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Wisdom's Vindication

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Scripture Reading

‘But to what will I compare this generation? It is like children sitting in the marketplaces and calling to one another,

We played the flute for you, and you did not dance;

we wailed, and you did not mourn. ’

‘For John came neither eating nor drinking, and they say, He has a demon ; the 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.”

Matthew 11:16-19 NRSVue

That Dog Can't Swim!

In his book *The Life You've Always Wanted*, John Ortberg told this story:

A FARMER HAD A NEIGHBOR, A CONSTANT COMPLAINER, A WET BLANKET IN THE LINEN CLOSET OF LIFE. THE FARMER DECIDED TO IMPRESS THIS MAN FOR ONCE, SO HE BOUGHT THE WORLD'S GREATEST HUNTING DOG, TRAINED IT THOROUGHLY, AND INVITED HIS JOYLESS FRIEND TO GO HUNTING. FROM THE BLIND THE FARMER SHOT A DUCK, WHICH LANDED IN THE MIDDLE OF THE POND. UPON COMMAND, THE DOG TROTTED OUT, WALKED ON THE SURFACE OF THE WATER, RETRIEVED THE BIRD, AND DROPPED HIM AT THE FEET OF HIS MASTER. "WHAT DO YOU THINK OF THAT?" THE FARMER CHALLENGED HIS NEIGHBOR. TO

WHICH HIS FRIEND RESPONDED, "YOUR DOG CAN'T SWIM, CAN HE?"

Sadly, when I read that the first time, if I'm behind honest, I thought the cranky neighbor was a Presbyterian!

How is it that the world perceives us? How much time, energy and effort do we put in to controlling how people perceive us? What does any of that have to do with our spiritual walk? And as a bonus on this fourth of July weekend, what does that have to say about freedom?

Jesus and John

There's been a little bit of a lead up to this story we read this morning. John the Baptist, who had preciously said that he wasn't even worthy to untie Jesus' sandal, is suddenly sounding a little bit doubtful. Admittedly, he's in prison for speaking truth to power, so we'll forgive him a little bit of mental anguish and questioning. He sends his own disciples to Jesus to say "Are you the one we've been waiting for? Or should we keep waiting?"

Jesus sends them back saying in Matthew 11: "Go and tell John what you hear and see: the blind receive their sight, the lame walk, those with a skin disease are cleansed, the deaf hear, the dead are raised, and the poor have good news brought to them." Essentially, Jesus says "take a look at everything I've done. What do those actions say about me?"

After this, Jesus speaks very highly of John. It's clear that John means a lot to Jesus. He was one of Jesus' mentors along the way to becoming a Rabbi. Jesus even says, if we're willing to

accept it, that John is the second coming of Elijah, who would point the way to the Messiah. This is high praise.

But it's also becoming clear that Jesus and John are two radically different people.

John is living a rather ascetic lifestyle. He and his disciples are frequent fasters. He also had pretty simple and uncomfortable clothing, wearing camel hair robes. Just think back for a second to any activity you did outside this week at all, and now try to imagine doing that in a camel hair robe. Not very comfortable, is it? John also ate locusts and honey, which is not exactly five star dining.

John comes from the ascetic tradition, which tries to deny all the worldly pleasures in an effort to connect to the spiritual, to find your way to commune with God. In fact, a lot of folks still fall in to this camp, this way of approaching their walk with God.

Jesus seems to be on the complete other end of the spectrum! Jesus' first miracle is to turn water into wine, at a wedding, where apparently they've been partying so hard they've already run out of wine. Kind of like the Scots drinking all the beer in Boston, that must have been some party!

Jesus is also accused of hanging out with the wrong people, including the tax collectors. Remember that these folks were authorized by Rome to go and collect a certain amount of taxes from the citizens, except the citizens didn't know how much Rome was charging. They didn't have Turbo Tax back then after all. So if Caesar said "Everyone owes 10%," the tax collector could show up at your door with two armed guards and say "That'll be 20%, please!" They were the very definition

of a universally hated population. And yet, Jesus hangs out with them enough to be credibly accused of being their friend.

Jesus is also accused of hanging out with sinners. This would have been a unique category in Israel. They would have understood that all of us sin, we all fall short of God's desires for us. So to be labeled a "sinner" in the society was someone who either couldn't afford to go to the temple and make a sacrifice to get right with God, or just didn't want to. Again, this would have been people on the outside looking in on the religious establishment, and Jesus calls these people his friends. He doesn't spend all of his time with the extremely religious and well-to-do people, in fact those folks seem to annoy him a good bit. He spends his time with the people who everyone else has written off.

Children in the Marketplace

To all of these people, Jesus asks the relatively reasonable question: What are you looking for? He then frames it with a bit of a parable.

He speaks of children in a marketplace. One set of children says "We wailed, but you did not mourn." John's ascetic approach was right there in front of you. He was denying worldly pleasures. He was focusing everything on the spiritual side of life. He was trying to teach you to do the same. But, it just didn't do anything in your soul. Kind of like you came to the worship service, but didn't get anything out of it, that kind of thing. How tragic!

Another set of children says "We played the flute, but you didn't dance." Jesus tries the entirely different approach to

John. Ok, let's party! Let's drink in all that this life has to offer! Let's reach out to the party people, even when no one else wants to be around with them. And still...it does nothing to stir people's soul.

