

“Seeing Gray: Faith, Morality and Politics in a Black and White World”
 “What Would Jesus Say to America?”

Two senators, one Republican and one a Democrat, are talking about faith and politics while sitting in the Senate dining hall. As they're eating, the Republican turns to the Democrats and says, "You Democrats don't know anything about religion." The Democrat was offended and said, "What are talking about? We know a lot about religion."

The Republican came back with, "No you don't! I'm **sure** you don't know anything about religion. I'll even bet you \$20 that you cannot even recite the Lord's Prayer." The Democrat said, "I will take you up on that bet and then I will take your \$20. Are you ready? Here it is. 'Now I lay me down to sleep. I pray the Lord my soul to keep.'" The Republican reaches for his wallet and said, "Darn it! I didn't think there was any way you could do it."

A lot of folks in politics talk about Jesus, but I wonder if they really know what he said. Today we conclude series of messages called, "Seeing Gray: Faith, Morality and Politics in a Black and White World." We've been using the book by the same title by the Reverend Adam Hamilton at the United Methodist Church of the Resurrection as our jumping off point.

We've been looking at this subject because we live in a world where there is so much polarization, especially in the area of politics. Especially when we're at this point in the election season. Sometimes we can't even have civil conversations with our best friends if we don't agree when it comes to politics.

The world seems to be shaped in black-and-white terms and part of the reason for this series was to challenge that and to say, "Maybe the world is not always black and white. Maybe there is a way for us to focus on the things that we agree upon—the gray area--and work together and listen to one another to solve the problems facing our nation and our world." We talked about this in the area of faith, and in the area of morality, spiritual maturity, and today what we stand for as a nation.

I want to begin by teaching you **three Hebrew words**. These words are very important and they dominate the Old Testament when it comes to what God expected of kings, and leaders, and his people.

The first word is **mishpat**. You find this word 421 times in the Old Testament. The tells you that this is a very important word! It's **typically translated as "Justice."** It means doing the right thing by **all** people.

Typically this word comes up when God is talking to the kings and leaders of Israel. God's talking to them about those who are powerless, or the workers, or the children, or the widows and orphans, the poor and the aliens (foreigners) in the midst of the Israelites. So many times God speaks to those in power and says, "You have got to pursue *mishpat* so that all the people are treated fairly and equitably."

We see this in particular in the Law and then again with the Prophets. God raises up prophets for certain times in Israel's history where the leaders of Israel were not ensuring that there was justice for all people. God warns them and says that, "If you don't pursue justice then I will. If you refuse to do pursue justice, then I will see that your own nation falls." These were harsh words of warning given to those who would not pursue *mishpat*.

In Psalm 146: 7-9 we find just one example of this. **“He [the Lord] gives justice to the oppressed and food to the hungry. The Lord frees the prisoners. The Lord opens the eyes of the blind. The Lord lifts up those who are weighed down. The Lord loves the Godly. The Lord protects the foreigners among us. He cares for the orphans and widows, but he frustrates the plans of the wicked.”**

Mishpat is making sure there is equity and fairness and the right thing is done to all the people, especially to those who are **not** in power.

The second important Hebrew word is **tsedeka**. **Tsedeka is translated as “righteousness”**. And generally when the Old Testament talks about righteousness it's talking about doing the right thing, at the right time, in the right place, and for the right reasons.

Righteousness is making sure that in every situation we're trying to do the thing that would really please God. So, what is the thing that God would have us do? Not just personally, but in the Old Testament this was a question that kings were meant to ask about their policies and their way of governing. And if they did not pursue righteousness then judgment would come.

Another way of thinking about righteousness is that it's doing the right thing even when the law does not obligate you to do it. When you're righteous you do the right thing not because there's a police officer watching you, or because the law requires it. But you do the right thing because God demands it of us. *Tsedeka*.

The last word is **hesed which means, "steadfast love, loving kindness or mercy."** It's not a feeling so it's not about feeling love for someone else. *Hesed* means that you **do** loving actions for someone else. You **act** with kindness towards someone else.

Hesed is sometimes translated as "mercy" because you're doing the kind thing even if the other person is unloving towards you, even if they're uncaring towards you. You love them even though they may not **deserve** your kindness.

