

“To Seek the Kingdom – Part 1” – Matthew 12:38-50 – March 8, 2020

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When we encounter Jesus in Matthew’s Gospel this morning, we find him in a confrontation with a group of scribes and Pharisees. This is part of an ongoing contentious relationship that Jesus has been having with these religious authorities. Though they have heard about and have been witness to his ministry with among the people – his preaching, his healings, his exorcisms – they now demand from him a sign, something that will prove to them his authority and its origins. They weren’t dismissing his ability to do those things, the healings and whatnot – they had already claimed that his power was demonic in nature. They refused to believe his claims that he acted on behalf of Israel’s God. They demanded proof.

His response to them is unfamiliar to us. He talks about the sign of Jonah that will come yet they will still disbelieve. Perhaps you can recall the story of Jonah - he compares Jonah’s three days in the belly of the sea monster to his three days in the grave before his resurrection. But as we will see later, even in the witness of death and resurrection, they will still refuse to believe. So he passes judgement on them, saying that the Ninevites and the Queen of Sheba will rise up and judge them for their faithlessness.

The astounding thing about this condemnation is this – the Ninevites and the Southern Queen were Gentiles. The people of Nineveh responded to the prophet Jonah and repented of their sins, turning to God, and thus they were spared destruction. The Queen of Sheba had come to the wise Israelite King Solomon to learn from his wisdom, and in turn, followed his God.

This condemnation on them is harsh. He is saying to them this – in my works of mercy, in my teachings, you still don’t get it – the Kingdom of God has been laid bare before you, and you choose to remain blind. You want to know my authority? These works of mercy and compassion, these teachings of justice and forgiveness? They should be all the signs you need, to know the origin of my authority.

Jesus is astounded that they could be so blind, when even those on the outside, the Gentiles of Nineveh and the Southern Queen, were able to see the truth and trust in the God of Jonah and Solomon. The arrogance of the Pharisees and scribes in their own knowledge and beliefs are blinding them to the truth that stands before their very eyes.

He further condemns them with a short parable, using the example of demon possession. An unclean spirit is cast out of a person, and begins to wander the desert looking for a new host. In the meantime, the person, who is now free of the hindrance, begins to “clean up shop” – discarding the remnants of whatever affliction was there and that is now gone. Thinking all is now well, the person goes on their merry way.

The unclean spirit has had no luck in its journeys to find a new home, and along the way has accumulated an entourage of other unclean spirits. It remembers the coziness of its previous home, and decides to return, with others in tow. It finds its previous host cleaned up, but empty. Ah, a fresh and tidy place in which it and its newly found companions can take up residence, increasing exponentially the havoc it previously caused.

This is an amazing and astute little story. While we in the 21st century may not have an appreciation for the notion of miniature demons, hellbent on causing us mischief, it is good example. Just look at the recent commercials from the insurance company Allstate – with their character Mr. Mayhem, who personifies all the possible ways we can be on the receiving of chaos in our cars – whether it's a car thief, a daughter texting on her phone, a blind spot, a woman out jogging, a raccoon in the attic, a deer jumping into the road, or an overzealous dog – Mr. Mayhem gleefully hints at what particular chaos is on the horizon before it actually occurs, and what will result if you have cut-rate car or home-owners insurance. These commercials are funny, but are true on a certain level. They make sense to us, even when chaos is personified.

What Jesus is saying here in this parable is that it is not enough to let go of something that is unhelpful or unhealthy. The actual Greek word used in this passage is more than just an emptiness, it's an idleness. So that when the unclean spirit comes back, the person has left an idle space, a hole that needs to be filled with something. And how easy for that old unclean spirit to just pop back in.

It's sort of like when we are trying to break ourselves of a bad habit, or a destructive way of thinking. We can't just go to the bookstore or hop on the internet and engage in a self-help routine for a few months and be done with it. Old habits die hard, the saying goes. When the diet or the class or the self-help strategy is over, we cannot simply expect to go back to live life as we once die. Something else must take its place, or our old habits will return with a vengeance.

Jesus is implying that the problem of the Pharisees and the scribes is that they have clouded their ability to see the arrival kingdom in their midst with something that is less than. Have they let their adherence to certain aspects of their religious life to take such a center stage that they have missed seeing God's work in action? The Pharisees and scribes had a tendency to focus on the Jewish laws at the expense of actually caring for those in need of help. They emphasized personal righteousness over a righteousness that cares for the wellbeing of others.

Early this morning, two of my old friends from my Baptist seminary days both posted the same article on their Facebook pages. It is an article written by a man who had left his conservative evangelical upbringing in search of something different. He was drawn to the

social justice aspect of progressive Christianity. But in his time there, he felt like what was emphasized was justice for the sake of justice rather than justice because of Jesus. So, he turned around and went back in search of evangelicalism.

Now, I can see the point of the article. He was looking for a place where he could faithfully live out the call of Jesus, but he somehow got caught in the extremes. Instead of looking for someplace in the middle, he seemed to want to toss out any part of progressive Christianity, and head back to what he knew before. He felt safer in his familiar roots, and so he totally gave up on what could have led him to a place of balance.

And that I think is the lesson for all of us to learn. To not just be stuck in a certain way of thinking and believing. To not be so rigid in our thinking and our believing that we are unwilling to see any other way of expressing them in our lives. Our faith journey is one of constant growth. The fault of the religious authorities of Jesus' time and of believers throughout history has been the unwillingness to change and grow. To imagine that there is possibly more that can be discerned along the way. To seek a balance in our desire to learn to help others as we other learn to grow closer to God through Christ. We cannot have one without the other. When we spend so much time on one, we often neglect the other.

We do not have all the answers. We have been conditioned by our place in our own little worlds – by what we have experienced and have been taught – and there is still so much for us to discover and learn. We cling to what we know, even when what we know holds us back from recognizing that our vision is limited. There is more to this journey of faith than we can ever dream or imagine. May our prayer be that we be willing to look to Christ to take us beyond what we know or believe in this moment. To be open to fuller experience of God's Kingdom. To imagine a world where the vision of Christ is fully realized. And to live our lives in pursuit of that vision, letting go of whatever holds us back.