

Matthew 11:16-19, 25-30

Sermon for July 9, 2017

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Grace and peace to each of you in the name of Jesus, our living Lord and Savior! Amen

This morning's text from Matthew 11 follows on the heels of Jesus' instructions to his twelve disciples. As we've learned the past few weeks, all of Chapter 10 has been filled with wisdom and warning for his disciples:

- take no payment for your preaching,
- know that you'll face stiff opposition,
- don't be afraid of anyone or anything,
- remember that I'll be with you whether you're welcomed or not,
- never underestimate what you do...even the smallest gesture, like giving someone a cup of cold water, will bring God's kingdom into clearer focus.

Then, when Jesus had finished instructing the twelve disciples, he resumed his own public ministry, teaching and proclaiming his message in all of the surrounding cities. Apparently, reactions to his preaching and teaching were not at all positive...and set the stage for this morning's text.

As near as I can figure, what Jesus discovers when he resumes his public ministry is that many of the folks he encounters already seem to think they've got God in their back pocket. That is to say, they're already certain that they know exactly who God is and what God wants. As a result, their ears are closed to any new revelation or insight.

They certainly have no time whatsoever for John the Baptist's cry for repentance or for Jesus' lavish, all-inclusive message of love and mercy. In their eyes, John's too gloomy and serious. While Jesus, on the other hand, is not somber enough. Quite to the contrary, Jesus is criticized for hobnobbing with riffraff, for drinking freely and openly, and for telling all kinds of outlandish stories about God's extravagant love for all people.

To his critics, Jesus says, "You are spoiled and misguided...like children whining to their parents."

And then he lets them have it.

"You people of Chorazin, you're doomed! You people of Bethsaida, you're damned. If the people of Tyre and Sidon had seen half of the powerful miracles you have seen, they'd have been on their knees in a New York minute. At judgement day, they'll get off easy compared to you. Same for you peacock-strutters in Capernaum...you're on your way to the abyss. If the city of Sodom had had your chances, it would still be around." (Edited from Eugene Peterson's "The Message")

Ironically and sadly, Jesus' listeners are so cock-sure they already know everything there is to know about God, that they refuse to recognize God's own Messiah standing in their very midst.

It seems to me that things haven't really changed much in 2,000 years. Many people today seem utterly convinced that they've got God pegged, and they're unwilling to entertain other perspectives, other faith traditions, other theological interpretations, other ideas about how God might be operating in our

world. They have no curiosity, no imagination and no ability to be surprised by a God very much on the loose.

For these folks, God has been conveniently corralled and domesticated. For these folks, God is static, limited, containable and very much “useable.” For these folks, absolute certitude about God’s identity, character and intentions is used to justify all kinds of self-serving and aggressive behavior.

What comes immediately to mind, of course, are folks like those who belong to ISIS or those who choreographed the Nazi rise to power in the first half of the 20th century. But we dare not forget how religious certitude – absolute certainty about who God is and what God wants - is a part of our own country’s history...both past and present. Convictions about God - often short-sighted and mean-spirited - have been used to justify slavery, spousal abuse, suppression of women’s rights, criminalization of homosexual people, opposition to refugee resettlement, racism, utter disregard for the environment and a willingness to wage war wherever our God-given manifest destiny is threatened.

Such behavior, says Jesus, is idolatrous and reprehensible.

And so Jesus prays, then and now, “Thank you, Lord, for confounding those who think themselves so wise and intelligent, and thank you for revealing Yourself in surprising and unexpected ways to ‘the infants’ of this world, to those who are hungry and thirsty for new and expanded visions of love and mercy.”

And finally, the 11th Chapter of Matthew concludes with Jesus’ familiar and comforting words:

“All you who are weary of being bullied by people who use their private God to exalt themselves and enslave others, come and learn from me. Walk beside me for a while, and I will give you a much deserved break from all the self-serving definitions of God that keep the world in constant turmoil and conflict. Let me be your companion, and together you will be renewed and refreshed by...

- a surprising God
- a caring God,
- an inclusive God,
- a challenging God,
- an unpredictable God,
- an undomesticated God,
- a compassionate God,
- a forgiving God,
- a healing God,
- a joyful God.

Come to me, says Jesus, and I will give you rest. I’ll give you peace of mind, hope for tomorrow and life everlasting.

Amen

