

July 20, 2008 Sermon – Elon Community Church

The scripture readings today could not more different, could they? The passage from Psalm 139 is beautiful poetry written in lyrical, soaring language. It paints a word-picture using the most glorious colors and tones. -a wonderful, comforting message of hope and belonging. Listen again to a part of this psalm

“Where can I go from your Spirit?
Where can I flee from your presence?

If I go up to the heavens, you are there; if I make my bed in the depths, you are there.

If I rise on the wings of the dawn, if I settle on the far side of the sea,
even there your hand will guide me, your right hand will hold me fast.

If I say, "Surely the darkness will hide me and the light become night around me,"

even the darkness will not be dark to you; the night will shine like the day, for darkness is as light to you.”

In contrast, the passage from Matthew, the parable of the weeds, is blunt, straightforward. This word-picture is painted in black and white, there is no gray here, no blended or muted tones to soften the message. It’s not one of the warm and fuzzy Scripture passages, is it?

"As the weeds are pulled up and burned in the fire, so it will be at the end of the age. **41**The Son of Man will send out his angels, and they will weed out of his kingdom everything that causes sin and all who do evil. **42**They will throw them into the fiery furnace, where there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth. **43**Then the righteous will shine like the sun in the kingdom of their Father. He who has ears, let him hear.”

The images Jesus used in this parable were keyed specifically to his audience. The weeds in the parable were a specific type of weed, most commentaries think it was darnel, that grew among wheat in that part of the world. As young plants the weeds and the wheat looked almost identical. It was not until they became more mature that people could tell them apart. By that point, farmers could not remove the weeds without also ruining the wheat around it. So they had to wait until the harvest to separate the two. The people hearing the parable would have understood the real-life reference, if not the spiritual message Jesus tried to convey.

Let's look some more at the setting. In chapter 12 of Matthew Jesus had been preaching in Galilee and performing miracles. All along the way he'd faced increasing challenges by the Pharisees, who by the end of the chapter are actively plotting against Him. To highlight a few:

1st about gleaning the wheat fields on the Sabbath. His reply – you'd save a sheep that fell into a pit on the Sabbath, isn't a person more valuable than a sheep?

2nd he heals a blind and mute man. The Pharisees say he's doing Satan's work.

3rd after the healing of the blind/mute man, Pharisees challenge him to perform a miracle. I have this image in my mind of Jesus hearing this challenge and thinking "Did you not notice the guy I just healed? The guy who can now see and speak! Exactly how big a miracle do you guys need?" But he responds with a talk about the character of human belief.

He continues through the end of chap 12 and the beginning of chap 13 a talk about the nature of his service contrasted with the nature of evil.

The topic then changes with today's passage and 3 other parables which describe essence of the Kingdom of God.

Many commentaries and historians believe that the Gospel of Matthew was written after the first Jewish-Roman war, which ended in 70 A.D. In this

context, the church which the writer of Matthew addresses has expanded into the Gentile world. It is struggling to stay true to the message of Jesus while balancing the cultural influences its new members brought with them.

The *Oxford Companion to the Bible* describes the church to which the author of Matthew was writing as, and I quote, "multiracial, prosperous yet divided and persecuted. It was "autonomous, being persecuted from the outside by both Gentile and Jewish authorities and beset from within by betrayal, "false prophets" and "disobedience to the law of God." The people of this church were asking: Who are the true believers and what is the true faith? And trying to "weed out" those who they felt didn't belong.

Some commentaries feel this is the reason the explanation of the parable is inserted in the text here. and why Jesus explains the parable to the disciples (the believers) separately, after the crowd leaves.

The emphasis of this kingdom parable however, is not only about the here after but the here and now. The truth in the parable is that judgment of the good and the bad is not humans' job, it is God's and God's alone. God will deal with everyone in His own way, on His own schedule and not before and certainly not to suit the timetable of any human organization, not even the church.

So, since we humans cannot always discern wheat from weeds, it's not up to us to worry about judgment, that is God's job. I think this parable tells us our job is to live the way we're supposed to in this life, at this time and place. Great, so what does that mean for us? Because it sure leaves the question, "Who are we as believers and how do we live in this world?" Or to put it another way, "What are we doing here?"