This is a defining characteristic of God. God shows us mercy, and gives us his loving kindness, despite the fact that often we don't deserve it. We push God away, we rebel, but God continues to show us his steadfast love and kindness.

This love is not a feeling, it's what Jesus is talking about when he says to, "love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you." That is *hesed*.

We find this word yoked together with justice in a powerful passage from the prophet Micah where God says, **"What does the Lord require of you, but to do justice (mishpat), love kindness (hesed) and to walk humbly with your God" (Micah 6:8)**

All three of these Hebrew words come together in a verse from the prophet Jeremiah where God speaks saying, **"I am the Lord who demonstrates unflinching love (hesed) and who brings justice (mishpat) and righteousness (tsedeka) to the earth, and that I delight in these things" (Jeremiah 9:24)**

These three words define who God is and they are what God expects in our relationships with one another. They are what God demands of his people and they are what God is holding leaders accountable to pursue.

Again and again in scripture God says that if you do these things you will be blessed and if you do not do these things **you will not stand as a nation**. The scriptures are crystal clear. In Jeremiah God says that if you disobey this command for justice toward widows, orphans and foreigners, I will make sure your nation becomes a pile of rubble (Jeremiah 22).

These three words, justice, righteousness, mercy, are a place where Republicans and Democrats can come together and meet. This is not a Republican or Democrat issue. This is an issue of what the Lord asks of us and we all agree on these things. Where we disagree is how you administer them or what each one of these looks like in given situations.

But we can all agree that no child should go to bed sick and unable to see a doctor because they can't pay for one. Somewhere sick children need to be able see a doctor and someone needs to figure out how that happens. We might disagree about **how** this happens, but the fact that it must happen, we can agree on, because it represents *mishpat*, *tsedeka* and *hesed*.

I think every faithful Christian, whether they are Republican or Democrat, would agree that workers should be treated fairly. I think we all can agree that it's not good for employers to abuse their workers. The question of course is how this is administered and what form it takes.

We all would agree that no one in America should starve to death. We might disagree on how to administer that kind of help and what the root causes are, but we all agree that the hungry should be fed.

What would it look like if we attempted to pursue these things even though we have different ideas on how to make it happen? What if we all agreed that these things were absolutely essential and it was a part of our vision as a country? And I think it is a part of the vision of our country, that is part of the American dream.

Let's take a minute and think about **the American dream**. What is the American dream? **Today it seems like it's that we'll have a six figure income and a 3,000 square foot house with the three car garage**. We may not all get there, especially in Joplin, but we have this dream of success that includes a certain income and a certain way of life.

But that was not the dream that the founding patriots were willing to die for. The American dream for them was much nobler! Of course it was the idea that we would have the opportunity to pursue happiness, but it was so more than possessions and wealth.

Take out a one dollar bill if you have one. Let me invite you to turn to the back. The great seal of the United States of America is found on the back of the one dollar bill. It is a two-sided seal and so you see both sides.

This seal was approved by Congress in 1782. I want you to forget everything you learned about this from the *National Treasure* and *The Da Vinci Code* movies. What you really want to do is go back and read what Charles Thompson said about the Great Seal. He was the one who designed it and presented to Congress. **The Great Seal** points to who our founders saw us to be.

This side of the seal has the unfinished pyramid. This was meant to represent America because the pyramid is lasting. It was enduring. It also represents strength. But you notice that the pyramid is unfinished. Charles Thompson said the pyramid should always be shown unfinished because the vision of America and what it represents will never be completed. Every generation is supposed to be working towards fulfilling that vision in its time, including our generation.

At the bottom of the pyramid you find a scroll with these words. **Novus Ordo Seclorum" = a new order of the ages**. Here was the idea. The patriots and our founding fathers saw America representing something new that was so profound, so just, and so righteous that it would fundamentally change how governments were ordered and how nations ordered themselves. America was to represent a new order of the ages.

Above the pyramid it says these words. **"Annuit Coeptis" = looks with favor on our undertaking**. This is an incomplete Latin phrase that means looks with favor on our undertaking. But who looks with favor on our undertaking? What was that in reference to? It was a reference to the fact that the founding fathers believed that God had looked with favor already upon the experiment that was under way called America. It was a hope for the future that God would continue to look with favor upon America. That's the eye inside the triangle; the eye of divine eye of Providence which is God who is

all-seeing. Those founding fathers, even those who were not so religious, talked about God's providence and God's care in raising up this country and blessing it that it might be a blessing the world through justice, righteousness and mercy.

