

Sermon: Do we understand?

In today's gospel reading Jesus is talking about people who do not understand. He shares this little parable about children playing in the marketplace, and their songs are never quite understood. The children play a glad, happy song for their friends, but no one dances. Then, they play a sad, mournful chant, but no one mourns or weeps. Jesus goes on to say, the children were no better understood than John the Baptist or he, himself.

Jesus is addressing the failure of society to understand the reasons for dancing and the reasons for weeping. He is addressing the failure of society to understand and respond to the messages he and John the Baptist had proclaimed. Their messages had been extremely clear. However, society – the entire generation – was unfaithful and fickle. The people had been given every opportunity to hear, but they refused. They had heard from both John and Jesus, but they could not decide what they wanted.

Now, John and Jesus could not have been more opposite in style. John appeared on the scene as this eccentric, sober, teetotaler who ate bugs and honey for lunch, wore scratchy clothing made from animal hair, and often fasted. He came addressing his listeners as a “brood of vipers,” proclaiming a message that was all about austere repentance. *But, the people complained.* Some even labeled him as demon possessed. Jesus, on the other hand, invaded the scene as this welcoming character who feasted, ate, drank, and partied with all sorts of people. He came proclaiming the good news of a God of love, a God of disturbing, startling, astonishing, even unsettling inclusiveness. He came healing the sick and performing all sorts of miracles. But the people dismissed him. Some even called him a glutton and a drunkard. Listening to other voices in their culture, the whole generation, a whole people, did not understand the song of these two very different men.

Listening to other voices around them, they did not know when to dance and when to mourn. In fact, they found reason to take offense at both John and Jesus and thus evade the call of both.

Yes, John and Jesus were misunderstood, and their call to living a life that truly mattered was evaded. I really wonder about the ways we fail to understand Jesus, the ways we fail to understand the reasons for dancing and the reasons for mourning. How deeply are we lulled by the songs of our culture: songs of toxic, malignant individualism; songs of success; songs of money, power and control; songs of pull yourself up by your bootstraps; and songs proclaiming a belief that strength, might and determination will solve all problems?

How often are we lulled by power hungry voices in our culture telling us to believe that we need not care for the most vulnerable in our midst because it costs money, so we cast the least of these aside even though that might mean they go without health care in the midst of a pandemic, go homeless, or go hungry while trying to find a way. How often are we lulled by narcissistic, self-focused voices in our culture, telling us it is ok to exclude and not welcome others who are different from us, cutting others out of the picture, whether it be globally, nationally, within our communities, even within our very own families? How often do we miss the moments in life that really matter? And, how often do we dance when we ought to mourn for a world whose burden is so very, very heavy? How often do we dance when we should weep for so many people who are suffering and need rest?

Well, Jesus turns away from the gathered crowd and offers a prayer that is rather jarring to our success oriented, power and control seeking, self-focused, wisdom and intellect pursuing psyche. And we discover that in God's realm, all those things that attract our attention, those things that drive our behavior and become the attributes we consider important, are barely noticed. In fact, they are dismissed.

What is even more interesting is that Jesus' words indicate the blessings of God are hidden from the wise, hidden from the powerful, hidden from the intelligent and sophisticated. Instead, the infants of this world, those who are innocent and naïve, those who are the most vulnerable, are the ones who best understand the ways of God.

You see, only the vulnerable can really identify their deep need. And, when we are vulnerable enough to identify the need within our very selves, the need for God's presence in life, it also means something must die and we will be changed.

Oh, how we tend to fear that because it means facing our own messed-up-ness, letting go of our issues, and facing loss. Yet, the truth of the matter is that, in doing so, we will be made new!

Here's the difficult truth about life in Christ. You cannot enter into it and expect to be unchanged. Which means a precondition of receiving Jesus – perhaps the only one! – is to recognize your need for Jesus.

Forgiveness, when you think about it, is meaningful only to those who have sinned, grace avails only those who are broken, and the promise of life abundant and eternal is only attractive to those who know they are dying/

Jesus knows that this kind of message – a message that is good news only to those who can identify their own deep need – will be of little appeal to the self-made man or woman of the first or twenty-first centuries. But it is good news – unbelievably good news – to those who know their own brokenness, can admit their own need, and who turn to God in Jesus to be known, understood, and accepted.

So, when we are celebrating things like our supposed strength, our might and power – can we not only give thanks for things we may consider good in our lives and in our country?

Can we also face our deep brokenness and messed-up-ness as individuals, as families, as communities, as a nation, as a world, and lay that before God? In the person of Jesus, God is calling us to come unto him.

In the person of Jesus, we discover God in Christ who not only enters into a messed-up world that is preoccupied with power and control, but is willing to be misunderstood and become vulnerable, even to the point of death on a cross, all because of God's deep love for this hurting world.

In Christ, we are called to turn again to the God who walks with us in our struggles, knows our pain and is present to us in our deepest despair, even during our most turbulent experiences.

We are called to turn again to the One who calls out to us through Jesus saying, "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."

These are words that can touch the deepest part of our being. And, when that happens, we truly begin to understand. We discover that we are truly known, and we are accepted by a God of love. And, most of all, we will find that this God of love understands us! And this God of love will lead us into wholeness and life that truly matters. Amen