

The Mayor, the Majors and the Priest

Last week, Wally, (whose parents named him after Wallyhouse), sent me a news article about a free daily lunch that's been going on at Saint Augustine's Catholic church in Waikiki for the last 50 years.

According to the story, the mayor and several police majors (dressed in blue), met with the priest of St Augustine's, and asked or told him to discontinue the generations old free daily lunch.

According to the news, the priest agreed to do so.

I share this with you today because the story of the mayor, the majors and the priest is a great entry point to help us dive into today's parable: the parable of the weeds and the wheat.

Part of understanding this parable begins with understanding the motivations of the mayor, the majors and the priest.

And truth be told, I'm sure they felt motivated by nothing but the highest principles.

I'm sure that the mayor has been pressured relentlessly by the hotel industry and the tourist industry because Saint Augustine's is right in the middle of our tourist Mecca of Waikiki.

The police majors, already struggling with decades of being understaffed, are now faced with an explosion of the chronically houseless, many of whom are addicted to drugs while others have various degrees of mental illness.

I don't doubt that these majors are simply looking out for the welfare of their men and women in blue and the welfare of the larger community.

And the priest, who agreed to discontinue the lunch, also probably felt that he was simply obeying government officials, as Saint Paul commands Christians to do in Romans chapter 13.

And yet.

And yet.

Here we are with Jesus — and this parable of the weeds and the wheat.

A parable that makes the piercingly difficult point that when it comes to knowing who is good and what is evil, we so very often get it wrong.

And on those occasions when our choices are backed up by a majority of people, when our choices are grounded in the status-quo and looking out for ourselves, well then, odds are, under those circumstances — we will almost always get it wrong.

“My ways are not your ways,” God says through the prophet Isaiah.

“Stay away from the tree of the knowledge of good and evil,” God says to our first parents.

And today, Jesus underscores our need to remain humble in the face of being asked to distinguish the good from the bad, the wheat from the weeds.

The parable of the wheat and the weeds is really a warm up act for the very last parable Jesus tells in Matthew’s gospel.

The distinction between God's ways and our ways, our acknowledged difficulty with knowing the difference between the good and the bad, all of this comes into extraordinary focus in the great climax to Matthew's gospel.

That great climax to Matthew's gospel occurs when Jesus tells his final parable, the parable of the last judgment.

It's the ultimate parable of who is good and what is evil.

It's the ultimate parable of distinguishing between the wheat and the weeds.

In that parable, all people are gathered before the king and separated, like sheep from the goats.

And the king says to the sheep on his right side, "come into my father's glory you blessed ones, because when I was hungry, you gave me something to eat, when I was naked, you gave me something to wear, when I was thirsty, you gave me something to drink."

And the sheep all yell out to Jesus: "when did we see you hungry or thirsty or naked?"

And Jesus says: "hold on a minute I need to take care of the goats."

And to the goats, he says: "away with you, because when I was hungry, you gave me nothing to eat, when I was thirsty, you gave me nothing to drink, and when I was naked, you gave me nothing to wear."

And like the sheep, the goats yell out to Jesus, "when did we see you hungry or thirsty or naked?"

And Jesus replies to all of those gathered before him, “when you did these things to the least of these, my brothers and sisters, my houseless people, my trans people, my lesbian people, my Muslim people, my evangelical people, even my Episcopalian people, when you did it to the least of these, just so, you did it for me.

And when you did not do these things, you did not do it for me.”

Kind of a punch in the gut, don't you think?

Not a word about believing in the right doctrine or creed.

Not a word about how many Masses we attended or how we avoided scandal.

It's what Paul is getting at when he urges us to live in the Spirit and not in the flesh.

The “flesh” is shorthand for the status quo.

The “flesh” means doing things our way: which usually entails separating out into tribes and factions, using power and division to assert control over others.

But to live in the Spirit is to practice living life within the flow of God.

It's a life lived by practicing the constant release of negative emotions, fears and resentments — trusting (as our first parents did not) that God's got this.

Our only job is to live in that trust - with open hearts and a giving spirit.

That God's desire for every person is that we live lives of joy and abundance; lives of self-giving and humble service.

It's what our father Jacob discovers as he lies down to sleep, with only a rock for his pillow, in the middle of nowhere.

In the middle of nowhere, Jacob receives God's undeserved promise to make his descendants more numerous than the grains of sand on the beach.

And in the middle of nowhere, Jacob discovers the very gateway into God's nearer presence.

As Jacob comes to see that God can be trusted — even in the middle of nowhere.

Spiritual nowhere's.

Physical nowhere's.

Emotional nowhere's.

In all of those places where we have no idea where to go or what to do next.

And how often do we feel that sense of lostness and indecision, especially when it comes to the crisis in our community of homelessness, of addiction, of mental illness?

What can we do?

What ought we do?

Usually, we end up doing what serves the status quo.

Most often, we seek out self protection and the protection of the true god of the modern age: the Economy.

And so you have to wonder if most folks who saw that news article about the mayor, the majors and the priest, nodded their heads in agreement with what the mayor, the majors and the priest ended up doing.

You have to wonder whether most good church going Christians nodded their heads with approval, all for the same or similar reasons that motivated the mayor, the majors and the priest.

But then, in the midst of us patting ourselves on the back for taking the regrettable but necessary action of closing down a food line, here comes that pesky Jesus.

And wouldn't you know it, but almost every time we say that we know what is wheat and we know what is weeds, Jesus shows up saying: "you've got it exactly backwards."

So when we are faced with a conundrum like the one facing the mayor, the majors and the priest, perhaps we need to stop and ask the key question:

With whom would Jesus be standing that day when the mayor, the majors and the priest sat down to talk at the church?

Would Jesus have been in that meeting with the mayor, the majors and the priest, insisting that the lunch be closed down?

Or would Jesus be standing in that lunch line – waiting for a sandwich, waiting for a cold drink?

The question, it seems to me at least, answers itself.

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