

Third Sunday in Advent – December 15, 2013
Good Shepherd Ev. Lutheran Church

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Matthew 11:2-11 (NIV)

When John, who was in prison, heard about the deeds of the Messiah, he sent his disciples 3 to ask him, "Are you the one who is to come, or should we expect someone else?" 4 Jesus replied, "Go back and report to John what you hear and see: 5 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. 6 Blessed is anyone who does not stumble on account of me." 7 As John's disciples were leaving, Jesus began to speak to the crowd about John: "What did you go out into the wilderness to see? A reed swayed by the wind? 8 If not, what did you go out to see? A man dressed in fine clothes? No, those who wear fine clothes are in kings' palaces. 9 Then what did you go out to see? A prophet? Yes, I tell you, and more than a prophet. 10 This is the one about whom it is written: 'I will send my messenger ahead of you, who will prepare your way before you.' 11 Truly I tell you, among those born of women there has not risen anyone greater than John the Baptist; yet whoever is least in the kingdom of heaven is greater than he.

Dear brothers and sisters in Christ:

Have you ever been disappointed by false expectations? Have you ever had to set aside those expectations and deal with reality. I'm sure you have. There's a danger to having false expectations, isn't there? Jesus pointed that out shortly after the events of our text took place when he realized that he wasn't meeting people's expectations. He said: (Matthew 11:16-19) **"To what can I compare this generation? They are like children sitting in the marketplaces and calling out to others: 17) "'We played the flute for you, and you did not dance; we sang a dirge, and you did not mourn.' 18) For John came neither eating nor drinking, and they say, 'He has a demon.' 19) The Son of Man came eating and drinking, and they say, 'Here is a glutton and a drunkard, a friend of tax collectors and "sinners.'"**

It seems even John the Baptist had some doubts and misgivings about Jesus – due in part to the fact that Jesus wasn't meeting all of his expectations. John was expecting swift judgment from Jesus and perhaps he was disappointed that Jesus was acting in mercy rather than in judgment.

Perhaps at times we have had our doubts about Jesus too. Those doubts about Jesus and his promises are only natural for people like us who have a sinful nature. Those doubts may threaten our faith but they don't automatically destroy it. So we dare not judge John as having rejected Jesus. Instead we can learn from John to take our doubts to Jesus so that our false expectations don't cause us to stumble.

When John heard in prison what Christ was doing, he sent his disciples 3) to ask him, "Are you the one who was to come, or should we expect someone else?" 4) Jesus replied, "Go back and report to John what you hear and see: 5) The blind receive sight, the lame walk, those who have leprosy are cured, the deaf hear, the dead are raised, and the good news is preached to the poor. 6) Blessed is the man who does not fall away on account of me."

It seems that John expected Christ's actions to fit his personal agenda and when they didn't doubts rose in his mind. What agenda do you have for Christ? What are your expectations from him? Perhaps when we hear Jesus' response to John's disciples we might expect Jesus to provide us with renewed health. And it's certainly not wrong for us to ask Jesus for the gift of healing or even miracles of healing if it is his will. But we have to realize that our time table and our agenda may not be his agenda or time table so that we are not tripped up by false expectations which don't come to pass.

Jesus' answer to the disciples of John was an obvious reference to our OT lesson for today. By comparing what he was doing to what the prophet had foretold concerning the Messiah Jesus was able to show that he was fulfilling the Scriptures. These things were just as important as the prophecies of judgment found in the Scriptures.

These acts of healing the blind and the lepers, raising the dead and preaching the good news of forgiveness were all a part of Jesus ministry of bringing people together into the family of God. His actions reunited people with their Lord and with the community of worshiping believers. The blind, the deaf, the lame, the lepers and certainly the dead were excluded from worship in the temple by the OT law. But Jesus was removing the barriers that separated them from this worship. The most important barrier that Jesus removed was the barrier of sin which separates us from God. That was the reason Jesus came in the first place. He described his agenda in this way: (Luke 19:10) **For the Son of Man came to seek and to save what was lost.** If we're looking for anything more or less than that we may be disappointed. But we will never be disappointed when we look to him as our Savior because as the Scriptures remind us (Acts 4:12) **Salvation is found in no one else, for there is no other name under heaven given to men by which we must be saved.**

Jesus was doing things differently. Jesus wasn't meeting every one's expectations. Yet Jesus offered true blessings to all who believed in him. That's why Jesus warns **"Blessed is the man who does not fall away on account of me."**

John and his disciples may have been offended by the fact that many were following Jesus because he seemed to dispense his forgiveness too easily. Indeed there may well have been many who were repulsed by John's harsh preaching who were followers of Jesus. But Jesus and John weren't presenting two different ways to eternal life. You can't take one without the other. That's why Jesus points to John the Baptist as a reminder not to expect easy treatment from the law of God.

As John's disciples were leaving, Jesus began to speak to the crowd about John: "What did you go out into the desert to see? A reed swayed by the wind? 8) If not, what did you go out to see? A man dressed in fine clothes? No, those who wear fine clothes are in kings' palaces. 9) Then what did you go out to see? A prophet? Yes, I tell you, and more than a prophet.

