Sermon for July 23rd

Pastor Steve Nelson

A while back, I was watching a television program. And they did an experiment in which they put an invisible powder on the hands of some young children in the school classroom. This powder was invisible to the naked eye, but when you shined a black light on it, it glowed with an iridescent blue green color.

They put this powder on the hands of the children and let them play and study and do their normal routine for a couple of hours. That was about 25 six year olds, with two hands each, and five fingers on each hand. That makes 250 fingers on busy kids for two hours.

At the end of that time they shut off all the lights in the classroom, so it was completely black and dark.

And then they shined a black light in the room. It was hard to even imagine all the places those little 250 fingers had been.

The books on the shelves were covered, the crayons and toys and table surfaces, and chalk boards, and light switches, and papers and pencils and even the floor and walls were smudged until it looked like the room was painted as high as the kids could reach. Even the children’s faces and clothes were smudged with the glowing blue green color.

And then they did the experiment, the same experiment with just a few kids getting the powder. But soon all of the children had it on themselves as it was picked up from the table tops, surfaces, and crayons. This happened because the kids handled the items that other children with the powder had touched.

It’s like when you are painting a room and three or four drops of paint fall on the floor.

Pretty soon you step in it and track it all over and then you step in those tracks and make more tracks.

The title of this sermon would perhaps be “faith prints”. Not fingerprints, or foot prints, but faith prints.

When someone goes out hunting, one of the most important skills is to be able to read the signs. Not the no hunting signs! But the trail signs that the animals leave. The foot prints in fresh snow, the places where elk have been watering or deer have stepped, or those spots where they roll in the mud, or tear up the trees with their antlers.

All these are signs. Just little imprints in the dirt or snow or pieces of hair lodged in the bark. But they tell a story of some thing greater. They are evidence that the animals frequent a place.

They point beyond themselves to another reality.

The rainbow, according to scripture, is a sign that points beyond itself as a sign of God‘s promise and love.

All of you are leaving the evidence of your having been here each day and minute of your life.

You are probably in daily contact with a multitude of people.

If you have been around children, you know that you are leaving an imprint and impression on them.

What kind of faith prints are you leaving?

You have left your mark… Your tracks. Now, according to the scriptures and Lutheran teaching, you are all ministers of Christ. God carries on his ministry through you. You are leaving evidence of ministry.

And that means that you are about something more than just breathing and walking. Your work and family and relationships are important but some thing is more important. And that is that in the midst of living, you are ministers of Christ. Listening ears, and speakers of the gospel.

Jesus said the church is like salt and leaven. That you, the ministers of Christ, permeate and flavor all of the life.

And it’s important how you live… Whether you are building up or destroying others. And it’s important in living to name the name of Jesus. Live, after all, as a child of God in this world.

And each of us should not just be leaving tracks in the lives of others, but leaving also the signs of God‘s presence in and through you… Leaving faith prints so to speak. Rainbows. Evidence of God’s love. God‘s forgiveness. God‘s blessing.

So that the youngster you teach in children’s church, or the ill friend you visit, that you minister to them in Jesus name.

I don’t know what your ministry is. I don’t know your spiritual gift. It may be that you are good at welcoming guests at church, or administering, or teaching, or visiting the sick, or praying, or making cookies… God has gifts in you… Special gifts… Paul says… “Having gifts that differ, let us use them.”

They are signs of God‘s presence and working. And use them to, as Paul said, “build up the body of Christ”.

Do you want to know God‘s will for you? Use your gifts. Not to destroy, but to “build up the body of Christ… The church”.

Leave some faith prints in the lives of others… And perhaps those you’ve ministered to will become ministers to others… That’s the way it works you know. Like the kids in the classroom… Pretty soon their fingerprints are going all over. God says that perhaps we even influence generations to come.

We celebrate all the ways today in which God brings goodness and blessing to the world through the church. But there are also some dark clouds on the horizon. All is not goodness and light.

In the parable of the wheat and the weeds read today, we find a mix of good and evil in all the world. Peace and war. Justice and in justice. Hunger and abundance. The worm in the apple.

I heard about a humorous highway sign at the entrance to a small town in northern Montana that reads; “POPULATION 107 NICE PEOPLE AND ONE OLD SOREHEAD”

The parable raises, profound questions.

