Hi,

What a wonderful morning outside; it was a special August morning for a walk.

* This Sunday in my 11am class we will be starting a new series, “Living Hope,” for I know we could all use some more hope in these very difficult times. We’ll be talking about the nature of the Christian hope and how we can live that hope every day, how such hope can change how we see ourselves and how we understand the world around us. I hope you will join us [on my Facebook page for ministry](https://www.facebook.com/Scott-Engle-St-Andrew-UMC-110365790736617/?modal=admin_todo_tour).
* The links to my on-line classes, the video recordings of the classes, the class audio podcasts, and the archive of these daily emails can all be found at [www.scottengle.org](http://scottengle.org/scotts-weekly-classes/). All the postings are up-to-date.

Today’s parable is one of my favorites, as it speaks to a temptation into which we can all fall.

***Matthew 13:24-30, 36-43 (NRSV)***

**He put before them another parable: “The kingdom of heaven may be compared to someone who sowed good seed in his field; but while everybody was asleep, an enemy came and sowed weeds among the wheat, and then went away. So when the plants came up and bore grain, then the weeds appeared as well. And the slaves of the householder came and said to him, ‘Master, did you not sow good seed in your field? Where, then, did these weeds come from?’ He answered, ‘An enemy has done this.’ The slaves said to him, ‘Then do you want us to go and gather them?’ But he replied, ‘No; for in gathering the weeds you would uproot the wheat along with them. Let both of them grow together until the harvest; and at harvest time I will tell the reapers, Collect the weeds first and bind them in bundles to be burned, but gather the wheat into my barn.’ ”**

**Then he left the crowds and went into the house. And his disciples approached him, saying, “Explain to us the parable of the weeds of the field.” He answered, “The one who sows the good seed is the Son of Man; the field is the world, and the good seed are the children of the kingdom; the weeds are the children of the evil one, and the enemy who sowed them is the devil; the harvest is the end of the age, and the reapers are angels. Just as the weeds are collected and burned up with fire, so will it be at the end of the age. The Son of Man will send his angels, and they will collect out of his kingdom all causes of sin and all evildoers, and they will throw them into the furnace of fire, where there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth. Then the righteous will shine like the sun in the kingdom of their Father. Let anyone with ears listen!**

*The farmer goes out and sows his field with good wheat seed. But at night, an enemy of the farmer sneaks into the field and plants weeds among all the wheat. When everything starts to grow, the farmer’s workers don’t understand how weeds could have gotten into the field. When the farmer tells them an enemy did it, the workers want to go out and weed the fields. But the farmer says no, they are as likely to pull up wheat as weeds. Instead, the farmer instructs the workers that they are to let the fields mature. The weeds will be separated from the wheat at harvest time. The weeds will be burned; the wheat will go into the barn.*

Jesus allegorizes the parable for his listeners. Jesus is the farmer. The field is the world – not the church. The wheat are the children of God; the weeds are the children of the devil, who is the enemy. The harvest is “the end of the age,” at which time the wheat will be resurrected to lasting glory and the weeds will be cast out.

What do you find most intriguing about this parable? What does it tease out of your imagination? Some of the parable is pretty standard fare from Jesus. Humanity is offered a clear choice – for God or against God. And the choice each person makes will have ever lasting consequences.

Yes, that’s the choice. Will we be “children of the kingdom” or “children of the evil one?” But here’s the problem: it is so tempting to begin trying to tell one from the other. To divide the world into Christians and non-Christians. I see this played out on television and in print by preachers and teachers who ought to know better. Even a casual stroll in the blogosphere turns up way too many self-identifying Christians who are convinced that they can identify the “real” Christians.

But the truth is that, when we are honest with ourselves, we have enough trouble sorting this out for ourselves, much less making judgments about someone else. The farmer in the parable wisely restrains his workers from going out to the field to pull up the weeds. The farmer knows that they won’t be able to tell the wheat from the weeds, so he tells them to be patient. Wait for the harvest. Leave the separating for the end. Leave it to God.

