

First Presbyterian Church, Bridgeton, NJ  
Richard E. Sindall, Pastor  
Sermon for July 17, 2011  
Lessons: Genesis 28:10-19 and Matthew 13:24-30

## TWO WAYS DIVERGE

Thirty-nine years ago today I woke to my first morning as an ordained minister, and we moved to Tamaqua, Pennsylvania so I could begin my first pastorate. Now I have begun my final year in pastoral ministry, and we have a lot of work to do together between now and next June when I will retire in my twenty-seventh year as pastor of this church. As I thought about Jesus' parable of the tares sown in the wheat field, I realized it will be important for me to try to be as clear as I can about certain choices we make as we seek to follow Jesus Christ, entrusting ourselves to him and to his future, ministering as a congregation of his church, and representing his grace in the world. This parable presents us with one of those very important choices. There are two ways to read the parable, two very different ways to understand it and have our faith shaped by it. We need to learn to choose consciously and deliberately between those two ways because the choice will make a great difference in the kind of people and the kind of church we are in process of becoming.

We Christians all read the same Bible, right, even though we read it in many different languages and various translations into those languages, and even though the Roman Catholic version has several extra books considered secondary in value? In terms of what our bibles contain between their covers, yes, we read very much the same Bible, but in terms of the way we read it and what we draw from it, we have two very different Bibles. I call one the "vindictive Bible," which is principally about reward and punishment – about separating good from bad, right from wrong, saved from damned. I call the other the "salvific Bible," which is about saving, healing, giving hope, and restoring broken relationships. Both interpretations claim plenty of support from the Bible itself, and each can marshal many passages and verses to justify its view of what the Bible really is all about.

Jesus says of people who identify themselves as believers, "By their fruits, you will know them." By their attitudes toward each other and toward outsiders, by the way they treat people who are "different," by what they hope for from God, and by the way they respond to questions, you will know which Christ they follow – that is, which kind of Christ they believe Jesus to be. Yes, the difference is so radical that we Christians present to the world two different Christs, even though we call them both Jesus. As there is a vindictive bible, so there is a scornful, condemning, punishing, and excluding Christ. As there is a salvific bible, so there is a saving, welcoming, healing, and compassionate Christ.

Now, you may object, “Dick, there is only one Jesus Christ, who is ‘the same yesterday, today, and forever.’” In the absolute sense, that’s true, of course. Jesus is who he is, and so he is not the kind of Christ you or I choose to make of him, and he will be the judge of our representation of him to the world. But that world meets him and knows him as we represent him. People don’t see Jesus; they see us, hear what we say about him, and experience the ways in which we treat them in his name.

I have only a short time to explain; so let’s get to the parable. The vindictive reading would tell us that there are two kinds of people: good and bad or saved and unsaved. It would warn us that we cannot distinguish between the two kinds well enough to judge and so must leave the final judgment to Christ himself, but that final judgment will reveal the truth of God because for the vindictive, judgment is truth. In the parable, “some enemy” sneaks into the wheat field and sows the darnel weed which when it sprouts looks very much like the young wheat. So anyone trying to pull out the weeds will inevitably pull up some of the good plants, too. “Let both of them grow together until the harvest.” Then the reapers can separate the wheat from the darnel, keep the good and burn the bad.

A full-blown deterministic understanding of God and life, such as that held by some of our Calvinistic ancestors in the faith, would insist that you are what you are, as God created you to be. That is, you are either wheat or darnel, and there’s nothing you can do about it. You are one of the elect or one of the reprobate, created for eternal salvation or for eternal damnation. I reject such hopeless determinism, and I feel pretty safe in assuming that you reject it also, but there remain less extreme interpretations of God’s truth and human destiny which are, nonetheless, more vindictive than salvific – more about reward and punishment than rescuing and welcoming home. Let me draw the contrast, so we can distinguish the two paths which diverge and see the way the salvific choice takes us.

There is much in this world that is wrong, that is not as God intended things to be. There is also much in me that is wrong, that is not as God intended me to be. There is guilt, and there is shame. There are hurtful things we do, and there are wounds we suffer. Certainly, there is much in any congregation that is not yet as Jesus wants his church to be. Yet, there is also much in the world, in me, and in the church that is responsive to love, that wants to trust and obey in trust, that longs for peace with justice, and that wants salvation and hope for all people. The world is neither all good nor all bad, and the parable suggests that we cannot hope to get rid of the bad by ripping it out because we will invariably tear up the good with it. The two are intertwined in the world, in the churches, in the human community, and in each of us. I am a field of wheat and darnel, and only by the lifelong process of God’s grace at work with me can the harmful and destructive be separated from the good. People and their lives are very complex, and punishment will not do the job God wants done. We cannot beat the badness out of people, neither physically nor spiritually. We

cannot purge people or churches to get rid of the bad, because we will get it wrong and because God works with respect, understanding, and compassion. Salvation is a process, not just a saved or unsaved judgment, a division of, “You’re in,” and “You’re out.” Too often, Christianity has failed to take seriously God’s love for people, for all people. Jesus tried in so many ways to tell us. God is like the shepherd who leaves the ninety-nine sheep to go out in search of the one that has wandered off. God will rejoice at the return of the rebel who has landed himself in misery and shame. God longs to restore the alienated and heal the broken.

Now, we need to realize that vindictive, punishing, excluding Christianity will stand horrified at hearing the kind of thing I have just said because it will not be heard correctly. It will be misunderstood as saying that there is no right or wrong, that there is nothing that pleases or displeases God, that our choices in life and attempts to be faithful to Jesus Christ mean nothing at all. That’s false, and it’s the same accusation that was leveled at Jesus himself, because it’s very, very hard for people who see everything in terms of black or white, right or wrong, pure or corrupt, to understand how complex we human beings and our lives really are – how interwoven are the wheat and tares growing together. Jesus’ parable does not say there are no weeds in our lives and in us. He does not say there is nothing wrong with us. He does not suggest our choices don’t matter; indeed, he makes them matter even more because we matter so much to God.

I’m just back from two weeks of continuing education in which, at last, I have been able to get a good start on writing a book and producing a rough outline of the whole project. If I have learned anything from my study of Affect Psychology and my work toward bringing its understandings of the shame family of emotions and their effects upon individuals, families, and communities together with the Bible and Christian faith, it is this: that real change in people and their lives does not come easily, but it can be accomplished, and it can be very liberating and healing. Shame is an extremely powerful force that can do some good for us if we handle it well but also does devastating harm. Life is very effective at shaming us, and people are incredibly talented at shaming each other and themselves, but there is hope, and the gospel of Jesus Christ offers that hope very powerfully, when it is not misrepresented by a vindictive misunderstanding of God’s will and purpose. God delights in healing the broken, recovering the lost, and welcoming home the estranged.

The two ways diverge – the vindictive, judgmental, punishing way and the salvific, respectful, compassionate way – and it matters very much which path we take as Christians and as a church. Jesus’ self-sacrifice on the cross was not a temporary measure, a mere stay of execution for the world; it was and is the way God works with us in self-giving love toward God’s purpose. “I have come,” Jesus says, “that they may have life and have it to the full.” That is the will and purpose of God. Amen.