

Matthew 11:16–30

16 'But to what will I compare this generation? It is like children sitting in the market-places 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.'

20 Then he began to reproach the cities in which most of his deeds of power had been done, because they did not repent. 21 'Woe to you, Chorazin! Woe to you, Bethsaida! For if the deeds of power done in you had been done in Tyre and Sidon, they would have repented long ago in sackcloth and ashes. 22But I tell you, on the day of judgement it will be more tolerable for Tyre and Sidon than for you. 23And you, Capernaum, will you be exalted to heaven?

No, you will be brought down to Hades.

For if the deeds of power done in you had been done in Sodom, it would have remained until this day. 24But I tell you that on the day of judgement it will be more tolerable for the land of Sodom than for you.'

25 At 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.'

Holy, Holy, Holy One, guide us by the Spirit of truth to hear the Word of life you speak, and to give all glory, honor, and praise to your threefold name; through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.

I'm not sure what to think of the folks who created the lectionary. The sad part is I think I've made a similar comment for the last few weeks, yet here we are again. This year they have 28 chapters of Matthew to work with, and they get bogged down in a couple of chapters that are difficult to work with for weeks on end. They also seem to be fond of omitting parts of the scripture, which changes the tone and context of what Jesus is saying. Today's scripture is supposed to exclude verses 20-24. I've decided to use them anyway, because, as you know, I think the context that the verses are in is important. So, I've included the whole section about Jesus reproaching cities and saying that Sodom would do better than the cities he has done miracles in, but those cities haven't repented.

Granted, Jesus' rant against various cities in the deleted/skipped verses here are difficult to hear. The rant also seems to come from out of nowhere, nestled in between some nice musings about John the Baptist and some lovely words about rest for the weary. I imagine that if I suddenly interrupted one of my sermons for a turn-the-air-blue diatribe, you folks would arch a collective eyebrow and wonder if I'd lost my mind. I'm guessing most of you would do your best to ignore what had just happened (and hope it did not happen again anytime soon!).

So maybe the Lectionary folks thought that, too. They thought, “This does not fit here. Maybe it’s even a textual mistake, a wrong insertion.” Who knows? In any event, it’s easier to skip these judgments than engage them.

But I disagree. Because the skipped verses are framed by other verses that pretty much tell us we are making a mistake to pretend Jesus did not speak the words he did about Korazin and Bethsaida and Capernaum. In verses 16-19 Jesus pretty much says that it is a theological error to look at who Jesus is and what he does and then choose to deride Jesus for those words and actions.

“The problem with you people,” Jesus says, “is that you want to call all the shots, force every prophet into your own pre-conceived mold. If you don’t like the message, you pick up on some aspect of the messenger as an excuse to reject him entirely. John never eats and you say that’s just nuts. I do enjoy eating and drinking and you say I’m a boozier, a glutton, and have bad taste in friends. It’s high time you listen to what God’s prophets say and stop looking for excuses for the fingers you keep sticking in your ears to block out God’s truth.”

How many times in today’s world are we doing the same thing? We ignore the message because we don’t like the messenger. How many people are thinking they can’t get behind the Black Lives Matter movement to stop systemic racism because of riots and looting? How many people won’t wear a mask because if they do, they feel they are supporting a political party? Why can’t we look at the current arguments about police and both agree that many police officers are good people trying to do a tough job, yet at the same time realize that there needs to be reform and consequences for officers who antagonize, intimidate, presume guilt, show bias against, and use unnecessary force with minorities?

Jesus says it’s time to overlook the messenger and listen to the message. So how ironic that the Lectionary then turns right around and edits Jesus by having us ignore something he then went on to say! Let’s just stick our Lectionary fingers in our ears for a few verses here! What’s more, Jesus then goes on to comment in verses 25-27 that everything he says comes straight from God and that to know the Father, you need to know and embrace the Son who reveals the Father.

All in all, then, this may not be a good juncture in Scripture to skip over certain words spoken by Jesus! We may not like hearing Jesus using his accusatory voice, we may not enjoy the specter of judgment on those who refused to recognize Jesus through his miracles, but it’s not up to us to edit the divine discourse.

