

Sermon for 17 July 2011
Pentecost 5; Proper 11, Year A

+In the name of the Father and of the Son and of
the Holy Spirit. Amen.

I have always been intrigued by the clever and not-so-clever things people put on church signs. One I saw recently which I particularly liked was "Honk if you love Jesus; Text while driving if you want to meet him." There is a particular theme that seems to end up on several church signs about this time of year, however, that makes me a bit uncomfortable. You've probably seen one or two of them yourselves. They're the signs that make a connection between the heat we're experiencing now and the presumed heat of hell. You'll see signs that say something like "If you think it's hot here..." or "This church is air-conditioned, hell isn't."

What makes me uncomfortable with this kind of sentiment is not the mention of hell. While in some

circles I'd be considered a theological paleo-conservative for this, I very much believe that there is a final judgment and that some, even with full knowledge of the consequences, will ultimately choose perdition over an eternity in God's presence. That gets back to the fact that God loves us enough to give us free will, even if it means some will reject Him.

What makes me uncomfortable with these church signs is that there seems to me to be an assumption about our knowledge of who makes the cut or not. This has been a problem Christianity has faced for centuries. The society John Calvin set up in Geneva took as its principle assumption the fact that election or reprobation—or, to use the more modern terms of American evangelicalism, the saved and the unsaved—could be easily identified. Not only was this based on the presence or absence of good works, but, sadly, on things like wealth. Having a lot of money or property was reckoned a sign of election,

and being poor was reckoned a sign that one was likely headed to hell.

This problem is still with us. I was, as many of you know, rather taken aback a few months ago when people started to celebrate Osama bin Laden's presumed arrival in hell. For one thing, celebrating somebody being in torment for eternity, no matter how horrible that person was, seems manifestly unchristian. More importantly for the sake of this sermon, though, underlying this attitude was the assumption that we knew enough about God and His ways to identify who was going to heaven and who was going to hell.

I have even heard, believe it or not, of people going to funerals in which the minister said that the deceased had most certainly ended up in hell. Pastoral sensitivity aside, making so bold a claim about another's eternal destination seems to suggest a fair amount of arrogance.

This morning's gospel should serve as a warning to avoid this kind of speculation. The slaves approach their master and ask if they should pull the weeds out of the garden, a rather obvious thing to do, one should think. The master, however, is afraid that some of the wheat would be thrown out with the weeds, and instructs the slave to let them grow, leaving the separation for the reaper.

I had always thought it rather strange, not having a background in agriculture, that the weeds could not be distinguished from the wheat. I had always assumed a farmer could tell the difference. Having done a bit of research this week, though, I discovered that the weeds in question were likely *lolium temulentum*, or darnel, which indeed cannot be easily distinguished from wheat until very late in both plants' maturation. So Jesus' audience would have known the dangers of trying to pull up these weeds from a wheat field prematurely. Some of the crop would invariably be lost.

And notice whom Jesus identifies as the reapers: they are the angels. They're not us. They are not the clergy or the matriarchs and patriarchs of a parish church or the vestry or the General Convention of the Episcopal Church or any other human agent. The angels make the separation, not us.

It goes without saying that this should lead us to a degree of tolerance. I think it's easy enough for most of us to avoid speculating out loud about a person's ultimate destination, but I think our hearts have more trouble in this regard than we might expect. I have thought to say and very occasionally actually said to somebody those three horrible words that lie in wait, ready to pop out of our mouths when we're angry: *go to hell*. Rarely do I really mean it literally, but sometimes, maybe deep down, I do. That's my problem; that's sin.

In a sermon on this very text, St. Augustine had this to say:

O you Christians, whose lives are good,
you sigh and groan as being few among many,

few among very many. The winter will pass away, the summer will come; lo! The harvest will soon be here. The angels will come who can make the separation, and who cannot make mistakes. . . . I tell you of a truth, my Beloved, even in these high seats there is both wheat, and tares, and among the laity there is wheat, and tares. Let the good tolerate the bad; let the bad change themselves, and imitate the good. Let us all, if it may be so, attain to God; let us all through His mercy escape the evil of this world. Let us seek after good days, for we are now in evil days; but in the evil days let us not blaspheme, that so we may be able to arrive at the good days.

Here that great father of the church not only tells us to withhold judgment—not knowing as well as the angels who might be a weed and who might be wheat—but he also warns us not to blaspheme. Blasphemy is irreverence, and it may take the form of us presuming to carry out the divine task of judgment ourselves. To presume to say somebody is going or has gone to hell, to take upon ourselves the authority to proclaim damnation, is perhaps the greatest blasphemy of all.

Let's make a go, then, of withholding judgment, knowing that judgment is not our prerogative when it comes to eternal matters. In fact, let's go one step further, by really trusting that God knows what he's doing. We might be surprised on our own heavenly birthday, when we go to join the saints in light, when we see who's there. They will have been changed, perfected, made into what God meant them to be, as will we. If we hadn't got it by then, we will finally realize how wrong we were to condemn so quickly, but, thanks be to God, that that realization will not inhibit us, but will free us to live in that land where our sinful arrogance has been purged and we can live in perfect peace and unity.

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