How do we know that no one's souls were stirred? Because everyone starts to argue about who's right. Well, actually, more tellingly that the soul isn't a part of the discussion, they start arguing about who was more wrong, rather than who was right. One camp says that John and all of his ascetic ways is so off his rocker, that he clearly has a demon. Another camp shows up and says that Jesus was intolerable as a drunkard and a glutton.

For the record, I think this is one of the fastest ways to see that your soul isn't really in the argument. When you are spending more time poignant out what's wrong with your proponent, whoever your opponent is, rather than spending time advocating for what's beautiful and wonderful about your position, then I don't really think your soul is engaged in the work at all. Good thing Jesus sorted this all out back then and we don't struggle with any of it today...

Wisdom is vindicated by her deeds.

Jesus then wraps up with this interesting line: "Wisdom is vindicated by her deeds." When I was a boy, my Dady always used to say "Actions speak louder than words." I actually think that's in the Dad Handbook that they give us when we become fathers, because just about every day I know says it. It means, if you want to tell me what's important to you, don't use your words. Show me. This is essentially what Jesus is saying here. You're not sure which path is right? Well, wisdom will be

vindicated by her deeds. I'll go ahead and let my actions do the talking for me. And, to Jesus' great credit, here we are north of 2,000 years later still listening to Jesus and trying our best to follow in his way, so I think those actions had a lot to say. I think the wisdom of Jesus was indeed vindicated by his deeds.

And so, I wonder, what does all of this have to tell us about who Jesus is, and who we aspire to be?

Jesus wanted to enjoy this creation.

In our *Book of Confessions*, we have the Shorter Catechism. It hopes with this question: What is the chief end of man (humanity)? Essentially, they open their confession by asking "What is the meaning of life?" And truth be told, they have a pretty great answer: "Our chief end is to glorify God, and to enjoy him forever."

I worry just a little bit that we emphasize the first part, and forget the second. We do a great job in our worship, in our personal devotion, in our own lives to try to *glorify* God. But, to enjoy God? To enjoy the creation God has given us? To wonder at it? To behold it? That's a bit trickier!

But that's exactly what Jesus did. When. You read these verses today, the accusations that his opponents are throwing at him, it really sounds like the Word was made flesh, and when he moved into the neighborhood, he wanted to enjoy his creation as much as possible. To enjoy the wine that is made from the fruit of the vine. To enjoy the people that God has created, even when no one else will. To enjoy the company of his friends. To enjoy this life!

This weekend, I had an experience I hope the rest of you had as well. Yesterday I drove up north and had a cookout with my band from college. These were friends that I haven't seen in some cases for a few years. We had food, we had drinks, we told stories, and we all wondered where all of our hair went. More than a few times, I just kind of leaned back and soaked it all in. God gave me all of this. The friends. The food. The drink. The jokes. And so I thanked God a few times yesterday for allowing and even encouraging me to enjoy what God had made.

Of course, with all of this we have to be responsible to an extent. We should enjoy the resources of the earth, but when it turns into abuse we start to see the damaging affects of climate change. We should enjoy the fruit of the vine, but if it leads us to a place where we are causing more pain than joy, we're off the path. We should enjoy the relationships with our friends, but if we start to take advantage of who they are as a child of God, then our relationships will ring exceptionally hollow. But still, the gifts that God has given us are meant to be enjoyed, and we should drink deeply of this life's joys.

Jesus wasn't worried about appearances.

I think this ability to be so unworried about how he appeared to others was deeply rooted in Christ's knowledge of who he was. Way back when John and Jesus were just getting going together, Jesus is baptized by John. As he's coming out of the water, he hears the voice of the Father over him: "This is my son, the beloved, with whom I am well pleased."

If you know that's true, it gets a lot easier to not care what other people have to think about you, doesn't it? When you

know deep in your bones that you are a daughter of God, a son of God, a sibling in Christ, then you really don't mind what other people think of you. When you know deep in your bones that you are the beloved of God, that God actually loves and cares for you very deeply, then you don't have to spend so much time chasing other people's affection, do you? When you know that God is well pleased with you and who God has created you to be, then what else do you need to prove?

One of my favorite theologians, Karl Barth, put it this way in a sermon once:

WHO ARE YOU? WHO AM I? THE ANSWER IS: ONE WHOM GOD HOLDS BY HIS RIGHT HAND, ON WHOSE HEART AND LIPS GOD HAS LAID THE CONFESSION OF FAITHFULNESS AND THE GREAT COMFORT: (WHEN GOD SAYS) NEVERTHELESS I AM CONTINUALLY WITH THEE.

This is true freedom.

Jesus has this great line later on in John's gospel: "You will know the truth, and the truth will make you free."

So as we continue to celebrate as a nation our freedom, which is all well and good, we really should! But I hope in all that discussion of freedom in a national and political sense, we remember the freedom we are offered in Christ. The truth brings us freedom. The truth is that you are loved by God. The truth is that you are someone with whom God is well pleased. The truth is that you are a child of God, right as you are. And all of that truth has the ability to set us free.

I don't know about you, but I think it's exhausting to keep up an appearance that isn't true to who I am. But that freedom of being who Christ has called and created me to be? That's a freedom worth celebrating!

Blessing

And so, may you be taken over by joy. May you take some time even today to enjoy the gifts that God has given to us. May you drink deeply of the gifts of God's good creation. May you not be worried what others have to think of you, because you know that God has called you a child, beloved, and someone with whom God is well pleased. May you dance to the song of the flute in the market place, because you have found your freedom in Christ. And may wisdom be vindicated in her deeds, with a life well lived.

Thanks be to God. Amen.



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