Matthew 11:16-19, 25-30

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.’

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.’

When Intelligence Doesn’t Help

Jesus says some things that can really challenge our sensibilities. In today’s scripture reading, Jesus thanks the Father that He has hidden certain things from the wise and intelligent while revealing them to infants. Regardless of what “these things” are, we can easily feel offended that God would intentionally hide anything from us, and if we pride ourselves on our intelligence, it certainly sounds like Jesus is rubbing it in our faces, saying that no one knows the Father except the Son and anyone to whom the Son chooses to reveal him.

Jesus then goes on to invite all who are weary and carry heavy burdens to come to him, and he will give them rest. But what if you’re intelligent and your burden is trying to understand God? It sounds like Jesus is not going to provide much comfort for you since he has chosen to hide something from you. Is he going to play games with you? “Come on, Alex. Come to me. I’ll give your rest…Psych!”

None of us like to think that God would hide anything from us, particularly if we are using our God-given intelligence to truly know God. What does Jesus mean when he says that the Father has revealed these things “to infants” while hiding them from “the wise and the intelligent”?

A clue lies in Jesus’ earlier statements in verses 16-19: ”But to what will I compare this generation? It is like children sitting in the market-places and calling to one another, ’We played the flute for you, and you did not dance;
we wailed, and you did not mourn.’” There are some universal characteristics of children, one being their tendency to mimic the behavior of adults; just as children today may play “cops and robbers” or “tea party,” children in Judean villages would play “wedding” or “funeral,” imitating the wailing and mourning that they witnessed at a funeral as well as the playing of music and the dancing witnessed at weddings. In playing “funeral,” a child would begin to wail like adults would at a funeral. Other children would join in. Or a child would pretend to play a flute, and other children would begin to dance as if celebrating a wedding. Jesus compares his critics and those of John the Baptist to children in a marketplace who refused to play with other children. Critics of John the Baptist accused him of being possessed by a demon, perhaps on account of the extremely rigid ethical behavior that he and his followers exhibited. We know, for example, that John’s criticism of the immoral behavior of King Herod. John’s followers responded to his call for repentance by coming to him and being baptized in the Jordan River. Jesus, on the other hand, held no such behavioral expectations of his followers, and was prone to socialize with drunkards and other “sinners.” Such behavior was unfathomable to the purity-conscious Pharisees and priests.

In fairness, Jesus’ style of ministry confounded even the disciples of John the Baptist, but Jesus insisted that he and John were both harbingers of the same message: the kingdom of God is upon us. John looked upon his ministry as one of preparation, of making straight the way of the Lord. His focus was upon *repentance*, a funeral of sorts for the old self. Baptism symbolized dying to the old and cleansing, making oneself ready for God’s work. Jesus looked upon his ministry as one of celebration. The kingdom is upon us. The King is here! Sins are forgiven and God now dwells with us. His ministry is a wedding of sorts as we celebrate our union with God.

Both repentance and celebration are part of our Christian religious experience. Each of us passes through a process where we recognize our own inability to establish a relationship with God in our current human state. We experience the frustration of being incapable, by our own efforts, to correct our own ways. We respond emotionally to our hopelessness by seeking God’s help. We are met by God’s love and grace. Jesus brings this message, and we are jubilant.

But to priests and Pharisees, such a process of repentance and celebration seemed too emotional a foundation for their religion. Steadfast adherence to the Law of Moses was the requisite for righteousness. Understand the demands of the Law and personal discipline all that was necessary to attain personal righteousness before God. The priests and Pharisees prided themselves on their intelligence in regard to their religion and believed that it placed them on a higher level than the common person.

Yet God desires a loving relationship, not an intellectual relationship, with us, and we establish relationship with Him through our hearts, not our minds. There are still many people who seek nothing more than to *understand* God, and are often quick to abandon Christian faith when something about our faith fails to make logical sense to them. They seek the kind of truth that a scientist seeks, a kind of proof of God’s presence. Such reliance on intellect is both blind and dangerous. Jesus recognized what Albert Einstein recognized when he stated that it was appallingly obvious that technology has outpaced morality. Intelligence can offer us ways to save life, but more often provide ways of destroying it, and some of the most intelligent people in history have been guilty of some of the greatest atrocities imaginable.

So Jesus is not dismissing intelligence as unimportant when he thanks the Father that “these things have been hidden from the wise and intelligent.” Rather he is asserting that the key to a relationship with God lies not in our mind but in our heart. And God has endowed everyone with the contrition essential for establishing such relationship.