

Sometimes when people misbehave you put a stop to it right away because the behavior cannot go on. One kid cannot hurt another one. One rapist cannot go free. One nation cannot terrorize another.

The main parable today, then, is surprising. Jesus says, when weeds show up with wheat, let them alone. When evil people show up among the good, let them be. Jesus recommends this procedure for two reasons, one pertaining to the present and the other to the future. In regard to the present, he says if you deliberately pull up young weeds you will accidentally pull up young wheat. If you go after the bad the wrong way, you will lose some of the good. In regard to the future, he says the weeds will get destroyed, but it's best to wait until harvest time. If you cannot stop evil people, God will punish them at the final harvest.

Even in Jesus' day, good and evil people coexisted. This parable tells a horrible story. A farmer sows wheat in his field. Then while he sleeps, his enemy comes by and sows weeds. The farmer doesn't even know it. Much later, as the sprouts come up, the farmer realizes what has happened. Now he faces a lack of safety, the loss of privacy, a bad crop, poverty, hunger and a powerful enemy.

The farmer tests out one option. He can pull up the weeds, but he will lose some good wheat. In the U.S., we would be pursuing another option. We'd call in an investigative squad to find out who the criminal was and punish the perpetrator. We'd look for footprints in the soil. We'd find out what strain of weed it was. We'd check records for recent purchases of that seed. We'd look for witnesses. We would want this criminal identified, stopped and punished. But Jesus' farmer doesn't.

Jesus has a point about the good seed. If you go after the bad seed in the wrong way, you may do more harm than good. If you punish children too severely, you damage their character. If you hunt down a rapist by asking what the victims were wearing, you lose integrity. If you deny human rights to terrorists, you look as bad as they do.

President Bush appears to be considering a first-strike military action against Iraq. He argues that Americans must be "ready for pre-emptive action when necessary to defend our liberty and our lives." This is a dangerous principle. We'd expect Yassir Arafat or Saddam Hussein to argue it, that their militias have a right to strike first to defend the life and liberty of their people.

We cannot appease terrorism, but we should not contribute to it either. When we confront evil at home or abroad, in a child's playroom or the fields of war, we must do it in a way that does not sacrifice the values we hold, but affirms our trust and dependence on the judgment of God. God will separate weeds from wheat at the final harvest.