Have we always gotten it right? Of course not. But the idea was that as long as we continue to pursue justice, doing the right thing and showing mercy then God's grace would continually be shed upon us. But when we forget that, we no longer receive those favors.

On the other side of the seal is the American eagle. The eagle is holding in its mouth a scroll which says, "**E Pluribus Unum.**" This referred to the fact that we were a nation of immigrants. There was a wonderful idea that this was actually our strength. Our strength comes from the fact that we have people who see things differently and come from different backgrounds bringing with them different heritages. Our founding fathers believed that this was part of what makes America great.

The issue of immigration is a challenging issue in this year's election cycle and there is always going to be tension about it. The tension is the fact that we are a nation of immigrants. All of you in this room, with the exception of those of you who are Native American, are from immigrant families.

My ancestors were from Wales and Germany. They landed in Boston in 1632, started a new life, and made a home here. We're all immigrants. That diversity, that work ethic, that blending of life and experience and tradition has made this country strong and prosperous. This is why today there are millions of people who want to come into this country and yet we struggle with what to do with this.

I'm not clear about the answers. But there is one thing I am clear on: that whatever answer we come up with must treat the immigrants and aliens with *mishpat, tzedeka and hesed*. God demands this in the book of Leviticus over and over again. With commands like this: "**When an alien lives with you in your land, do not mistreat him. The alien living with you must be treated as one of your native-born. Love him as yourself, for you were aliens in Egypt. I am the LORD your God**" (Leviticus 19:33-34, NIV).

That's not an immigration policy but it should shape how we look at the issue and we have to incorporate these fundamental ideas.

As you continue to look at the seal you will find the eagle has in its talons two sets of things. The 13 arrows represent the first 13 states. They also represent military strength. In the other talon you find the Olive branch which is a reminder that peace is to be pursued. The fact that these talons are holding both things means that both of these things are important. Charles Thompson intentionally designed the face of the eagle to face towards the Olive branch to say, "This is what we are to be focusing on—pursuing peace."

One of the realities that our country needs to wrestle with is how we balance our resources for these two things. That leads to this question: Do you know what we spend on our military budget versus what we spend on diplomacy and humanitarian aid to those in other countries who need help? It's important that we know this.

Last year our military budget was \$600 billion. 150 billion was for Iraq and 450 billion was for general military expenditures and the debt on past military expenses. It's hard to get a handle on \$600 billion until you begin to compare that to what the rest of the world spends on military. Our \$600 billion is more than what the rest of all the nations of the world spend **combined**. China is the second on the list and they spent \$60 billion on military last year.

Of every income tax dollar that you and I send into the federal government \$.41 goes to military expenditures. How much goes to peace efforts, the diplomatic corps and humanitarian assistance to other nations? One penny. \$14 billion.

Again I am not saying that we should not have military because we have to have that, but a big question we have to ask is: "Is it possible that if we would spend **more** money in working in developing nations and helping people and working on diplomacy, that we could possibly spend a little bit **less** money on the military because our own security wouldn't be threatened as much?"

Of course how we resolve that is complicated and each political party will have different ideas but I hope that no matter what party you're in you would want our nation to find a healthy balance between military strength and pursuing peace. It's challenging to figure out how to balance these things but we must wrestle with it.

What Would Jesus Say to America? This last week I tried to imagine for myself what Jesus would say to us if he came in bodily form to America. I pictured Jesus standing on the steps of the Lincoln Memorial and addressing our nation. I envisioned thousands of people gathered around the reflecting pool. What would Jesus say if he was facing this crowd? What would he bring up?

If Jesus came to America today would he only talk about "spiritual things" or would he say anything about the stuff we are facing today as a nation—immigration, war, the economy, abortion? You know if you read through Gospels it doesn't take long to see that for God **everything** is spiritual. Everything is God's realm. The decisions we make, how we conduct our businesses, what we do as a nation, and how we act in our marriages—all of those have to do with our faith and our spiritual lives.

