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Matthew 11:16-19;25-30

July 9, 2023

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***16“But to what will I compare this generation? It is like children sitting in the marketplaces and calling to one another,***

***17‘We played the flute for you, and you did not dance; we wailed, and you did not mourn.’***

***18“For John came neither eating nor drinking, and they say, ‘He has a demon’; 19the Son of Man came eating and drinking, and they say, ‘Look, a glutton and a drunkard, a friend of tax collectors and sinners!’ Yet wisdom is vindicated by her deeds.”***

***25At that time Jesus said, “I thank you, Father, Lord of heaven and earth, because you have hidden these things from the wise and the intelligent and have revealed them to infants; 26yes, Father, for such was your gracious will. 27All things have been handed over to me by my Father, and no one knows the Son except the Father, and no one knows the Father except the Son and anyone to whom the Son chooses to reveal him.***

***28“Come to me, all you who are weary and are carrying heavy burdens, and I will give you rest. 29Take my yoke upon you, and learn from me, for I am gentle and humble in heart, and you will find rest for your souls. 30For my yoke is easy, and my burden is light.”***

When John the Baptist was in prison, he heard about Jesus and what he was doing. I imagine that from where he sat, in prison, he was wondering about his life, his mission, his life in the wilderness eating locusts and honey, wondering if his life’s mission as the one who would prepare for the Messiah, had been in vain. John sent word from prison through his own disciples, to go find out about Jesus. They asked Jesus, “Are you the one who is to come, or are we to wait for another?” (Matt: 11:4) Jesus didn’t give a yes or no answer. In a style Socrates would have been proud of Jesus answered them, “Go tell them what you hear and see.”

I love that answer. I imagine asking Jesus a question (Are you the one?) and the first thing Jesus does is take us by the hand and say, let’s go find out together. What’s the evidence? First we’ll check with our senses. (What do you see and hear?) Ah, I see that “the blind receive their sight, the lame walk, those with a skin disease are cleansed, the deaf hear, the dead are raised, and the poor have good news brought to them.” That would have brought to mind words from Isaiah, more evidence. Jesus confirms for them that when Isaiah said, ‘See, I am sending my messenger ahead of you, who will prepare your way before you.’ He was referring to John the Baptist. More evidence: scripture can be trusted.

Knowing this background helps to understand our scripture for today, and why Jesus starts talking about John the Baptist. This generation he says, is like children waiting to play. No matter what they do, they don’t get what they want. Imagine one group of children calling to another group, we played our flutes but you didn’t dance. We wailed and you did not mourn.

Just like the children who didn’t respond to either the dancing or the wailing, this generation is rejecting both John and Jesus. John, the weird guy who dressed weird, lived in the wilderness and kept company with no-one, ate and drank practically nothing – he was seen as possessed, and finally imprisoned. Jesus at the other end of the spectrum, seems to be a normal guy, lived in society, kept company with anyone and everyone, ate and drank anything and kept the wine flowing – he was rejected too because he hangs out with the wrong people and he’s a glutton and a drunkard. No matter who God sends, they are met with rejection. One commentator likens it to a familiar story when she writes, “Like a Goldilocks judging spiritual lifestyles, the people said that John’s way was *too hard* and Jesus’s way was *too soft*. The people still hadn’t found their *just right*, so they refused to join in whatever it was that either of God’s messengers were offering.”1 In other words, I imagine Jesus saying, “We can’t win with this generation.”

Think of how many generations have existed since Jesus first asked that question. How many generations have asked, “To what would Jesus compare us?” Would we be seen as missing the messengers of God; of not *creating* the compassion, kindness, wisdom and grace that the world needs? or of not *seeing* and welcoming those beautiful glimpses of God’s hand that are all around us?

Personal change leads to societal change so it matters how we think about things, especially when it comes to how we find ourselves joining in God’s will for us. What messenger are we following?

There’s a danger in always thinking *we’ve got it right*, and we’re on the right track. If we’re used to being right, being the ones who got the memo, the ones who read the right news reports, listen to the right pundits, being the ones in the know – then we never have reason to veer from our oh-so-correct rut that we’re in. We know we’re following the right messenger! So we never ask questions, we never get curious, we sink to the bottom of the small bowl we’re living in. With the exception of dangerous situations, the great thing about being wrong sometimes is that we have an opportunity to learn something. The opportunity to grow and develop.

Just as there is a danger in assuming that we mere humans *never get it right* and we’re always missing the mark. We are nothing, mere worms. If we think that we are nothing, we run the risk of never trying, of giving up, of not feeling the largeness of being created in God’s image to do the work of bringing about the kingdom of God here on earth. Thinking too little of our impact runs the risk of becoming stagnant and irrelevant.

