

## Lectionary 16 A 2017

Dove of Peace Lutheran Church

Pastor Stephen Springer

July 23, 2017

Matthew 13:24-30, 36-43

Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ. Amen.

Dear Friends:

Do you hate snakes? Do you just hate snakes so much that you kill any snake that you find? In the decade that I've lived in Tucson, three times I've found snakes in my backyard. And all three times, after studying them very carefully from a distance, I've let them go.

Because I was able to determine that they were non-venomous. I believe that each of the three snakes was a gopher snake. And gopher snakes eat rodents. And any animal that eats rodent is all right by me. Now, if I had found a rattlesnake, I would have killed it, or called animal control. But a gopher snake is my friend. So before I start enthusiastically butchering snakes in my backyard, I try to make sure whether it's my friend. Or not. Three times in a row it was a friend. So I'm batting a thousand.

Now I've never encountered an Arizona Coral Snake. That's a poisonous snake. With bands of red, yellow, and black. But it looks a lot like a Milk Snake, which would be one of my non-venomous friends. The Milk Snake also has bands of red, yellow, and black. Do you know how to tell the difference? "*Red and yellow will kill a fellow. Red and black, friend of Jack!*" If the red bands touch the yellow bands, it's probably the Coral Snake. It's venom can kill a fellow. If the red bands touch the black bands, then no worries. It's a friend of Jack.

Now, I know some of you snake-haters from the Great Lakes regions will tell me, "Yes, pastor, but the problem is... Jack is never around when you're dealing with a snake." I've seen some of you Lutherans from the Upper Midwest, you Great Lakes Lutherans, out there in the yard with a baseball bat. "Kill them all! Let God sort it out."

Kind of like that bumper sticker I saw after 9/11. "Kill them all. Let God sort it out." To most mortals, that sounds good sometimes. And then, from our gospel reading this morning, "*No; for in gathering the weeds you would uproot the wheat along with them.*" The voice of the Savior urging his followers to resist the rush to judgment and the rush to violence. No. In trying to destroy the bad growth, as you see it, you will also be destroying the good growth. Let God sort it out? Yes. But impose your own judgment? No. You'll do more harm than good.

Our translation says that Jesus is talking about the wheat and the "weeds." The old King James translation said more accurately, "The wheat and the *tares*. Most of us don't know what *tares* are, anymore. But they did back in the days of King James. And in the days of Jesus. There is a

bad weed that looks like wheat, but isn't. And it's hard to tell the difference. Darnel, it's called. The Bible doesn't just say "weed." It mentions this specific one, *zizanian* in Greek. I don't know anybody in this congregation who grows wheat. But a lot of us know the coral snake rhyme. "*Red and yellow will kill a fellow. Red and black, friend of Jack!*" They look alike. One is very dangerous. One is very helpful. But if you start killing every snake, you're going to kill the useful ones along with the dangerous ones.

Jesus in today's gospel isn't using the metaphor of snakes. He's using the metaphor of crops. But it's the same point. "*No. For in gathering the weeds you would uproot the wheat along with them.*"

It was four years ago this week that Pope Francis responded to a question with these words: "Who am I to judge?" Pope Francis was new on the job, and his words generated a lot of controversy. Despite the repeated admonitions of Jesus that we are not to judge our neighbors, a large portion of the world exploded in anger that the pope hesitated to be judgmental. The pope said that if someone is searching for the Lord and has good will then why should he condemn them. "Who am I to judge?"

The Catholic churches AND the Lutheran churches are in the year of Matthew. We'll be reading Matthew's gospel on Sundays until Thanksgiving and the holiday season. In Matthew's gospel, Jesus repeatedly urges us not to judge others. For two good reasons. The first reason is that because God has forgiven us so much, we must likewise be big and generous toward our neighbors. Later this fall, we'll encounter parable of Jesus. Where one man is forgiven a huge financial debt, and then he goes out and refuses to forgive the person who owes him a small sum of money. In this other parable, which is coming up in September as part of our year in Mathew—as Jesus tells it—the amount that the one man owed was 600,000 times what the other guy owed to him. It's like he was given a six million dollar debt cancellation, but refused to let someone who owed him ten dollars off the hook.

The point of that parable is that we are all greatly indebted to the mercy of God. You are. I am. So in the words of Pope Francis, "Who am I to judge?" So that's one of two reasons that Jesus gives in the gospel of Matthew when he urges us not to judge others.

The second reason that Jesus gives in the gospel of Matthew for us to not judge others is WE DON'T KNOW. At the end of the church year, right after Thanksgiving, our gospel reading from Matthew will be yet another parable of Jesus. The parable of the sheep and the goats. The sheep protest that they don't remember doing good. The goats protest that they don't remember doing bad. The point of that parable is that WE DON'T KNOW. We don't know who is really doing good and who is really doing bad. Because God sees things differently than we do.

And that's the point of today's parable, as well. WE DON'T KNOW. So therefore we don't pass judgment. We don't kill all the snakes, we don't pull up all the weeds, we don't make permanent judgments that are not ours to make. And in Matthew's Gospel, Jesus gives us two

good reasons. First, because God has been so generous and forgiving to us that we must be generous in spirit to others. And if that isn't enough, then we should refrain from judging others because we don't know. That's God's job. He sees, he knows, and it's his perspective that matters. And meanwhile we have other work to do.

“Who am I to judge?” The parable of the wheat and the darnel tells us that when we try to uproot what we perceive as evil, we will inevitably uproot and harm God's good plans as a kind of collateral damage. Our hymn of the day, which we are going to sing next, prays these words: *“Lord of harvest, grant that we, wholesome grain and pure may be.”* Rather than uprooting the garden ourselves, we should more modestly not assume that we are either wheat OR tares, but that by God's grace we may be included among the wheat. *“Lord of harvest, grant that we, wholesome grain and pure may be.”* Amen.