

Dealing With the Bad Guys

Matthew 13:24-30, 36-43

Preached by Rev. Phyllis A. Norman July 20, 2008

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There is something going on in Waterbury that is very disturbing to me. Actually it disturbs quite a few of us, including Rev. Maner Tyson, Pastor of Waterbury Baptist Ministries. Maner and I had a conversation last Monday—was I aware of the situation at Dick Dill’s Bible Church? I wasn’t. It seems a disgruntled neighbor of that church reported the church to the Department of Health as an agency illegally operating a food pantry for the poor. The state responded and cited the church for not having a permit to operate a food pantry. In fact none of the churches in downtown Waterbury operate food pantries with permits, including GWIM. United Way organized a food pantry committee in Waterbury years ago, and presides over the monthly meetings; even United Way is unaware a permit is needed.

The church appealed. Recently they received a letter from the state explaining why the appeal was denied. It boils down to an interpretation of the exchange of goods and the word “sold”. I go to Olivers and select a can of soup. Olivers gives me the can in exchange for \$1. The state reasons that a poor, hungry person would go to the food pantry at Bible Church and receive a bag of groceries. In exchange for that bag of groceries, the poor, hungry person would go away feeling good about the people who had helped him/her; therefore, there is an exchange and the groceries are considered “sold”. I kid you not! Of course the impact the state’s decision has on all the pantries in Waterbury is profound—each pantry will have to purchase a permit for \$150, including GWIM, and I don’t believe anyone is going away from that purchase with a good feeling toward the state!

There is a hunger for justice going on here! Rev. Tyson is outraged along with Rev. Dill and all the other people who work so hard to help the people in need—I too want this injustice to be righted. Trust me, it is not a matter of trying to get away with anything, trying to pull the wool over the state’s eyes. The Connecticut Food Bank regularly inspects every food pantry in the state. There are stringent requirements that must be met and they are met. The state’s interpretation of “sale” is, to me, an outright injustice!

However, in this parable Peg read to us Jesus is quite clear: it is not my job, nor is it Maner’s or Dicks’ job, to separate the wheat and the weeds. Our desire for justice is not nearly so pure as we would like to think it is. I think it is so great when the good guys win and right triumphs! I must make a confession here: My feelings come close to that fruit know as *sweet revenge!* If God gave me sole responsibility for eliminating wrong and preserving right, more than likely I would pull up a lot of the wheat with the weeds.

The reason why I think this way has to do with an issue I have never preached about and probably never will: the death penalty. I don’t preach on the subject because I don’t know where I stand on it. For many years I believed the death penalty to be wrong. Then about 1990 I changed my stand: I was a student at UCONN Waterbury campus. A

classmate's sister was murdered at Christmas time in the parking lot of the then Naugatuck Valley Mall. The loss of a young girl's life and the pain family and friends experienced brought about a change in my thinking. From then on I believed in and supported the death penalty. That is until recently when the state of Connecticut discovered an innocent man had unjustly served many years in prison for a rape he had not committed. He was found to be innocent through DNA testing, and he was released.

What if that innocent man had been sentenced to death? How many innocent people have died? Once again I changed my stand on the death penalty. As I speak on this subject I can imagine for many of you it is an issue, both pro and con, and our stands, for or against, can create division. There is no middle ground on the death penalty. One cannot "sort of" execute another human being. There is no such thing as a 50% death penalty, no gray area. Either we pull out the weed or we don't.

So the question becomes, is this an issue of justice, or is it an issue of revenge? When Jesus gathered his followers to explain the meaning of this parable of wheat and weeds, Jesus gave them a major principle of faith: *Genuine faith surrenders the outcome of righteousness into the hands of God.*

One of the desperate cries of the people of God is the same cry of the ancient Biblical peoples: "How long, O God, how long?" Our world-view sometimes leads us to the impression that the right will never really win out. Here is where Jesus' words in his explanation to the disciples are important. Look at the way Jesus uses the word "will": "There *will* be a time of accountability." "Wrong *will* be made right." "Evil *will* be destroyed." "The right *will* be honored." Genuine faith in God means *trusting God* for a righteous outcome in all things. No matter what things appear to be, the indisputable fact is, God will right every wrong; God will bring justice to every circumstance. Psalm 119:142 says, "Your righteousness is an everlasting righteousness." The Psalmist was distraught by the evil he saw so he bowed in worship to the One who promises the right will prevail.

This is a very large pill to swallow, especially when there appears to be so much evil around us, yet the outcome is never in doubt. Jesus said, "The righteous will shine like the sun in the kingdom of God." Every victim will be a victor! All who have been wrongfully dispossessed will rightfully possess in God's kingdom!

That means we have to wait, and for people like me who are not very patient, and who want to see justice in our time, this is a difficult task. Yet it is here more than in any other place in our life of faith that we test the very fiber of our faith. Do we believe God will finally make all things right? Are we able to give the issue of complete and final justice into God's hands? Are we afraid evil people in the end will not be held accountable by God for their wrongs?

There is a great question looming over our heads at this moment: Aren't we supposed to eliminate the evil ones from this earth to make this a better world? Jesus said emphatically, "NO!" This is the whole purpose of the parable: Only God is to separate

the good guys from the bad guys, the wheat from the weeds. No one less than God has the perfect information and insight to accomplish this separation. To live faithfully in the face of injustice means we wait for God's righteous outcome, the source of true justice. Meanwhile we remain instruments of God's peace.

There is no greater wrong in all of human history than the crucifixion of Jesus. Human wisdom cannot begin to fathom why such a thing had to take place. In Paul's first letter to the church in Corinth he wrote, "None of the rulers of this age understood this; if they had, they would not have crucified the Lord of glory" (1 Cor. 2:8).

If the cross had been the end of the story Christian living would make no sense. Of all people we would be the most pitied. Wrong prevails and goodness is nonsense. Yet we know the resurrection to be true, so Christian living is everything. Righteousness prevails and evil is defeated.

We will face evil over and over again in our lifetimes—there will be times when we will wish we could take things into our own hands. Events will occur that will seriously tempt us to wish for revenge. Nevertheless, there is no other circumstance that will give us greater opportunity to put our faith front and center. "Though they will slay me, yet will I trust God." No matter what things appear to be, I am convinced God will make them right.

This is a major foundation stone of our faith. Trust in God for the complete triumph of righteousness—it is the only real healing power for the wrong that breaks our hearts. It affirms the healing and redeeming love of God. Some of the strongest, most powerful words in history were said by Jesus from the Cross, "Father forgive them, for they know not what they do." May God give us such a hunger for righteousness.