

Sermon: Pentecost 5

Mr. Evans DeVries

July 9, 2017

Year A

Zechariah 9:9-12

Psalm 145:8-14

Romans 7:15-25a

Matthew 11:16-19, 25-30

It has taken me quite a while to make sense of today's gospel reading. Maybe it would be more accurate to say "readings." The selection is made up of several parts that don't seem to fit together well, in my mind. Like many of the Revised Common Lectionary readings, it tends to jump around and skip sections. What I have found that seems to help me is going back and connecting with the gospel chapter, keeping the on-going story in mind. So where are we, then, with this story? Chapter 11 begins with Christ instructing the 12 disciples on how to teach and proclaim his message in their cities. That is followed by messengers from John the Baptist seeking to know if Jesus is THE ONE, the Messiah. You probably remember Jesus's answer to John's followers: go back and tell John what you heard and saw. As they leave, Jesus speaks with the crowd, praising John. He affirms John's status as a prophet and says in verse 11 that "among those born of women, no one has arisen greater than John the Baptist; yet, the least in the kingdom of heaven is greater than he."

Pastor Edward Markquart reminds us that John was the first prophet in Israel in over 400 years, but more than that, the gospels all agree that he was the forerunner of the Messiah. In Malachi 3:1 it says, "I will send my messenger before your face who shall prepare the way for you." In Matthew verse 14, quoting from Malachi 4:5, Jesus says of John, "he is Elijah who is to come."

Having just compared John to Elijah, Jesus says, "But to what will I compare this generation?" Jesus is talking about the crowd's reaction to both his joyful message of the coming kingdom of God and John the Baptist's much more severe call for repentance. How the messages of John and Jesus resonate and are accepted by the crowds reminds Christ of children squabbling over what game to play. Dale Allison, New

Testament professor at Pittsburgh Theological Seminary recognizes this dichotomy of interpretation and response to the two figures and their messages. He says, "Many readers, supposing that the children represent John and Jesus, draw this analogy: John called for mourning and repentance in the face of judgement whereas Jesus proclaimed joy because of the presence of the kingdom, and in both cases their messages encountered unbelief or indifference.

Other readers, observing that Matthew 11:16 likens 'this generation' to those who play and wail, suppose that the piping and wailing children represent the disagreeable contemporaries of John and Jesus. When the Baptist came neither eating nor drinking but demanding repentance, people instead wanted to make merry: "We played the flute for you, and you did not dance." When Jesus came, preaching good news and celebrating, people demanded that he fast: "We wailed, and you did not mourn." Stan Saunders of Columbia Theological Seminary in Atlanta, Georgia reminds us that "Matthew typically uses the expression 'this generation' ... for those who are unfaithful, unrepentant and ultimately violent in their defiance of God." He goes on to say that, "Jesus's statement that 'wisdom is justified by her deeds' directs us to pay closer attention to the results of our actions, even as we consider who Jesus is and what his ministry is about.

Jesus' prayer/sermon in 11:25-30 identifies those who are most likely to be attuned to God's work in the world, the 'babies' rather than the 'wise and understanding' (11:25) Jesus mocks those who claim for themselves wisdom and intelligence -- most immediately the leaders and elites who oppose Jesus, but really those of any age or generation whose 'wisdom' blinds them to what God is really doing."

Chapter 11 ends with, arguably, its most well known verses:

Come to me, all you that are weary and are carrying heavy burdens and I will give you rest. 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. For my yoke is easy and my burden is light.

It is fitting that chapter 11 ends with this direct invitation to discipleship. The chapter opens with Jesus teaching his disciples how to teach and proclaim his message in their cities and it closes with His invitation to us to join in proclaiming the kingdom of God.

Tracing the storyline of the chapter, helps the pieces of the reading make more sense, but there is always the underlying tension of the dawning of the New Covenant, and the passing away of the Old. John is the last prophet of Old Testament (aka the Law and the Prophets). Jesus is the new beginning. John represented the Law, some 600 plus things Jews were not to do. If you did violate the law you needed to give a sacrifice, to 'balance the books' for you, to atone for your sin.

On the other hand, Jesus represented just two things that you should do: Love God and your neighbor. If you broke one of the two great commandments, the sacrifice has already been made that balance the books for all of mankind. While it seems counter intuitive that any yoke would be easy, if we accept Christ's offer made in Matthew 11:28-30, the yoke is indeed easy because the whole body of Christ is wearing it with us and the whole community lifts it together. That is the Good News.

Evans