So when you read Jesus' words you find things like this in the Sermon on the Mount. "Blessed are those who hunger and thirst after righteousness (*tsedeka*—doing the right thing in the right place at the right time for the right reasons). Blessed are those who hunger for that for they will be filled."

"Blessed are the peacemakers. Blessed are those who show mercy (*hesed*—kindness even when someone else does not deserve it.) for they shall be shown mercy."

He told parables of the rich man and Lazarus the poor man who died at his gates. He told parables of the Good Samaritan and parables of the sheep and the goats. He spent much of his time healing the sick--those people that everyone else had turned away from are the ones that he took time for and made sure they were cared for and made well.

Looking at what he said then, maybe we can get a good picture of what he would say now. I think he would remind us as a country that true greatness, which is what we long for for our nation, is not defined by our GDP (our gross domestic product) or by our military might. Greatness, true greatness, is seen in humility and servanthood and sacrificial love.

I think he would remind us of the little children whose prayers he hears every night. He sees those children every night before they go to bed. In our world 30,000 children go to bed at night and don't wake up the next morning. Every 3 seconds someone dies from poverty related diseases. Every 30 seconds a child dies from malaria which is a very preventable and curable disease.

There are thousands of children in this country who are in homeless shelters every night, including our own homeless shelters here in Joplin. Jesus sees all those children not just in America but around the world. What is his heart for those children?

Last week I saw a film clip which was put together by Richard Curtis who started Comic Relief several years ago to deal with the issue of children's poverty and hunger. He had a cameraman go to India and told him to just record what he saw on the streets of Calcutta and bring back some images. The cameraman was setting up his camera when he saw a little girl in a yellow dress and he quickly started filming to see what she would do. Jesus sees images like this all the time and I wanted you to see this one.

[VIDEO: 2 min. Girl in Yellow Dress]—*A little girl, approximately 5 years old, slowly and carefully makes her bed on the sidewalk on the streets of Calcutta as pedestrians walk by. It ends as she lies down to go to sleep for the night. Here is the web link if you would like to watch it. <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=rfAOVKjDfg>*

Jesus says in Matthew's Gospel, "I was hungry and some of you gave me something to eat and some of you didn't. I was thirsty and some of you stopped and gave me something to drink and some walked right by. I was naked, and I was sick and I was in prison, and some helped and some pretended not to see. **In as much as you pretended not to see you won't be seen in the kingdom of heaven.**"

We all, Democrats and Republicans, may come to different conclusions about the problems in our world. But somewhere along the line we have to at least **see** the problems and we have to be able to say that the defining characteristics of what makes our nation great and what God requires of us as Democrats and Republicans who are Christians is *mishpat*, *tsedeka* and *hesed*.

I know it's complicated and there is no way one series of messages can address all the complexities that faith and politics bring to the table. But we have to be able to look at each other and say, "Though we disagree and we are in different political parties I still want to listen to you because you are my brother or my sister." We must learn to offer our opinions with humility and not as though we absolutely know the truth, but recognize that we could be wrong about an issue. We must see how we can begin to work together on common aims and common ends even though we disagree.

I think most of us in this room would agree that we would like America to be great, and that we want other nations to be inspired by who we are as a nation. My guess is that we don't want people to be inspired by America because of our military might but by the way we give of ourselves. My hope and my dream is that we would be a nation who would pursue with compassion what is just and what is right and what is the loving thing to do.

To the degree that we recognize that the truth is found sometimes on more than one side and we're willing to listen and act humbly, is the degree to which we've begun to see gray in a world of black and white. That's my hope and prayer for us as we go through this political season, when our nation can be torn apart. What if, instead, we might be those people who stand in the middle as a bridge and say, "You have something important to say, and you have something important to say, and what's most important is that we pursue justice, and righteousness and kindness."

Whether you are Republican or Democrat or Independent, you are some of the most caring, thoughtful, intelligent and compassionate people I know. Our process needs you to care and to be involved that we could be great. And for today that is the Good News. In the name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit. Amen.

Prayer...

Listen to this song that I think speaks to the challenge we face. **[SONG: Calling Out To You]**

I thank Rev. Adam Hamilton, Senior Pastor of the United Methodist Church of the Resurrection, for his preaching resources in this message, and for his book Seeing Gray.