

Newsletter Reflections for August

I find “social media” a fascinating and also an alarming phenomenon of our current society. It actually seems to have developed a power that is frightening since things said on it seem to take on a life of their own without root or proof. They spread like the kudzu sometimes seen growing along the side of some roads...something that may look harmless at first glance but has been proven to be otherwise, covering trees and killing them. Individuals easily pass along “tidbits” they see, like and agree with without regard for truth or verification. Even in the face of factual evidence to the contrary these “tidbits” continue to circulate. There seems to be no regard for any harm a false claim might do. There seems to be no interest or need to question a “source” if you like the thought. In our journey through the gospel of Matthew this year we have now reached the portion of the narrative that Matthew devotes to some parables that Jesus told to the crowds that had begun to follow him. They are seeking to be healed and listening to what he is saying. Many of these parables are found in Chapter 13. The two which come to mind as I am writing this are the parable of the sower and the parable of weeds among the wheat. For both of these parables Jesus offers an explanation to his disciples after the crowds leave because evidently, the message within parables is not clear to them as it is originally told. In the final analysis both of these parables are describing the outcome of the planting of seeds where the seeds represent the outcome of the message that Jesus is bringing about God’s love and redemption. The message within the parables is about the acceptance or rejection of the message which Jesus is proclaiming. This becomes clear in the explanations which Jesus gives to the disciples. What is also clear is that the problem that Jesus refers to as the reason he speaks in parables is still a problem which plagues us today. It seems to be a fundamental and an eternal problem for human beings...also known as selective hearing (or seeing). For Jesus tells the disciples that the crowds are fulfilling the prophet Isaiah’s words: “You will indeed listen, but never understand, and you will look, but never perceive. For this people’s heart has grown dull, and their ears are hard of hearing, and they have shut their eyes, so that they may not look with their eyes, and listen with their ears, and understand with their heart and turn---and I would heal them.” (Matt. 13:14b-15). Unfortunately, it seems that this tendency to behave according to the characteristics of those described by Isaiah is not confined to social media. Far too many people have now confined their obtaining of the news about our world to only one resource. Too often when only one resource is heard, only one perspective is presented. An analysis of news sources recently rated them according to these characteristics: % reliability for factual reporting; % of reports that were opinion stated as fact; % of opinion stated as opinion. This analysis did not separate by type of opinion, just whether or not what was presented was factual or opinion. It seems to me that in the choosing of just one source of information, and making that one source one which only presents one perspective more and more people today are behaving in the manner described in Matthew 13: 14-15: willfully not seeing or hearing and thereby not being able to perceive the truth of what is happening in the world around them. How does this then relate to the instruction that Jesus gives to those who will be his followers? Those who will come after him as the sowers of the seed of the message

of God's redemptive love? If the one who is proclaiming a word of love is not acting with compassion and empathy, is that word going to be heard? If the one who has a word of compassion and empathy to share is not listening with compassion and empathy to those crying out, what happens when the word is shared? Jesus says: "Let anyone with ears listen!" at the end of both of these parables. In the parable of the weeds or tares among the wheat the owner who has only sown good seed in his field is told that there are indeed weeds growing there. The workers in the fields want to remove them, but are told to wait until all have grown to maturity because if they try to remove them too early they will not be able to distinguish properly and will thus destroy not only the weeds but also some wheat. We often are so convinced of our own ability to make "good and righteous" judgments of others that we forget this parable's wisdom. This is a danger that is especially perilous when we limit our sources of information in this age of rampant unverified broadcasting of "seeds". We withdraw into smaller and smaller groups which become more and more like "us" and less and less able to include the "other" however we define "other." And the less we know the "other", the easier it is to fear, the less likely we are to be able to understand or be compassionate. In this time when there are real reasons for us to be very careful about when and how we interact physically with others; perhaps we have an opportunity to examine how these other factors...these social factors...have come to play in our lives...and whether or not they have played a role in what kinds of sowers of the message we have been in the past or perhaps may become in the future.

Shalom,

Pastor Libby