

Like Children

Matthew 11:16-19-25-30

Lethbridge Mennonite Church

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In my experience, we tend to default to one of two very general approaches in the life of faith.

Some people think that religion in general and Christianity in particular are mostly about the law. These people tend to be more pessimistic about human nature and the possibility of progress. Human experience is defined by brokenness and sin, falling short of what God intended.

On this view, we are inherently prone to greed and violence and selfishness of all kinds. We need strong guardrails—some non-negotiable “thou shalt not’s”—to restrain and judge our darker impulses.

Others think that religion in general and Christianity in particular is fundamentally a message of grace. These people tend to be more optimistic about human nature and the possibility of progress. Human beings have inherent goodness in them due to being created in the image of God.

What is needed here is not the heavy hand of the law but a willingness to learn and grow and develop. And, when we fall short, a grace that acknowledges that we are all affected by factors beyond our control and we’re mostly doing our best.

These divisions roughly map on to conservative vs liberal approaches to life more generally, whether it’s politics or social issues, or whatever.

As I said, these are “rough categories.” We are not locked into one approach or the other at all times and in all situations in our lives. There is a spectrum between these two poles and we probably find ourselves in different places at different times.

But in general, I think these two categories describe what I have seen in my experience in the church.

Some want more law. The church should be more explicit in calling out sin and taking a stand on controversial issues and telling the truth, even when it's inconvenient.

Some want more grace. The church should just love and accept and not judge or talk about ugly things like sin or imply that there's anything wrong with us.

(These different views can be even trickier to negotiate than different opinions about how the church should respond to a pandemic! 😊)

To what can I compare this generation? Jesus asks in our reading this morning.

They're like children. They sit in the marketplace singing the wrong tune at the wrong time. They play songs of celebration and nobody dances. They sing soulful laments, and nobody mourns.

They don't seem to know what's going on or what the situation calls for.

Jesus' metaphor is likely lost on us, at least initially. It's not immediately clear to twenty-first century ears what he's talking about.

Things become clearer when he starts talking about the ministry of John the Baptist and his own and how they were received.

John is the wild man of the desert. He comes wearing clothes made of camel's hair and subsisting on locusts and wild honey.

He comes preaching a fiery message of repentance. His language is stark and severe. He calls the religious leaders of Israel a "brood of vipers." "The axe is at the root of the tree" he says.

"Don't think you can rely on your pristine bloodline as Abraham's ancestors. God cares about righteousness, not genetics. Produce good fruit or you'll be tossed in the fire."

John did not have a particularly rosy view of human nature. He didn't think that we're basically good and just need a bit of tinkering around the edges.

John's message was simple. Repent. Turn around. You've missed the mark. Start producing fruit.

This message was well-received by some. People flocked to the desert to hear John's message of repentance and to be baptized. But unsurprisingly, it wasn't popular with everyone.

People do not tend to appreciate hearing about how sinful they are. Especially if they are the religious elites of the day.

John's tune was played in a decidedly minor key, and some had no interest in singing it.

Jesus, on other hand, came proclaiming welcome, acceptance, belonging. Blessed are you, he said, if you're on the bottom because the kingdom of God turns things upside down.

Jesus hung out with tax-collectors and prostitutes and Samaritans and centurions. Jesus came breaking religious laws to extend healing and mercy, breaking down barriers that were thought to be sacred and inviolable.

Jesus took stones out of righteous hands ready to condemn and exposed the hypocrisy of the gatekeepers of Israel.

Jesus came ready to throw a party where the wine never runs out, where the best is saved for last, where those who never had a place at the banquet table now have the best seats.

Jesus' song was not John's song. This was a song in a major key, a song of surprise and exuberance and joy.

But some weren't interested in this song either. If John's message was too severe, Jesus' wasn't severe enough. All this talk about tax-collectors and prostitutes getting into the kingdom ahead of those who had studied and knew how God worked?! That's going a bit far! We still need rules, after all!

So which way do you want it, Jesus asks?

When John the Baptist comes along and preaches an austere message of repentance, you say he's demon possessed. When I come along, eating, drinking around a common table, you call me a glutton and a drunkard.

You're like children. You can't make up your minds.

You can't appreciate that God speaks in different ways at different times to accomplish his purposes. You mourn when you should be singing, and you dance when you should be repenting.

One commentator summarized it like this:

In other words, when we're left to fend for ourselves, we routinely miss what really matters. We don't know when to dance, when to mourn, when to repent, when to celebrate. We claim to be wise and discerning, but we don't recognize the divine when we encounter it. God is always too much or too little for us; too severe or too generous, too demanding or too provocative. On our own, we have little capacity to discern what is good and right and holy and true.¹

We routinely miss what matters. We don't recognize the divine when we encounter it. We don't have much capacity to discern.