Christian churches preach both extremes and they’re both dangerous. I hope you never hear these extremes here in this community.

Everyone can understand how in anything we do in life there is a time for strong convictions and certainty and confidence. And there is a time for being aware of our limits, being humble and listening more than we speak. Whatever we do in life, we are constantly juggling varying degrees of arrogance vs humility; being helpful vs being hurtful; being on the right path vs being uncertain or lost. On a good day being human is tiring. On a bad day being human is an exhausting trial.

To all of us, through all generations, Jesus next offers this comfort:

***28****“Come to me, all you who are weary and are carrying heavy burdens, and I will give you rest.****29****Take my yoke upon you, and learn from me, for I am gentle and humble in heart, and you will find rest for your souls.****30****For my yoke is easy, and my burden is light.”*

I heard a sermon on just these three lines a couple of weeks ago during my retreat at the Mercy Center. The sermon included a description of a city guy spending a week in a more rural setting and for the first time seeing two animals yoked together. The way he described the two animals together I thought of how I would just hate it, if I were going one way, and someone was constantly yanking me back another way. Or if I were attached to someone who was constantly pulling me away from where I wanted to go! I want to make my own decisions, go where I want to go, forge my own way, create my own path…can you hear some movie music in the background with the picture I’m creating? Me, me, me, I, I, I. Sure, I follow rules, but independence is really better, right? Being yoked makes me think of all of the things that are not of our own doing tying us down – illnesses, the impact others have on us, accidents, financial situations, not to mention larger systemic ways some are kept from their full lives – racism, lack of access to proper care and assistance (the proper menu as it were), immigration status, societal biases. I can’t think of why a yoke would be a good thing.

Unless…we read again what Jesus is offering. Jesus doesn’t say he will remove all yokes and he will remove all burdens. Life still goes on. The rest that Jesus gives us is an active rest. We will find rest for our souls. The yoke of Christ gives me a different vision than that of the two animals yoked together. I surprised myself when listening to the sermon a few weeks ago at how strongly I reacted in my mind to the idea of being yoked but then immediately said, “yes, but if it was Jesus I was yoked to, I guess that would be ok.” Imagine being yoked to someone who couldn’t let me wander too far; who would pull me back from the edge of the black hole I’m about to fall into; who would lead me back when I seemed to be going quickly to a fiery rage, or visit the bottle again after years of abstinence, or pick up that cigarette, or answer that phone call from the guy that supplies my drugs, or would lead me out of my bed that seems to have me trapped deep in my depression. It would be like the opposite of that Dr. Seuss book and be called “Oh, the Places I Won’t Go!”

What if you could trade in the yoke you wear now, for the yoke Jesus is offering here? The yoke that is easy. Trade in that yoke of “I’ll only be successful if…” “I’m not worth anyone’s time…” “I’m not allowed to need anything…” “I can’t show how sad I am…” “I can’t ask for help with…” “My children must be successful…” What if you could turn in your hard yoke and take up the easy yoke offered here that says “I am a child of God.”

Take a second and think of the name of the heaviest yoke that you wear now, the thing that’s holding you back. Say to yourself, I am yoked to the belief that “name of the heaviest yoke” (“I am yoked to the belief that I can’t ask for help” for example.) Let’s try it. “I am yoked to the belief that………….” Now replace that heavy yoke with “I am a Child of God.” Repeat after me, out loud is fine: “I am yoked to the belief that I am a Child of God.” Now think of the possibilities!

If we need to, changing what messenger we follow is that simple – just take it off and put on another. Paradoxically, simple does not mean easy. Being a child of God isn’t magic, it’s not open ended nirvana. But it does change the questions we ask ourselves an others, and the decisions we make. Is what I am doing seeing and welcoming that “wisdom, kindness, grace, and compassion for ourselves and others”1 that we walk right past most days? Am I furthering God’s mission here on my little patch of earth? Am I treating others like the children of God that they are also? Am I taking care of myself?

These aren’t giant projects that are bringing us lots of attention or kudos or praise. They can be. But more often it means showing love and grace before showing irritation or impatience. It means remembering the Platinum Rule – treating others as they would like to be treated. It means listening carefully and lovingly, resisting the urge to offer a solution. It means having integrity. It means self love and care also. It means less judging. It means forgiving others and ourselves when we fall short.

God wants happiness, love and ease for us. God in Jesus Christ understands that life is not always filled with those things and we struggle. And for those times, Christ is with us always, offering that soulful rest.

Let us pray…

1Harmon, Chesley, Center for Excellence in Preaching, commentary for July, 9, 2023. <https://cepreaching.org/commentary/2023-07-03/matthew-1116-19-25-30-3/>