

John Sampson

“The Harvest”

Text: Matthew 13:24 – 30, 36 – 43

Preached at KVCC

July 23, 2017

Will you pray with me?

God, may the words of my mouth and the meditations of all of our hearts be acceptable to you, our rock, and our redeemer. AMEN.

14 19 40.5

44 54 23.9

These are not random numbers.

They’re coordinates, coordinates to a city called Rad’a, which is located in Yemen to the southeast of the capital Sana’a.

In December 2013 two Unmanned Aerial Vehicles, commonly referred to as drones, were sent by the United States Joint Special

Operations Command to these coordinates. The US had received intelligence that operatives of the al Qaeda terrorist group were active in the region. The drones circled the area all day looking for their targets. And then they spotted a convoy of twelve to fifteen cars leaving a nearby village. It was believed that this convoy included Shawqi al-Badani, identified by the US State Department as a “specially designated global terrorist.” The US servicemen and women who oversaw the operation of the drones were given the order to engage the convoy and destroy it. Minutes later the drones fired their missiles, which hit the cars turning them into heaps of flaming metal. The survivors, who could pull themselves out of the wreckage, were then picked off one by one by bullets fired by the drones. In all, 12 men were killed in the engagement, and 15 wounded.

After the battle it soon became clear that those killed by the drones were not terrorists, but a wedding party that had just left visiting

the bride's village and were returning to the groom's town in celebration. The intended target, Shawqi al-Badani was not among those in the convoy; he would actually be killed later in another strike in Yemen in June 2014.

The United States' war on terrorism has asked us as a nation to adapt and change our legal and military policies to engage an enemy that is hidden and yet has a global footprint. For many of us this is a strange new world. For others, it may be the only world we have ever known. Because global terrorism doesn't need huge budgets and the support of political states to thrive and strike. It only needs an internet connection and some items that can be easily purchased at a local store to inflict death, pain and fear in our towns and in our lives.

I have heard some in our community express the hope that Keene and Keene Valley can remain in a bubble, hidden away from the

reach of something like global terrorism. That we can remain living in peace. That we won't know the horror of a bombing, or a mass shooting here among the beauty of the Adirondacks. Although we may escape the gory reality of terrorism it already infuses our lives. It comes to us through our tvs. We feel its pull as we move slowly through the massive lines at airport security checkpoints. Its power is present in something as small as a new and updated driver's license.

Terrorism is a reality of our modern lives. We cannot escape it. We must engage it, one way or another. But how? How will we engage the threat of terrorism?

This morning Jesus speaks to us. Across time and space his words come and find us, a people living in a world afflicted by coordinated acts of violence. His words seem simple at first, and they seem to have little to do with the real struggles of our lives. He talks about

farming, and weeds. But with Jesus what appears at first glance to be simple and superficial always turns out to be deep and complex. We simply need to slow down and take the time to think about what he is telling us. Then his words will open like a blossom and reveal their subtle nuances to our minds and our hearts.

The parable we hear Jesus share with us this morning centers on a strange, and unlikely, situation. There is a farmer who has planted his field with wheat. So far, so good. But then there is another sower, another farmer, who decides to play an obnoxious trick on the first farmer. This second farmer comes in at night and secretly sows seeds, not of wheat, but of weeds. And so time passes. The wheat and the weeds sprout and begin to grow. As they do, the servants of the first farmer begin to realize that something is wrong, that not only is the wheat growing, but also many more weeds are also growing in the field. They go to the farmer and tell him that his field is being overrun with weeds, and suggest that they go through

the field and pull the unwanted plants. It seems like a helpful suggestion; it seems like the right thing to do. But the farmer balks. He tells his servants to wait because the wheat might be hurt if they pull the weeds right then. He tells them to wait until the harvest, and then the weeds will be separated and burned.

Jesus' disciples ask Jesus to explain what this parable means. We come here this morning asking Jesus to explain to us what this parable could mean to our lives. So, as Jesus says, "let anyone with ears listen!"

The weeds are the sinners. The weeds are those who sin through acts of terrorism, who build bombs, and gun down the innocent. The weeds are those who look out at the field, which Jesus says is the whole world, and are so filled with hate, and anger, hopelessness and a sense of injustice perpetrated against themselves and those they love, that they strike out and indiscriminately kill strangers and

children. They strike out in Baghdad and Orlando, in Istanbul and Berlin, in Manchester and New York City.