How did evil enter a world that God created?

Why doesn’t God smash evil wherever it appears?

What is God‘s plan for the separation of good from evil?

The parable invites us to think.

The parable is simple. A farmer sowed his field with good wheat seed. During the night in enemy came and sowed weed seeds throughout the same field. When the field workers of this farmer discovered before the harvest what had happened, they asked the farmer if they should pull up the weeds. He said, “no, lest in gathering the weeds you route up the wheat along with them. Let both grow together until the harvest, and at harvest time, I will tell the reapers, “gather the weeds first, and bind them in bundles to be burned, but gather the wheat into my barn”.

The parable tells us that good and evil are intermingled throughout all of life. There is no such thing on this planet as sinless existence. If there were, we would not need locks on our doors. Hail and tornadoes as well as blue skies exist.

Good and evil are hopelessly intertwined in God’s world. Gods field.

Some have historically tried to disentangled them. Ulrich Zwingli, a reformation leader, tried to establish the kingdom of heaven on earth in Geneva, Switzerland, but it didn’t work. The Greek word for utopia comes from a root word meaning, no place.

Paul says, in the book of Romans, that the holy spirit is at war with the lower sinful nature in the hearts of even believers. The spirit and the flesh are opposed to one another. Therefore, Paul says, live, according to the Spirit. Put to death the deeds of the flesh.

Luther says that we are at the same time made right with God and yet are sinners. Sometimes we even mistake good for evil and evil for good.

Where did evil come from in a world God created? This parable does not attempt to answer that question. All the farmer said in Jesus parable is “an enemy has done this.” Later, Jesus explained, “the enemy who sewed them is the devil”. But how did the devil get into God’s good world? The parable does not say. In Jesus parable, the enemy came under the cover of night. So the origin of evil is cloaked in mystery. The Bible would perhaps say “don’t waste your energy, seeking to explain it, rather recognize it, resist it, and overcome it by the grace of the Lord Jesus Christ”.

One of the bright spots in the parable is the farmer sowing good seed in his field. So God is always showing good in his world. That’s what Jesus does all around us and in us. All the gracious wholesome, lovely things in life come from our gracious God. God shows the good seed. God plants what is wholesome, kind, loving, and good. God the divine farmer plants good and only good.

One cannot accuse God of evil. James wrote that God temps know one to evil. God doesn’t tempt people to sin. When a person has a car accident. God did not turn the steering wheel. God is good and in love wills the good even for the lives of selfish and unrighteous people!

God cannot be, is not, will not, will never be evil. That is not God’s nature. God by nature is good. And all that is beautiful, noble, true, wise, kind, and loving is God’s gift. James says that “every good endowment and every perfect gift is from above coming down from the father of lights with whom there is no variation or shadow do to change.”

But God does allow the coexistence of good and evil. Wheat and weeds grow together.

One thing we learn is that sometimes evil cannot be uprooted without destroying much that is good. One summer I let my weeds grow too long and pulled up quite a few beets while trying to gather the weeds. The farmer in Jesus parable knew the same situation. Patience until the field is ripe for the harvest is required.

If the evil weeds were to be uprooted when found, then John Newton, notorious captain of a slave ship in the 18th century, seizing Africans and bringing them over to America as slaves, should be eliminated. But growing up alongside that poisonous weed in his heart, was a later transformed John Newton, who studied theology at a seminary, took on holy orders, ministered inspiringly to the poor, and wrote that most popular hymn, “ Amazing Grace “.

This parable deals with ultimate outcomes, not with the temporary. The earth is still God’s field, and God will allow evil to exist for only so long. When all is said and done, despite that good and evil stand side by side in the world, only righteousness can win. What a marvelous confirmation of this life! Good will triumph over evil. God will root out all that is bad, painful, hurtful and wrong, and leave only the good. Never lose hope in God‘s final vision and vindication of what is right, even when you see so much that is wrong in this world. When the Earth is ripe for harvest, the Son of Man will send out his angels to reap the Wheat, and to gather out of his kingdom, all causes of sin, and all evil doers. But until then the good and evil will grow side-by-side until the close of the age.

Jesus teaching concludes with this great promise; “then the righteous will shine like the sun in the kingdom of their Father. Let the one who has ears, let them hear”.

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