To make matters more complicated, many of those who are wheat now were once weeds. In my own case, I’m pretty sure I was once a weed, though I would have told you then that I was wheat. I’m really hoping that I’m truly wheat now, but if I think I was wrong before, well . . . but perhaps I was just a weak wheat plant back then . . . or better yet, I can just leave it all to God.

Don’t misunderstand me. God expects us to learn what sin is and do our best to avoid it, to love God and to love neighbor. What we believe is true about God and ourselves really matters. We are to defend the apostolic faith, albeit with gentleness and reverence (1 Peter 3:16).

But we cannot go so far as to imagine that we can judge the quality of another person’s relationship with God. Only God knows – now and at the end of the ages. If you ever doubt this to be so, remember the story of David, God’s great king, the man after God’s own heart, the man with whom God made an everlasting covenant. David, despite his long and intense relationship with God, violated Bathsheba and then murdered her husband after she turned up pregnant. I imagine that most of the farmer’s workers would have pulled David out of the ground, figuring that only a weed could do such a thing.

This is one of those parables around which one could build a whole sermon series. But, today, I hear a cautionary tale about our human tendency to pass judgment on other people, to imagine that we really *know* who is a Christian and who is not, who is wheat and who is a weed.

The truth is that we are not equipped to make such judgments. We underestimate how much our own sinfulness warps and reshapes our view of the world, of other people, and even of God. We need to hear Jesus clearly – these matters, such as judging who is a child of God’s kingdom and who is not, are, thankfully, to be left to him.

*More than a bit more: “The enemy . . . the devil”*

Passages such as today’s invariably generate questions about the devil, aka, Satan. Many Christians struggle with the Bible’s depiction of Satan (or better, “the satan,” *ha-satan* in the Hebrew) and demons in general. Are there really demons? And the corollary – are there really angels? Is Satan genuine, a personal being who actively opposes God and God’s purposes? You might find the following from N.T. Wright helpful.

“The Bible is never very precise about the identity of the figure known as ‘the satan.’ The Hebrew words mean ‘the accuser” [as in Job] and at times the satan seems to be a member of YHWH’s heavenly council. . . . However, [the Hebrew word] becomes identified variously with the serpent of the Garden of Eden and with the rebellious daystar cast out of heaven (Isaiah 14:12-15) and was seen by many Jews as the quasi-personal source of evil standing behind both human wickedness and large-scale injustice, and sometimes operating through semi-independent ‘demons.’ By Jesus’ time, various words were used to denote this figure, including Beelzebub and simply ‘the evil one.’ Jesus warned his followers against the deceits this figure could perpetrate. His opponents accused him of being in league with the satan, but the early Christians believed that Jesus in fact defeated [the satan] both in his own struggles with temptation (Matthew 4; Luke 4), his exorcisms of demons, and his death (1 Corinthians 2:8; Colossians 2:15). Final victory over this ultimate enemy is thus assured (Revelation 20), though the struggle can still be fierce for Christians (Ephesians 6:10-20).”

What we might call “spiritual beings,” whether loyal to God or rebellious, are woven throughout the biblical narratives. So much so that the great 20th-century German theologian, Karl Barth, was led to say that “to deny the angels of God is to deny God.” In the biblical view, reality is much larger than the world we see and touch each day. In one of his best books, Philip Yancey sees in this world, “rumors of another world.” The things of this other world may be unseen but that does not make them unreal.

For much of my life, my theology had little room for Satan, demons, or anything of the sort. But as the years have rolled by, I’ve come to see that the existence of spiritual beings who work against God’s purposes is as good an explanation of much of what is wrong with this world as any. And I’ve learned that the existence of such beings, loyal and rebellious, is certainly the biblical view of God’s creation. So, yes, I accept the existence of the satan.

Still, I have to remind myself that the existence of Satan does not diminish my own responsibility for my actions. There is no room for “the devil made me do it.” When Satan confronts Jesus in the wilderness, Satan tempts Jesus but he can’t make Jesus do anything. Likewise, *ha-satan* may tempt me away from God and God’s ways, but I am responsible for choosing each day to love God and neighbor, to live so that the image of God within me shines brightly for all to see. And by the grace of God, the Spirit of God empowers and enables me to resist temptations – at least, some of the time!

‘til tomorrow, grace and peace,

Scott