Although surrounded by terror, although living in a world where terror is the new normal, Jesus tells us that terror is not the final word. There will be an end to our fear.

For Jesus says that the weeds will be judged. They will not escape from the responsibility of their actions, and the terror they have sown in the world. They will be gathered and the memory of them, and the horror they have birthed, will be brought to an end as if they had been burned in an all-consuming fire. I do not believe that this fire is the fire of an underworld created to punish the evil for eternity. I believe it is God's beautiful promise to us that the abject crimes we inflict on each other, out of selfishness and greed, do not have ultimate power, and will be brought to an end, if only at the end of the age. For at the end of the age, which is always coming

closer, if never quite arriving, we hope for a new kind of world, which our tradition calls the kingdom of God, to usher in a time of deep communion among all God's children and among humanity and our Divine mother.

But before the end of the age we live in a field, a world, saturated with weeds, with crimes against humanity, with acts of terror finding us in every community across the globe. And we wish to pull out the weeds. We pray to enter the fields and yank out everything which isn't wheat. And so, we create legal and military solutions to find the terrorists and kill them. Because we no longer bring terrorists to courts of law and try them publicly. Our justice now is simply to pull the weeds, to destroy them and burn them where we find them.

For we have taken on the role of God's messengers. We have seized the wings of the angels.

Where God has said that the harvest, the separating of the innocent and the guilty, is the work of angels, in confidence we have responded that the CIA and the FBI can make the distinction too.

Where God has sent his messengers through the heavens on their holy wings, we have sent our drones through the brilliant blue skies over cities like Rad'a.

But where we have coopted God and her throne of justice, Jesus reminds us that we are not Divine. All of us fail. All of us are mortal. All of us lack the depth of holy sight.

Jesus tells us that God's harvest will happen at the end of time and be overseen by the angels because he knows the risks involved if humans were to take on this delicate and nuanced work. And the story of the drone strike against the wedding caravan in Yemen is the proof of his insight. On that day the FBI and the CIA, or whoever

it was that identified the members of the convoy that was destroyed, got it wrong. Instead of pulling the weeds, the drones destroyed the wheat. There are no universally accepted statistics given for the number of civilian casualties resulting from drone strikes.

Estimates range from 2 to 34% of all those killed by drones being innocent victims. Some organizations put the estimates much higher.

The words of Jesus have become prescient. “In gathering the weeds you would uproot the wheat among them.” In strikes against the terrorists that have threatened our country, and our lives, our nation’s military technology has killed innocent men, women and children.

Jesus is not saying that the weeds must not be dealt with, that we should just let terrorism destroy us. But what I think he is saying is that the value of life, the value of the lives of honest and

compassionate people, the lives of children who have never committed any crime, is ultimate. These lives are so valuable to God that they must not be sacrificed in our drive to root out the weeds that are encroaching on us. In God's kingdom collateral damage is unacceptable. In God's dream for humanity there is no such thing as acceptable losses when it comes to the innocent. Our God is the God of life, and to be her chosen people we must choose life, for ourselves and for all of humanity, even those who live far away in cities like Rad'a.

We live lives that are messy, that exist somewhere in that gray space between black and white. We live between the real threat of terrorism and the parables of Jesus and his vision of the Kingdom. As a nation we can't succumb to the threat of violence and death, but we are also challenged by Jesus to always choose life, and let judgment fall to God. The hard work of being asked to follow Jesus

is to figure out how we, as individuals and as a republic, can creatively negotiate between these two realities.

I am sure many of you are aware that the primary races for congress have already kicked off. We have friends of this congregation who have announced their candidacies. And they join an ever-growing field of our neighbors interested in representing New York's 21st Congressional District in Washington, DC. When you meet with the candidates from either party remember Jesus' parable of the wheat and the weeds. Ask those running for office how they understand the value of human life. Ask the candidates how they will negotiate between the real need to fight terrorism, and God's demand that we protect all life. Ask those who are asking for your vote what they will do to make sure no other wedding caravan is ever incinerated again. These are questions for all candidates to be asked. And these are questions for all candidates to answer.

“Let anyone with ears listen!”

AMEN.