

Year A, Pentecost5-Proper 9

July 9th, 2017

Matthew 11:16-30

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A “Made” Jesus Follower

Jesus likened the people of his day to children playing in a village square where each gender preferred to stick with their own group and play their own games. It reminds us of any elementary school any place in the world where boys and girls play separately, each playing the roles they will eventually assume in their culture. In Jesus’ culture the boys say to the girls, “let’s play like we are at a wedding, we will play the music and you can dance.” Men in Jewish culture always played musical instruments at weddings and the women always danced.

The girls, loyal to their own gender, say “we don’t feel like dancing today” and offer a counter proposal that asks the boys to play their game. The girls say “let’s pretend we are at a funeral. We will sing the funeral song and you can mourn.” The women in Jesus’ culture were in charge of ritual mourning and everyone mourned with them. The boys say, “We don’t feel like mourning today.” These children were acting out there future adult roles in their play but neither gender can get the other to cooperate.

In each case, it’s as though non-cooperation is the name of the game and neither side will work with the other. At this point in their development both boys and girls put preserving their gender identity ahead of working cooperatively. Jesus says this non-cooperation characterizes the people of his generation.

They were being what the Scottish people call “*contrary*.” No matter what was suggested, they didn’t want to do it; no matter what was offered, they found fault. Because the boys and girls where in rivalry with each other they lived to contradict rather than cooperate. Division was more important than collaboration. They were more interested in forcing the other gender to their point of view than in joining them so that they could have fun together. I suspect that will change in time though not completely.

With this metaphor Jesus is saying the people were contrary and more interested in pointing the finger and finding fault than open to learning from the messengers God had sent them. To illustrate Jesus points to John the Baptist who came to them living like a hermit, severe and disciplined and they label him crazy. Now the Human One comes mixing with all kinds of people, sharing their sorrows and joys, and they label him a socialite and partier. They dismissed John’s ideas on repentance as too heavy-duty and rigorous. They discounted Jesus’ words about the arrival of the kingdom of love and forgiveness for everyone as too soft-hearted and easy on sin. They are like the boys and girls in the market who accuse and refuse but never accept and participate.

Matthew then inserts a strange little phrase. “But wisdom is proved to be right by her works.” Matthew, who sees Jesus as the embodiment of wisdom, thinks that in time wisdom expressed in Jesus will overcome their resistance. We will see whether divide and accuse or join and participate works the better.

The lectionary then skips over this next passage. You will see why as I read it.

²⁰ Then he began to scold the cities where he had done his greatest miracles because they didn't change their hearts and lives. ²¹ "How terrible it will be for you, Chorazin! How terrible it will be for you, Bethsaida! For if the miracles done among you had been done in Tyre and Sidon, they would have changed their hearts and lives and put on funeral clothes and ashes a long time ago. ²² But I say to you that Tyre and Sidon will be better off on Judgment Day than you. ²³ And you, Capernaum, will you be honored by being raised up to heaven? No, you will be thrown down to the place of the dead. After all, if the miracles that were done among you had been done in Sodom, it would still be here today. ²⁴ But I say to you that it will be better for the land of Sodom on the Judgment Day than it will be for you."

What do we do with this? Jesus seems to be chastising the towns where he has spent time and they have not been open to embracing his message. He seems to be threatening them with destruction for failing to respond. Or maybe their failure to respond will inevitably lead to their destruction through totally human processes. When you think about it, he never mentioned God as the destroyer. We are the ones who bring that to the text. It doesn't occur to us that we could bring it on ourselves. This is a case where the text interprets us.

Gil Bailie, a Girardian scholar, thinks it reveals what happens to cities that refuse to repent of "us" and "them" thinking. Having "us" and "them" blinders on, they can only see John the Baptist as mournful and Jesus as glutton, each the opposite of the other but both having nothing to offer them. Chorazin, Bethsaida, and Capernaum miss the message of repentance and forgiveness and we see what happens. He sets before them life and death, continuing in their violent ways or contrition and mercy but they choose the way that leads to their own destruction. That's a scary thought in view of the polarization in our own world.

In summary this passage has Jesus scolding these towns for being so "wise" in their own eyes that they weren't open and teachable. God's revelation of himself was taking place in their midst but they were failing to take notice. Then Jesus noted that those who did get it were the little ones; the unpretentious, the ones their culture ignored, the weak and powerless, mere babies. They made no claim to entitlement and therefore were open to the gift of revelation. Let me read the passage.

"At that time Jesus said, 'I praise you, Father, Lord of heaven and earth, because you've hidden these things from the wise and intelligent and have shown them to babies. Indeed, Father, this brings you happiness.'"

Children know they don't know and feel no shame in asking for help. They are not in rivalry with adults. The same is true for all of us. God can only reveal himself when we realize we don't have the answers. Only when we are not in rivalry with God will God speak. God can only help us when we are humble and open to being led. When we are ready to put on the double yoke of Christ he will teach us.

What does it mean to put on the yoke of Christ?

One day a priest who grew up on a ranch talked about being a “made” (m-a-d-e) priest. “Being made” is a term cowboy’s use when breaking a new horse. Once a wild horse has been broken, knows the ropes, and is ready to work, it’s called a “made” horse. A friend asked what was required to become a “made” priest. He replied “a humbling.”

We could say a “made” Jesus follower is anyone who has experienced “a humbling” and has become teachable and wants to live as Jesus desires him to live. Any experience can become a humbling—a death, divorce, career setback, a broken heart, moral failure, health problems, anxiety that won’t go away, depression, or even a wonderful grace that astounds us and forces us to view our world differently. It can be any experience that reminds us of our limitations and sinfulness. When a humbling is accepted graciously as a gift from God (not caused by God, but used by God for our benefit), it can help us become a believer again. It can help us find life and peace.

I want to close by reading Eugene Peterson’s beautiful translation of this passage from Matthew.

“Are you tired? Worn out? Burned out on religion? Come to me. Get away with me and you’ll recover your life. I’ll show you how to take a real rest. Walk with me and work with me—watch how I do it. Learn the unforced rhythms of grace. I won’t lay anything heavy or ill-fitting on you. Keep company with me and you’ll learn to live freely and lightly.”

Thanks be to God. Amen.