Why?

Well, one reason is because of what psychologists call "confirmation bias."

It's a term that simply points to the fact that we all tend to gravitate toward voices that confirm what we already think/believe/are convinced of.

We tend to screen out and select only those voices that nicely align with our own. We often can't be bothered to actually consider different viewpoints or to engage in a conversation where our mind might be changed.

This is just how we are wired, as human beings.

¹ <https://www.journeywithjesus.net/lectionary-essays/current-essay?id=2678>

We like our way of looking at the world, after all. Our beliefs have served us reasonably well. And, more importantly, we have often invested many years in them. We have read books and articles; we have listened to podcasts and lectures and sermons.

We have had conversations with wise people who we respect. Together, these have had a galvanizing effect upon our convictions.

To concede that we might be wrong (or even a bit less right) would be to throw away all the years we have given to the fortification of our ideas and identities.

This is true of us just as it was true of the people Jesus was speaking to. Whether it was those who were critical of John's harshness or Jesus' playing fast and loose with the rules, all were reasonably convinced that they knew how God worked, what religion was for, and how to play the game.

They weren't interested in considering that God might not confirm their biases.

So, given that we don't automatically sing the song that is appropriate for the moment, given that we're biased and not particularly motivated to be open to things that challenge our views, what do we do?

We acknowledge that understanding God's priorities and actions in any given moment does not come automatically to any of us. And we seek wisdom.

Wisdom, Jesus says in verse 19, is "vindicated by her deeds."

What deeds are these? Well, at the beginning of chapter eleven, John the Baptist sends his followers to ask Jesus if he is the Messiah or if they should be waiting for someone else. Apparently, it wasn't even obvious to John.

Jesus responds by saying,

Go back and report to John what you hear and see: The blind receive sight, the lame walk, those who have leprosy are cleansed, the deaf hear, the dead are raised, and the good news is proclaimed to the poor. Blessed is anyone who does not stumble on account of me (Mat. 11:4-6).

These are the deeds that vindicate wisdom. Deeds of healing, restoration, hope, and life. If these things are the result, then we can be sure that God's will was and is being done.

And a word of caution. It's not as though John's minor key message of repentance was wrong, and Jesus came along to correct his theology.

John told the truth about human beings. We *are* sinners in need of repentance. Jesus echoed this truth at other points in his ministry.

For those who sail through life oblivious to their own hypocrisy and selfishness or the ways in which their behaviour is harming those around them, this is precisely the truth that is needed in order to move forward on the path of healing and liberation and hope.

But Jesus also told another part of the truth. We are dearly loved, forgiven, accepted and graced with God's presence. The lowly and mistreated and persecuted are blessed in the kingdom of God.

The kingdom of God *is* a lavish banquet where all are invited.

For those who have been kicked around by life and feel shame and worthlessness and despair, this is precisely the truth that is needed in order move forward on the path of healing and liberation and hope.

And of course, this is true for each one of us throughout our lives. Sometimes the truth we need to hear is that we are sinners called to repentance and to bear the fruit of righteousness. Other time, the truth we need is that we are embraced by a grace that is greater than all our sin.

Both are true.

The title of my sermon is "Like Children." There are two senses in which Jesus is comparing us to children in today's passage.

I've already talked about the first. We're like children in that we are fickle, indecisive, slow on the uptake, unable or unwilling to recognize and appreciate the manner of God's truth in our lives.

We are biased and self-interested. We want God on our terms, not God's.

But there is another sense in which we are to be "like children."

Matthew 11 ends with these well-known words:

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 (Mat. 11:28-30).

It is not the elites, Jesus says, who are most well-positioned to understand who God is and what God wants. These things are "hidden from the wise and learned," he says, and "**revealed to little children.**"

In the kingdom of God, we have to become like little children to be truly wise.

Elsewhere, Jesus famously welcomed the little children saying that the kingdom belongs to such as these.

And I think we have an idea of what Jesus is talking about. Children have fewer pretenses. They're more honest about their need. There is an innocence to the way they approach the world that hasn't yet been eroded by world-weary cynicism.

They trust more easily than those of us who are a bit further down the road. They are more prone to be curious and eager to learn.

They are less reluctant to take on the yoke of obedience to Jesus' teachings than those of us who have a bit more pride and think we know better.

My prayer is that we would be like children in this latter sense of the term. That we would bring our burdens to Jesus and leave them there. That we would trust and follow and learn from our gentle Saviour.

That we would learn to sing our Saviour's song at the right time and for the right reasons.

May God help us.

Amen.

