

Wheat and Weeds!

July 19, 2020

UMCG

Seeing Gray in a World of Black and White: Thoughts on Religion, Morality, and Politics... that's the title of a best-selling book by Pastor Adam Hamilton of the Church of the Resurrection in Leawood, KS. (1) We've used this book in a number of adult study groups here at church. United Methodist Bishop Janice Riggle Huie is right on the mark when she notes that this book "unites scripture with tradition, reason, and experience. Even when we cannot agree on common ground, *Seeing Gray* reminds us that we stand together on higher ground. This is a book for thinking Christians." (2)

Matthew's Gospel, too, was written for "thinking" Christians...disciples of Jesus who didn't have to remove their brains when they walked through the doors of the *ekklesia*...the "gathering," or the "church" made up of followers of Jesus. As much as some folks today wish we did...we no longer live in a world that is simple, unambiguous, and clear cut on many, many issues. Matthew's first readers, living between 80 to 90 CE, inhabited a multi-cultural, pluralistic world in the Roman Empire. And they certainly faced a wide array of choices as their religious community transitioned away from Rabbinic Judaism and formed their own distinct faith community composed of both Jewish and Gentile followers of Jesus.

One thing Matthew's Gospel is clear about, however, is that in Jesus...through his life, teachings, death and resurrection...God was breaking into the world afresh. Indeed, the Kingdom of God...the Kingdom of Heaven...was breaking into the world. And this Kingdom—a reign of peace and justice, love and compassion—continued to break into the world...and continues to break into the world, as Jesus's followers advance his ministry here on earth. Matthew 4:23 puts Jesus's mission this way: "And Jesus went throughout Galilee, teaching in their synagogues, and proclaiming the good news of the kingdom, and curing every disease and every sickness among the people." A bit later on, Matthew devotes an entire chapter to Jesus's teaching on the topic of his mission on earth--establishing God's Kingdom...God's reign.

In Matthew's Gospel, the most Jewish of all the Gospels, Jesus is portrayed throughout as a Rabbi. What do Rabbis do? They teach! And so in chapters 5-7, often referred to as the Sermon on the Mount, we find Rabbi Jesus, the new

Moses, ascending a mountain to teach his disciples his Torah, his law, his way of righteousness and life. (This way of life is the “yoke” Jesus invites us to take upon ourselves as we partner with him in expanding God’s Kingdom on earth. I preached on that passage from Matthew 11 a few weeks ago.)

In Matthew 10, Jesus launches into more instruction—teaching—in what is known as his “missionary discourse.” There he instructs his 12 disciples regarding the mission he is sending them out to do. And then, in chapter 13—today’s scripture—Jesus devotes the entire chapter to teaching about the goal of his mission, the work he came to do—the Kingdom of God. Chapter 13 is full of parables...parables of the Kingdom. So we have the parable of the Sower and the Seed that our new Assoc Pastor Lisa Telomen preached so eloquently upon last Sunday. Before chapter 13 ends, Jesus goes on to tell a string of other parables about the Kingdom, such as the parables of the Wheat and Weeds, the Net, Leaven, Treasure and Pearl.

Our word “parable” comes from the Greek word *parabole* which literally means “side by side.” The Greek verb form of *parabole* means “to compare.” (Literally “to cast, to place alongside.”) So one thing – God’s Kingdom—is compared to another thing—such as a net, a seed, a field, a treasure and so forth. Or, one type of person—those responsive to Jesus—are compared to another type of person—those who are not responsive to Jesus and his message. N.T. scholar Douglas Hare goes on to explain that “Jesus’s Kingdom parables do not tell us what the Kingdom will be like in its final consummation...He was less interested in the future than in the present dimension of God’s rule...At the heart of all his activity was the conviction that in and through himself (Jesus), God’s end-time kingdom was invading the world, confronting persons with the necessity of deciding”—for, or against him, and his kingdom.” (3)

Today’s focus—Jesus’s parable of the Wheat and the Weeds—follows immediately on the heels of last week’s parable of the Sower and the Seed. While the parable of the Sower and the Seed emphasizes the need for Jesus’s followers to scatter the Good News of God’s word and love all the time, in all places, and to all people...the parable of the Wheat and the Weeds builds on that farming metaphor, but does so with both a word of caution...and a wonderful word of grace. As the seeds so freely sown begin to grow, today’s parable of the Wheat and Weeds points out that we human beings are not competent to make the kind

of judgments needed in separating wheat from weed. In plucking out what we think are weeds, well intentioned followers of Jesus may very well be pulling up wheat! Only God can make such judgments.” (3) Taken in this way, Prof Doug Hare notes that the story becomes a parable of grace!

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Pastor Adam Hamilton wrote an entire book on the buzzing, blooming, complex, confusing, multi-cultural, pluralistic world we live in. In commenting on today’s scripture, another Pastor by the name of David Lose asserts that the parable of the Wheat and Weeds is about ambiguity. (4) “Yes, the sower planted with good seeds. Yes, there are now weeds strewn among the wheat that puts the ideal harvest at risk. Indeed, the servants could just rip out the weeds, but the sower knows that to tear out the weeds now risks ruining the maturing wheat as well. And so the sower must wait, patiently, living with both the wheat and the weeds until the day of harvest when God can separate them in due time.” In short, it’s not up to us to decide who should be “in” and who should be “out” of the church, who is acceptable and who is not to God! That’s God’s work.

Pastor David goes on to say: “How often do we not also face similar dilemmas? If not with wheat and weeds, then with a multitude of other difficult choices: between getting a job to support the family, or staying at home to spend more time with the family...or between supporting someone who consistently struggles at work and pulls the quality of your team down, or firing that person...or between choosing the best school you’ve been accepted to, or choosing one that is more affordable...or between two different options in responding to a grave illness...or staying in your current call where things are comfortable or choosing to move on to newer, but unknown pastures...or giving into peer pressure because it’s just so awful to be left out, or choosing to stick to your values and risk isolation.” (4)

So what are we to do in this midst of this gray, ambiguous world? One of the most powerful things we can do is pray and then take concrete steps to live out our prayers. Rev. Lose offers a beautiful prayer based on today’s parable. Will you join me in that? “Dear Lord...our lives are colored by ambiguity and we don’t always know the right or best thing to do. But we do know that your love is guiding us and that you have called us to live as your people in the world. When we face hard choices, give us eyes to see the best path forward and the courage to follow it. When we make mistakes, forgive us. When we are hurt by our

choices, comfort us. When we hurt others, help us to reach out to them in love. And above all of this, remind us that you still love us and call us back that we may be forgiven, renewed, called, and sent forth again as your beloved children. In Jesus' name we pray. Amen."

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- (1) Adam Hamilton, *Seeing Gray in a World of Black and White: Thoughts on Religion, Morality, and Politics*. Nashville: Abingdon Press, 2008.
- (2) Bishop Janice Riggle Huie, *Seeing Gray in a World of Black and White*, (cover page).
- (3) Douglas Hare, *Matthew: Interpretation Bible Commentary*. Louisville, John Knox Press, 1993, pp. 146-156.
- (4) Rev. David Lose, Blog – "Dear Partner in Preaching: On Wheat, Weeds and Ambiguity," July 14, 2014.