate, but it's my theory and I'm sticking to it.

Today, in the reading from Matthew, we hear another parable of Jesus. Last week it was the parable of the sower who with flagrant generosity throws seed everywhere. This week the parable is about weeds and wheat growing together. It makes good sense that Jesus told these two parables in sequence. In today's parable the workers in the field ask the owner, "Are we there yet? Can we pull up the weeds?" The farmer, God, answers, "No, not yet, not until the end." We ask the question, "Are we there yet?" not just about vacation destinations, but about many situations on the journey of life. When we run into difficulties we want a quick fix. We call out to God, or anyone who might be listening, "Are we there yet?"

Most scholars agree the weeds in Jesus' parable are most likely bearded darnel. This is a poisonous weed that in the early stages of growth so closely resembles wheat it is not possible to distinguish one from the other. By the time they are distinguishable the roots of the two are so entangled it is not possible to weed out the weeds without uprooting the wheat. It is essential to let them both grow together until harvest time.

One of the facts of life is there will always be weeds in life. In each of our wheat fields, more than a few weeds will grow. In the gospel of John one of the last things Jesus says to his disciples is, "In this world you will always have trouble." (John 16:33) Jesus knows what he is talking about and we know from personal experience the truth of his statement.

There is a story about a fellow who went from church to church hoping to find and then join the "perfect church." In the midst of his search, someone was bold enough to point out to him that as soon as he joined the church it would no longer be perfect. There are weeds in every wheat field.

Another fact of life is life is a tangled mess. A couple weeks ago we spoke of Paul's confession that he did the things he did not want to do and did not do the things he should do. (Romans 7:15) In Thornton Wilder's story, "The Bridge of San Luis Rey" there is an old monk who tries to "keep books" for God. He did his best to be conscientious and correct, but things got so mixed up that he finally had to ask for divine forgiveness.

One of my students at Course of Study School serves a rural church in Idaho. His congregation decided to hold a fun fundraiser for Heifer Project International. A short time before Christmas everyone bought a stuffed toy of their favorite animal that Heifer gives to poor people around the world. The congregation then sponsored a "Livestock Auction" open to the community. Parents could come and bid on the toys for their children's Christmas gifts and the proceeds went to Heifer. The local animal brand inspector saw an article about the auction in the newspaper and showed up at the church wanting to inspect the animals to make sure no poached animals were being sold. When he realized what was going on he was a bit red-faced but had a good laugh along with everyone else and stayed to participate in the activities. Life is a tangled mess.

Some people hear the proclamation of grace and turn it into a permissive license suggesting it makes no difference what one does as a child of God. These people believe God's grace is so overarching that it relieves

them of any meaningful obedience to the will of God. Dietrich Bonhoeffer famously called this "living by cheap grace." This living with no responsibilities is quite contrary to the call of Jesus to lose our life on his behalf. On the rebound, legalism rears itself as a counterpoint to "cheap grace," suggesting that Jesus' call to live responsibly requires one to "clean up one's act" in order to become acceptable to God. So, in our tangled, mixed-up world, a word of grace becomes a word of license and a word of responsibility becomes a word of required obedience in order to earn God's approval! There are also many stops in between as we take God's word and twist it to our own ends. It is not always easy for us to distinguish the good and the bad, especially in our own hands.

Life is a mess, and we want a quick fix. We live in an age when speed seems to be one of the greatest values. Slow start up and down load times on our computers are critically important to us. We expect everyone to respond to our instant messaging instantly. When something goes wrong, we want it corrected immediately. The workers in the field wanted to pull up the weeds right away.

The point of the parable is patience. Not everything is benefited by immediate action. One does not usually root out evil and corruption in the midst of life without destroying much good in the process. For example, some people call for the end of government interference in our lives, but that leaves us with problems such as no legal aid for the poor or the elderly, or health or safety

regulations, or standards for hospitals, just to name a few. Socrates once observed, "The one who takes only a few things into account finds it easy to pronounce judgment." Jesus calls us to be patient. Wait for the harvest time. We are not to be quick in our judgments.

God demonstrates amazing patience in relating to Jacob in the Genesis passage today. The context of this passage is that Jacob has duped his brother Esau twice by this point. Jacob has conned Esau out of his birthright and tricked their father in giving him the blessing that was due Esau, as the eldest. God should have blasted Jacob, but blesses him instead. God reminds Jacob that the gracious promises of the covenant made with his grandfather, Abraham, and his father, Isaac, are extended to him as well. In his dream, Jacob is reminded there is an open line of communication between heaven and earth. The door is not closed at the top, as angels are coming and going. At this low point in his life on the run, he is not judged but given grace in new opportunity.

Patience does not mean passivity. Just because there are no easy answers to the hard problems of life does not mean there are no answers. Our task is not to expend our energy trying to identify and root out other people's weediness. Rather, we are called to be the best wheat we can be. We are called to do the right thing as we know it.

With the Padres suffering as they are this year, we deserve a good baseball story: the first Africa-American baseball player in the American League was a rookie by the name of Larry Doby. He played for the Cleveland Indians in 1947, starting just eleven weeks after Jackie Robinson joined the Dodgers in the National League. He was reputed to be a good player, and an excellent hitter. He came to bat in his first game, and the fans waited to see. It was a disaster. He swung at the first three pitches and missed them all by at least a foot. He struck out. The fans booed him off the field. He stared at the ground as he walked back to the dugout. He went to the end of the bench, sat down, and put his head in his hands.

The next batter was second baseman, Joe Gordon, an All Star hitter, who had always hit this particular pitcher well. Everyone knew he could not only hit the ball, he could knock it out of the park. He stepped up to the plate, swung at the first three pitches and missed each pitch by at least a foot. The fans could not believe it. A huge silence fell over the crowd. Joe Gordon stared at the ground as he walked back to the dugout. He went to the end of the bench, sat down by Larry Doby, and put his head in his hands. To this day people wonder, did he strike out on purpose? Of course, nobody knows for sure, except Joe Gordon. However, it is reported that from that day on, Larry Doby never went on the baseball field but that he did not first reach down and pick up the glove of his teammate, Joe Gordon, and hand it to him.*

Even if this act on the part of Joe Gordon meant what we think it did, it did not cure the problem of prejudice, but it did represent what one person could do at that time and place and in that circumstance. If you and I do what we can with some problem that is beyond our power to fix it, then that is enough. God will finish the job at harvest time.

When Jesus said that we would have trouble in this world, he added an encouraging word we should never forget. He said, "Take courage, I have overcome the world." **Are we there yet? No, but when we are, God will fix us all.**

Thanks be to God.

*Note: I am indebted to Thomas Lane Butts for the Larry Doby story.

[Order this sermon on compact disk](#)

[Send your comments via e-mail to Rev. Jim Standiford](#)

[NEWS](#) * [SERMON](#) * [MUSIC](#) * [KIDS](#) * [YOUTH](#) * [COUNSELING](#) * [MAIL](#) * [HOME](#)