John's way of life and his way of dressing showed just what kind of a message John would present to those who came out to see him. No doubt many people went out to the wilderness to see a spectacle rather than to hear a message. John's rough attire fit in well with the rough message which he presented. If he would have shaped his message on the basis of popular opinion he would have like a reed blowing in the wind. But John had a stiff message of repentance and his dress reflected that message.

John pointed out the sins of the people in order to prepare them for the coming of Christ. Once again Jesus directs the people to the Scriptures to remind them that a messenger of repentance was necessary. **10) This is the one about whom it is written: "I will send my messenger ahead of you, who will prepare your way before you.'** John was that messenger.

There were those who didn't want to hear the law which John preached just as there are those today who don't want to hear about sin. They expect easy treatment from God's law. But the law is necessary to point out our sins and our need for a Savior. The law is necessary to prepare us for the Good news of forgiveness. And because we daily sin much the law needs to be a regular part of our diet of God's Word. We can't just enjoy the sweet honey of the Gospel and then ignore what the law says.

We need to let the law speak to our hearts to condemn us for our selfishness, our laziness, our failures to use the word properly, our lack of kindness, our false judging and the like. We need to let the law drive us to our knees and to humble us before God so that we plead: Lord be merciful to me a sinner. Then the message:

“Your sins are forgiven will taste even sweeter to us. And then the law will become a guide for our lives as we seek to set aside our selfishness, our laziness, our failures to use the word properly, our lack of kindness, our false judging and the like. The law will show us God’s will of putting others first, being willing to work, using the word daily and carrying it with us in our hearts, considering the actions of others in the kindest possible manner and the like. And we will use that as a guideline for our new life with Christ.

To reject the law is to reject our need for a Savior and to fail to show our love for our Savior.

Jesus concluded his statements about John by saying: **I tell you the truth: Among those born of women there has not risen anyone greater than John the Baptist; yet he who is least in the kingdom of heaven is greater than he.** These words present us with a bit of a puzzle. Who does Jesus have in mind when he speaks about the one who is least in the kingdom of heaven?

There are those who point out that since John did not live to see Jesus complete his ministry, sacrifice himself on the cross and rise victorious on the third day that even the lowliest NT Christian has an advantage over John. That certainly is one explanation of Jesus words. But there is another explanation that also fits.

People had been comparing Jesus and John and their respective ministries. And Jesus had also been comparing himself and John the Baptist. It is possible that Jesus continuing to do that in this verse as well. Jesus may be well referring to himself as the least in the kingdom of heaven. In his humiliation, when the Son of God was “despised and rejected by men,” when he was cruelly mocked and mistreated and unjustly put to death, he was considered by men to be stricken by God. He appeared to be the least in the kingdom of heaven. When he humbly washed his disciples feet he showed them that lowliness is the path to greatness in the kingdom of God. The Scriptures teach us (Philippians 2:5-11) **Your attitude should be the same as that of Christ Jesus: 6) Who, being in very nature God, did not consider equality with God something to be grasped, 7) but made himself nothing, taking the very nature of a servant, being made in human likeness. 8) And being found in appearance as a man, he humbled himself and became obedient to death-- even death on a cross! 9) Therefore God exalted him to the highest place and gave him the name that is above every name, 10) that at the name of Jesus every knee should bow, in heaven and on earth and under the earth, 11) and every tongue confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father.**

There was a time before John was imprisoned that people had some false expectation about him as we read in (Luke 3:15-18) **The people were waiting expectantly and were all wondering in their hearts if John might possibly be the Christ. 16) John answered them all, "I baptize you with water. But one more powerful than I will come, the thongs of whose sandals I am not worthy to untie. He will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and with fire. 17) His winnowing fork is in his hand to clear his threshing floor and to gather the wheat into his barn, but he will burn up the chaff with unquenchable fire." 18) And with many other words John exhorted the people and preached the good news to them.**

John had pointed his disciples to one who was greater than he – one whose shoes he was unworthy to tie – he pointed to Jesus as the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world. The day will come when this humble Lamb of God will return as judge and all will be compelled to confess that he his Lord.

If we take Jesus’ words about the one who is least in the kingdom of heaven as a reference to himself it’s easy for us to understand how he could be greater than even John the Baptist of whom Jesus said, **I tell you the truth: Among those born of women there has not risen anyone greater than John the Baptist.**

Jesus’ words then become a powerful reminder not to expect to be impressed by the humble servant Jesus – during his life on this earth so that we are not offended by his humility. That was a warning which was needed at Jesus time because there were so many false expectations regarding the promised Messiah. It’s a

warning which is in place today because of the many temptations we have to question or doubt whether Jesus is the Son of God our Savior.

Theme: Don't Stumble Over False Expectations

1. Don't expect Christ's actions to fit our agendas remember he has come to seek and to save the lost.
2. Don't expect easy treatment from the law of God. Remember the law points out our need for Christ.
3. Don't expect to be impressed by the humble servant, Jesus.

For the message of the cross is foolishness to those who are perishing, but to us who are being saved it is the power of God. (1 Corinthians 1:18) Amen.