

July 23, 2023

Prelude

Welcome and Announcements

*Call to Worship

O God,

We gather together in your presence with expectation,
hungry for an encounter with you,
eager to hear your Word.

Open our eyes and ears to the presence of your Holy Spirit.

May the seeds of your Word, scattered among us this morning,
fall on fertile soil.

May they take root in our hearts and lives,
and produce an abundant harvest
of good words and deeds.

We pray this in the name of Jesus Christ,
our teacher and our Lord. Amen.

Christine Longhurst, *re: Worship*

*Hymn 667 When Morning Gilds the Skies, verses 1 and 2

Prayer of Confession

Loving Lord, you watch over us all our days. Help us to feel your presence today. We confess that we have allowed a host of concerns and frustrations to compete with your word and will for us. Remind us that you are not the author of confusion, but of peace. Guide our thoughts, strengthen our bodies, inspire holy intentions within us, that we might be faithful to you and gospel-bearers to our neighbors and families, strangers and friends.

Response Take, O Take Me as I Am

Words of Assurance

Hear the good news- while we worry and fret, God is at work in our lives and in our world, that we might have a taste of God's blessed kingdom, the realm of justice, freedom, mercy, and peace. Believe in the good news of the gospel: in Jesus Christ our sins are forgiven. Alleluia! Amen.

First Reading Psalm 23

Moments With Our Young Disciples

Gospel Reading Matthew 13:31-33, 44-52

The Morning Message

Years ago, there was a local theatre group called Community Players. They produced a few plays each year, usually at the Abbot Theatre, which was on 14th Street West, what we now call “Central City.”

Community Players was supported by patrons who appreciated the art of live productions and the seasonal offerings were much enjoyed.

One of our neighbors was always urging me to audition for children’s roles. She took me to some of the productions to stimulate my interest. It worked.

When I was in fifth grade, CP advertized that their fall production would be *The Bad Seed*, an adaptation of a novel written by William March.

I remember our neighbor coming to the house with the flyer she had just received and said I was going to audition for the role of Rhoda, the young girl in the story. She would take me. Well, fine. I’d never been in a play before, but, ok, I’ll go to the auditions.

To my great surprise, at the end of auditions, the director stood to announce the cast. He did so by walking up to each person cast and handed them a script. He walked up to me and placed a script in my hand. What followed was about two months of work that eventually became a play and a love for live performances of all kinds.

I loved it, especially rehearsals. *The Bad Seed*. To make a long and twisted story short, Rhoda, a girl in grade school, looks like perfection personified. Winsome, clever, pretty- with long, blonde braids, starched pinafore, shiny shoes with taps on the heels. Remember that detail.

Rhoda was a fine student. Sharp and talented. On the last day of school, awards were given to outstanding students. Rhoda was expecting the coveted penmanship medal. When the winner was announced, that medal was awarded to Claude Daigle, a boy in her class.

This angered Rhoda fiercely. She hated to lose. She acted out, taunting the classmate and leading him to a dock at the edge of an open body of water. We do not see what happens next, but, by the end of school picnic, little Claude was dead. While the other children played and adults chatted, he had drowned. Strange thing, though, he had marks on his hands and on his forehead that seemed strangely like the shape of the taps on Rhoda's shoes.

By now you've figured out the rest of the story. Rhoda stole the medal and hid it in her room. Eventually, Rhoda's mother, Christine, discovers the medal and other items Rhoda has stolen over time. The awful truth of her daughter's deadly deed becomes apparent. She quickly comes to the realization her beautiful, intelligent, well-behaved daughter, has a hidden darkness in her personality, in what we would call her soul or spirit. She could not feel empathy. She had no conscience, could only feel for herself, the center of her own world. Her interactions with others were largely motivated by what that person could do for her. She was manipulative and cruel.

As Christine was coming to terms with this ugly truth, she began to wonder about what caused Rhoda's abnormal behavior. She automatically thought of her own childhood. She was adopted. Christine's parents welcomed her into their family, loving and nurturing her. She turned out happy and well adjusted. But given the problem with her daughter, she sought out more information from her father about her birth parents.

What she discovered was she was the biological child of a serial killer. Christine began to wonder if the tendency toward anti-social behavior could be inherited. Had she passed the gene to her daughter? Some psychologists adhered to that theory.

Fearing what her daughter was capable of doing in the future, Christine attempts a murder-suicide. It was, in her mind, the most benevolent thing she could do. She would put an end to the bad seed.

Christine succeeded in taking her own life. Rhoda survived, charming and deceiving her way into the affection of her father and grandfather.

In our text, Jesus says the kingdom of God is like a farmer who sows wheat in his field. At night, an interloper sneaks onto the property and sows weeds, bad seeds if you will, among the wheat.

