

## Never give in

A sermon preached by the Rev. Robert B. Edson in St. John's Episcopal Church, Franklin, Massachusetts, on the Tenth Sunday after Pentecost, July 20, 2008.

*For in hope we are saved.*

Romans 8:24

I like to use a garden as a metaphor for living the Christian life. It is helpful because having to know something about soil conditions, planting, watering, cultivating and weeding, you feel closer to the Creator. If you've ever worked to keep a garden free of weeds, you can understand that this parable of the wheat and tares is about having to sort through the bad from the good.

While the parable of the sower last Sunday was concerned with the condition and quality of the soils in which the seed is planted, today's parable is concerned with the quality of the seeds themselves. The analogy is clear that the planter is Christ, the field is the world, and the good seed refers to what is right and good while the bad seed refers to what is wrong and evil. The enemy is the power of evil and the harvest is the time in which we all must give an account of ourselves. This parable is about learning to live with the reality of evil in God's good world and not giving in to despair and hopelessness.

We really have no choice but to contend with the stark reality of evil that exists along side of what is good in the world. No matter how we might wish it otherwise, we have to contend with the forces of evil and hatred that work against the forces of good and love. It isn't all black and white. There is some evil in all of us and there are those among the good who sow bad seeds.

We live in an imperfect world. We have all had to deal with poor quality services, defective machines, computer viruses, dishonesty in the financial world, and employees more concerned about doing the minimum than about being part of a productive team.

Efforts at discerning good from evil can result in confusion and conflict. In fourth century North Africa, a group of schismatic Christians known as the Donatists valued theological purity that caused dissension by excluding from the church anyone who did not meet their measure of religious purity and orthodoxy. They caused great strife and enmity within the life of the Christian community. The church has always had self-appointed guardians and arbiters of right doctrine based on their narrow interpretation of the scriptures. Within the life of the church today various splinter groups presume to say who and what is theologically pure.

The Lambeth Conference convening now in England is a once a decade gathering of all the bishops in the Anglican Communion. They face a serious split over the question of the authority of scripture and the traditional teachings on sexuality. The very conservative and very powerful African church is leading the split by forming a power center away from England. It is a clash of culture and power that may be inevitable, based upon opposition to many issues going as far back as Prayer Book revision and the ordination of women. Up until now we have lived side by side with our differences, but we are now faced with choosing between maintaining our integrity at the cost of sacrificing our unity.

When it comes to teaching our own children right from wrong, good and evil, we are protecting them from all evil, hatred, prejudice, crime, drugs, violence and conflict in the world. Knowledge is their best protection. We taught my own children about the reality of evil and the conviction that love is always greater than any evil force. We gave them the best spiritual

upbringing we could in equipping them with the values they needed to deal with the realities of living in a fallen world. It is a great responsibility to teach children the right values if they are going to be prepared to be among those with differing values and standards. Learning to live in a pluralistic society is as much a part of our children's education as anything.

In a time in which we are aware of abuse and exploitation, a subtle but no less dangerous form of abuse is brainwashing young minds. I recently saw a documentary about evangelicals teaching children that, contrary to science, humans lived in the age of dinosaurs. They based this belief upon some obscure reference in the Bible about large animals that roamed the earth. Children can be fed and nurtured on what is right and good and fair as well as what is just plain wrong headed. The hope is that in time they will learn to think for themselves. We as parents have an awesome responsibility for teaching the right values that shape young minds, emphasizing that hatred based on fear and ignorance is not a family value.

Sadly, religion has used as an excuse for appalling behavior and exploitation. Church leaders perpetuate crimes against innocent people by rationalizing their behavior and misusing their spiritual authority. The really serious carnal sins are forced sex, promiscuity, adultery and pederasty. They are serious sins because they hurt people and they offend God.

St. Paul says that our best hope is in being saved from giving into evil. We are all human and we are all tempted from time to time and there is no sin in being tempted, only in giving in. Well-grounded hope enables us to live with the mystery of unanswered questions and what we can't see and know or understand.

We live everyday with unknowns. We must never give into anxiety over what might happen. The reality is that we will never see the end of evil and it is naive to think that good is always rewarded and evil is always punished. Sometimes it happens the other way around. Bad things happen to good people and good things happen to bad people. We can't expect God to rescue us every time we get into trouble. We have to strive to do the right thing and live with the consequences. We must not despair over the evil we find in others or in ourselves but hold to the hope and expectation that God's love is ultimately greater than any power of evil and that nothing can destroy our relationship with God. Nothing can overcome us.

The power in living as a Christian is in our ability to discern truth from falsehood, good from evil, and love from hatred. There are plenty of weeds along life's paths, but there are no weeds in the garden of paradise. Life is learning to live with the imperfect world as we work toward God's perfection. If you wonder why we should strive for perfection since we will never attain it, my only response is: why aim for anything less?