

Matthew 11:16-19, 25-30

[Jesus spoke to the crowd saying:] 16“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.’

18For 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 that 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.”

For the past few weeks we’ve been listening to Jesus talk with his disciples as he sent them out to dip their toes in the waters of ministry. Early last month we saw Jesus restrict who they were to serve so that they would gain a sense of confidence. From that

we made the commitment to focus locally on our serving in this new normal with COVID-19. We will have our hands full taking care of those in our communities as we bring a sense of confidence and God's ever-present grace and love in uncertain times.

Then we considered the fact that not everyone would welcome the message of the gospel. Jesus told his disciples that even members of their families might oppose what they have to say about God's relentless love towards all people. From that we decided that we would just keep loving people, without regard to their current openness to the Good News.

And last week we challenged our graduates to be active in weaving the gospel in our changing culture—with a special appeal to be patient with us when we resist change and a reminder that they will have to live with the new patterns of community longer than most of us will.

Which brings us to today's scripture. Just before the passage we read today, John the Baptist's disciples came to Jesus and ask a question for him. He wanted to know, just to be sure, "Are you the one who is to come, or should we expect someone else?" They must have asked him this question in front of a crowd. He didn't answer them directly, but said, "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."

And then Jesus asked the crowd what they had expected when they went out to see and hear John in the wilderness. He affirmed John's ministry, but then spoke some

words we have probably not considered. Jesus said, From the days of John the Baptist until now, the kingdom of heaven has been subjected to violence, and violent people have been raiding it.” Someone had been using their power to corrupt the message for their own advantage. We know now that this person was Herod. We’ll not go into that much more today, but I believe it’s important to know the context to better understand Jesus’ words.

So let’s begin today’s scripture adventure with a little game. I say, UP, you say, down. Good! Now I say, little. You say, BIG. Excellent. Let’s make this a little tougher. I say, stop. You say, go/start. Two quick observations: I never told you the rules of the game. You just knew how to play it. It’s almost instinctive for us. And many of you chose the most common response when there was more than one. Again, we respond instinctively, even when we are encouraged to think outside the box. Remember I did say, “Let’s make this a little tougher.” You want another try? I say, right. You say, left/wrong.

This is called dualistic thinking. It happens when we react to something as if there were only two choices. We think that everything is either “this” or “that” and don’t spend much time considering other options. While it is efficient in terms of survival, it is less than desirable in terms of our community thriving. As we consider today’s gospel lesson, we want to keep this tendency towards dualistic thinking in mind.

Just for practice, let’s try it again. I say, happy. You say, sad. Yep. That was the contrast Jesus made between how people looked at the message John the Baptist brought and the one he brought. Remember, John preached about repentance, about

stopping self-focused behaviors and starting other-focused ones. For the record, he told tax collectors to collect only what they were authorized to collect, and soldiers to be content with their wages in Luke 3:14. John got specific. And to the people who were used to the Law, his repentance was Law focused.

Jesus, on the other hand, had a different motivating factor. In Matthew 5, Jesus told the people who were listening to him teach on the mountain side if they were asked to carry a soldier's backpack for a mile (which was a legal thing to do), they should carry it another mile. If we heard Jesus' word through a Law filter, we might think he was saying we shouldn't let someone use the Law to think they control us, but to show them we were in control of our own actions and go beyond what the Law says.

The motivation Jesus taught his followers was to be controlled not by the law but by love. I know it sounds almost like I'm back to dualistic thinking, doesn't it? We Lutherans like to talk. Law and Gospel and they are both important. But there is a lot of ground in between. If we see things as black or white, there is even more in the gray area—and that's the place where faith comes in. We trust in the love of God, a love that didn't let human hate and violence and rejection win on the day of Jesus' crucifixion. Rather that love won the day when God raised Jesus from the dead and overcame our worst enemy, death.

I say, good. You say, bad. I think that's where the people were that Jesus was teaching in today's gospel. They were preoccupied with good and bad and Jesus pointed them to God's grace which is a place much larger than either. And that's what Paul was certainly doing in the second lesson. While he saw the dualistic battle in his body, his spirit was drawn to the grace of God that was always pursuing and overtaking him.

That relentless, tireless, limitless grace is what allows us to take Jesus' yoke of love upon our lives. It is easy because it doesn't expect us to sort between right and wrong, good or bad—but rather be motivated by selfless love for others. As we grow confident in God's abundant provision of all we need we worry less and less about scarcity. We see our stewardship of this provision as God's work being done by our hands. And we know that we have something to offer, and something to receive, as brothers and sisters in God's world.

244 years ago, our nation was founded on a principle different from the nations of the time. It was to be a place where life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness were the guiding principles. It was to be a place of opportunity, with a foundation of hope, and expectation that each person could live out their faith. It was also founded by humans. Predictably, the abundance enjoyed in this new land was overshadowed by the human tendency to focus on scarcity. People began to turn in on themselves (we call that sin) and look out for their interests before the needs of others. The kingdom of heaven was subjected to violence and raided by those who sought to minimize the space where God's grace dwelt and reduced the faith Jesus died for to a stark "this" or "that." The yoke it imposed was heavy and burdensome. Rest was impossible because living that faith stole time and soul.

Today, Jesus calls us back to the core principle of our faith—expressing our trust in God’s grace in how we live. We take his yoke of love by striving for peace and justice in our communities, making sure that all have access to the things they need and are welcomed with dignity for the gifts they bring. These are blessings. They may challenge our own sense of personal independence, but our country, our world, is at its best when we recognize our dependence on God and God’s provision through each other.

Today, I say, blessed. And I hope you say, AMEN!