That being said, what else is there to observe in Matthew 11? First, it is important to remember that all these words flow out of the scandalous and shocking fact that as Matthew 11 opens, no less than the imprisoned John the Baptist has sent some emissaries to Jesus to inquire if Jesus really was The One or if they should go back to waiting for the promised Messiah after all.

Can it really be that the one sent to prepare the way for the Christ got to a point so desperate that he began to doubt the identity of Jesus? Or was John still pretty sure that Jesus was The One, but had his disciples ask Jesus this question as a subtle rebuke over what John regarded as the too-slow pace of Jesus’ ministry to date? In that case, John’s question would have been almost a cheeky form of the question we sometimes rhetorically ask to motivate someone to greater courage and action: “Are you a man or a mouse!?”

That was the set up for Jesus not only to send word back to John that more was going on than he maybe knew, but also to point out that as it turned out, neither John nor Jesus was exactly what anyone expected. Both were easily caricatured by opponents looking to attack their

characters. John was a reclusive sort who hung out in the wilderness, dressed weirdly, talked weirdly, and was given to rhetorical excess. So those who wanted to dismiss John as being of no importance in God's grand scheme of things said, "He's nuts. He's got a demon in him. He's a few garbanzo beans short of a good hummus."

Jesus, on the other hand, appears to have been anything but restrained. When people threw weddings, they wanted Jesus at the party (and according to John's gospel, Jesus was even good at providing a whole winery's worth of vino for folks who were already three sheets to the wind). When people threw dinner parties, they invited Jesus and at those gatherings, Jesus was not averse to asking for a second helping of the lamb stew. So those who wanted to dismiss Jesus as being a good non-candidate for Messiah said, "That guy enjoys a good drink and big meal and doesn't look a thing like God, so can't possibly be God's Christ."

In other words, "We'll know God's servants when we see them and these two ain't it."

But if there is one thing the God of Scripture is consistent in; it is the ability to surprise and to startle. Indeed, a good bit of divine revelation happens precisely through just those surprises. We learn the most about God's nature and plans not when God puts in some appearance that accords pretty much with what we expect of a deity in the first place, but when God shows up in the least likely of guises and in the least likely of places.

Who would have guessed that God would have decided to start a mighty nation by approaching a wrinkled old couple who were ready for a retirement home—two people who had not managed to generate children even when they were young and virile? Who would have guessed that God's favorites would always be the less likely of the possible candidates: crafty and wily old Jacob is favored over his more staid brother Esau; the young braggart Joseph is chosen over his more stable and hard-working brothers; Moses the stutterer becomes God's mouthpiece instead of his more golden-tongued brother Aaron; the family runt David gets elevated over all the other sons of Jesse.

God always seems to choose the less likely of the options. And God shows up in other surprising places. The Israelite spies who visit Jericho make a beeline for a brothel. Who knows why they went there first but at the end of the day, God preached a sermon to them from the lips of no less than the establishment's madam, Rahab herself. God delivers the Ninevites from certain doom by pressing into service the reluctant and defiant figure of Jonah (a man whose personality could have curdled milk, as Frederick Buechner once put it). God frees the Israelites from their long captivity in Babylon by turning the Persian (and pagan) King Cyrus into a messiah.

And lest we think that these surprises were limited to the Old Testament, let's not forget that God starts out the New Testament with its own surprise BANG by implanting God's Son into the uterus of an unsuspecting virgin named Mary and having him delivered in the barn with the donkey and other livestock. Then God continues by taking the guy who is persecuting the newly created church and having him become the most influential missionary to the Gentile world.

John the Baptist looked at the shape and content of Jesus' ministry and said, "This can't be. He can't be the one." But John should have just looked in the mirror. Because if God could use the zany son of Zechariah and Elizabeth . . . well, there was just no telling what God might do next! Small wonder that Jesus ends up saying in verse 25 that praise is to be given to God for revealing the deep truths of salvation not to the wise and learned, but to "little children." Children, after all, have a vast capacity to be surprised!

We need to move beyond our concern with who is saying something and focus on what they are saying. As the saying goes; “God works in mysterious ways.” Let’s work on viewing the world with an open mind and the curiosity and excitement of a child. If we do, we may be able to see the mystery that is God working in this world to bring forth God’s kingdom. Amen