Now, for a little Greek lesson. The word for “weed” in Greek is “zizania.” It is a very particular type of weed that looks just like wheat as it grows. You could hardly tell the difference. It looks like wheat, it appears like wheat, but it is not wheat. It can fool you.

The field grows up and the servants notice there are weeds growing among the wheat. They ask the farmer if he wants them to pull the weeds.

“No, no no,” says the farmer. By doing so, you may pull up some wheat with the weeds. Leave it until the harvesters come. They will sort it out. They’re experts at it. They will bundle up the weeds and burn them.”

This text could lead us in several directions. And as I read and studied this parable, the only way I ever heard this one interpreted was like a morality play. There are good people and bad people. They live alongside one another until such time as the final judgment. Then they will be separated and God will save the good seed, the faithful, the pious, the tithers, those who came to church every time the doors were opened. They are the wheat in our story.

But, woe be unto the bad seed, the non-conformists, the doubters and infidels. They would be destined to burn in hell for all eternity. The weeds.

And when the day of judgment comes, the wheat would cluck their tongues at the weeds and say with sick satisfaction, “I told you so.”

Oh, my goodness. I just don’t think it’s that cut and dried. Literally.

First, the farmer was not very troubled at the presence of weeds in his field. “Let them be. It’s someone else’s job to sort them out. We really can’t tell them apart, can we?”

I let this thought rumble around in my head for a few days. We can't really tell them apart. Is it possible to distinguish the wheat from the weeds? They grow in the same soil, draw nourishment from the same soil, water, and sunlight.

In this month's *Christian Century* magazine, I read an article I've been anticipating: the action taken by the Southern Baptist Convention to dis-fellowship-sever the relationship- between the national body of southern Baptist churches and those churches in particular that had female pastors or significant leaders.

They were attempting to purify the denomination. Clearly, those who adhered to the ruling were labeled "wheat." Those who did not comply and continued to have women in pastoral leadership, were deemed the "weeds."

Makes my head spin, too. But, that is the way that denomination chooses to govern itself and we have no standing there. Thankfully, the PCUSA adheres to a different understanding of who is qualified for service in the church. In A Brief Statement of Faith we affirm that the Holy Spirit calls both women and men to all ministries of the church. If a Presbyterian congregation tried to establish a "male only" pattern of calling pastors, elders, or deacons, there would surely be a mutiny.

So, now who would be labeled "Wheat" and who are the "weeds?" We would reverse the labels.

You can hardly tell the difference, right? They both meet weekly, usually on Sundays. They both pray, sing hymns, hear the Word read and proclaimed, receive an offering and leave with a blessing. They reach out to help and support others, hold VBS, dole out graham crackers and juice, and rest from their labors.

Like Rhoda, the bad seed, we can hardly tell the adherents of one church from adherents of the other.. They look alike, have the same routines, send their kids to the same schools. I'm interested to see what fallout will come from this move by the SBC, the largest Protestant denomination in the world.

At a church not far from here, a session grappled with an issue that has really caused a rift in the congregation. A child of the church, preparing for ordained ministry, has been asked to preach or lead a service of some kind. That is expected of candidates for ministry in our denomination. But, after deliberation, the session declined to approve the request to preach.

Battle lines formed immediately.

Any more information would reveal identities and that is beside the point. Those who supported the candidate's request to preach obviously claim the wheat status. They see the session as weeds.

Those who were not in favor of granting the request believe to do so would be hurtful to the congregation. They believed they were being faithful wheat.

The whole thing is hurtful and damages the body. This does not honor God. And we can't accuse either group of failure to love. One of my grandmothers loved me dearly and I loved her. But she didn't support my call to ministry. "The Bible says a pastor is the husband of one wife. You can't be the husband of any wife. I think you would make a good teacher."

Her proclamation had less to do with love and more to do with a faith that was based on fear of a punitive God. She was trying to keep me on God's good side and making sure I had my fire insurance.

The point is none of us is capable of judging who's in and who's out, who's a faithful believer by following the rules and who is faithful by following the Spirit into the unknown.

That is a job for God alone.

Scripture tells us that God gave his only Son that whoever believes in him shall not perish, but, have everlasting life. For Christ did not come into the world to condemn the world, but, that the world through him might be saved.

This I believe. In the end, love wins. Grace wins. It is God's greatest desire.

I pray it is so for all of us. Amen.

*Hymn A Farmer In a Field Carolyn Winfrey Gillette

*Affirmation of Faith The Apostles' Creed p. 35

Pastoral Prayer and the Lord's Prayer

Presenting Our Tithes and Offerings

Offertory

*Hymn 607 Doxology

*Hymn 667 When Morning Gilds the Skies, verses 3 and 4

*Blessing

May the God of hope fill you with all joy and peace in believing, so that by the power of the Holy Spirit you may abound in hope. Romans 15:13

*Postlude