

July 23, 2017

Is Your Life a Sheaf of Wheat or a Bunch of Weeds?

SERMON

One day as I was driving I turned on the radio to help pass the time. While scanning up and down the dial I ran across a preacher and out of curiosity started listening to him. He was going on and on about how not everybody in the church is a Christian. I was interested in hearing what he had to say because as a pastor I have experience the best and the worst of people in the church. But as I listened, I started having problems not only at what he was saying but how he was saying it. His definition of a Christian was very narrow and charismatic. According to him, unless you are on fire with the Holy Spirit you are not a Christian. The more I listened the more I began to think, who are you to judge? How can you possibly know what's in a person's heart? And yet as I listened I had to concede – especially in light of this parable – not everyone in the church is a stalk of wheat, some are weeds!

In this parable, Jesus tells us that the weeds and the wheat are growing side by side in and amongst each other. According to Jesus, some of us here this morning, are wheat, and some of us are weeds. Which are you? Are you wheat bearing the fruits of God's love or a weed taking up space in the garden of grace that is God's kingdom? While I feel uncomfortable judging others and trying to figure out who's a weed and who's a stalk of wheat, I rather imagine that some of us here this morning are deeply committed Christians, and some of us are not. Some of us take our faith and discipleship seriously. We place our hope and trust in God and strive to conform our lives to God's will. But some of us do not evidence an understanding that our baptismal calling is about discipleship in the kingdom not membership in the church.

That reminds me of a profound little quote Lynne shared with me a few years ago. Those who claim to be Christians but don't listen to Jesus are practical atheists. Think about it. If we ignore or disregard what Jesus teaches about the life of faith, there is very little difference between us and those who reject Jesus altogether. There is a world of difference between a de jure Christian and a de facto Christian. De jure means legally/by law or in this case in name only. Simply to say we are a Christian means very little in and of itself. Anybody can say they are a Christian. De facto, on the other hand, means because or by reason of the fact itself. To live as a Christian who follows Jesus is an affirmation of our faith. To fail to live as a Christian who follows Jesus is a denial of our faith.

Thirty years ago, I had the opportunity of a lifetime to travel to India. My congregation in Melbourne was building a hospital in Kakinada, and I had the chance to go and see it under construction. Our second day in India as we waited for our train in Secunderabad, I walked around the platform of the railway station taking in the sights and sounds and smells of everything that was happening. One of the things that intrigued me was the way the Indians reacted to the four Anglos in our entourage. They started at us – watching everything we did. Some would meander over to where we were – just to be near us. Others would look and then

try to gather up the courage to talk to us. It made me think this must be what celebrities experience whenever they go out in public. Anyway, a young Indian soldier came up and spoke to me. He was intrigued to see us in Secunderabad and curious to know why we were there. So I told him about my church in Melbourne and the hospital we were building in Kakinada. When he learned that I was a pastor his eyes lit up, and with great excitement he told me that he was a Christian too.

Then with great earnestness he asked an intriguing question. How many people in your church are Christians? How would you respond to a question like that? His question and the way he asked it reminded me that our calling to follow Jesus implies a commitment that shapes the very way we live our lives. Do our lives evidence a faith that makes a difference in the way we live? Are we wheat bearing the fruit of the kingdom, or are we weeds taking up space in the garden of God's grace. Which are you? Are you a de jure Christian? Are you a Christian only because you claim to be one? Or are you a de facto Christian? Are you a Christian because that's what your life shows you to be?

Back in the early 70's when I was doing Clinical Pastoral Education at Methodist Hospital in Jacksonville I learned about the concept of denial. During a group session one of my self-perceptions was being challenged by the other chaplains. The more I denied what they said, the more they pushed the point. Finally, the Chaplain Supervisor said, Handlee, your actions are shouting so loud we can't hear what you are saying. That was painful to hear, but it's true isn't it! If there's a disconnect between what we say and what we do, our actions will speak louder than our words. If we tell our spouse we love them and yet are unfaithful or abusive, our words are drowned out by our acts of infidelity and abuse. Our actions – the things we do – say a whole lot more about us than what we say.

So how do we know if we are weeds...or wheat? Jesus says we are known by the fruits we bear. We are known by the way we live our lives. If our faith bears the fruits of love, joy, compassion, generosity, prayer, etc. we are wheat. But if our lives lack these virtues of faith, we are little more than weeds taking up space in the garden of God's grace.

The imagery of this parable – and its word of warning – are ominous. In the kingdom of God there's no future in being weeds. But there is also good news – the good news that through the death and resurrection of Christ we are given the gift of God's forgiving grace. As we turn to Jesus in faith, God forgives our sins so that we are set free to live the life of faith we are called to live. There's no future in being weeds, but we bear the fruits of repentance, then, by grace, our lives can be transformed from a bunch of weeds into sheaves of wheat.

What are you! Are you an ugly weed taking up space in the garden of God's grace or a beautiful amber stalk of wheat bearing a bountiful harvest? If your life is a bunch of weeds, it's not too late to sow a new harvest of faith and bloom for the Lord. Remember, in the garden of grace that is God's kingdom, there's no future in being weeds!