I bet that's a question a lot of us have asked at some point in our lives – what am I doing here?

Sometimes we ask that question from a sense of well being or good fortune. A dream vacation finally realized, a wedding, anniversary or

another of life's milestones reached. What am I doing here? I can't believe this wonderful thing has finally happened to me or to the person I love!!

Many times, it's a mark of being in a bad or unhappy situation, isn't it?

What am *I* doing here? expresses unfairness – why is this happening to me? Why am I responsible for this? It's not my fault/job/duty...

Sometimes it expresses outrage and lack of control – What am I doing *here?* how did I end up in this situation? I've done everything right (or at least, nothing wrong) and still I'm in this mess?! This isn't fair!!! How did this happen?!!!

What am I doing here? What happens when we find ourselves among the weeds? How do we live when good news is nowhere in sight? Life is hard, people struggle, face trials and pain, every day. There are people in this town, I'm sure even in this congregation, who are dealing with challenges the rest of us cannot even begin to understand. We may never hear most of their stories.

Two stories from outside North Carolina we do know.

One is Dietrich Bonhoeffer's. Minister, professor, he struggled during the 1930s and WWII to live the ethical life his faith demanded in the social and political struggles of his time. Bonhoeffer's writings chronicle his struggle to live faithfully in ever more difficult circumstances, from censure and removal from his teaching position in the mid-1930s, to prison in 1943 and execution in April 1945. Because friends and relatives saved many of his letters from prison, we can follow his faith journey right up almost to his death. His writings show an understanding of the Christian faith that moved from theory to action.

Bonhoeffer understood that believing in the God who loves us so much He lived a human life means living with the consequences of that belief. How many times, especially in prison, must he have asked "What am I doing here?"

We know from his writings that Bonhoeffer found the strength for his journey among the weeds in his faith in the God who was with him from the beginning to the end. How well he understood the message of hope in Psalm 139. No matter where we are, even in lowest depths of despair or the darkest night of prison, God can find us!

In prison in August 1944 he wrote: "God does not give us everything we want, but he does fulfill all his promises, ie., He remains the Lord of the earth, he preserves his Church, constantly renewing our faith and not laying on us more than we can bear, gladdening us with his nearness and help, hearing our prayers, and leading us along the best and straightest paths to himself. By his faithfulness in this, God creates in us praise for himself."

The second story is Nelson Mandela's. After 27 years in prison for battling apartheid in South Africa, released, became president, invited one of his jailers to be his honored guest at his inauguration. How he found the strength to live all those years among the weeds is amazing indeed!

They had a 90th birthday concert for Mr. Mandela in London last month. I caught part of it on TV. 46,664 people attended the concert. This number has special meaning - 46664 was Mr. Mandela's prison number, prisoner number 466 of the year 1964. Prisoners were never referred to by name, only by their number.

To me the most amazing image from the concert was the picture of Mr. Mandela sitting in chair, big, broad smile on his face, wearing a shirt with the number 46664 on it. He has re-claimed 46664, changed it's symbolism from oppression, anger and darkness, to hope, charity and light. Now, 46664 is the name of AIDS/HIV charity which Mr. Mandela's foundation sponsors. It's miraculous that he was able to take this awful symbol of his time among the weeds and turn it into wheat. Nelson Mandela is certainly living the ideal Jesus described when he directed us to love our neighbor as ourselves.

What am I doing here? Turns out I've been asking the wrong question. It's not what am I doing here; it's What am I supposed to do here?

Bonhoeffer explained it another way when he wrote in 1944 "Our relation to God is not a "religious" relationship to the highest, most powerful, and best Being imaginable – that is not authentic transcendence – but our relation to God is a new life in 'existence for others', through participation in the being of Jesus. The transcendental is not infinite and unattainable tasks, but the neighbor who is within reach in any given situation."

What Jesus taught us, and what Bonhoeffer and Mandela model for us, is simple to state but difficult to do: Our responsibility is to live as our faith demands in the here and now, even if the here and now finds us among the weeds.