

Joy of the World

Matthew 11:2-11

Narrator: When John heard in prison what the Messiah was doing, he sent word by his disciples and said to him,

John: Are you the one who is to come, or are we to wait for another?

Narrator: Jesus answered them,

Jesus: Go and tell John what you hear and see: the blind receive their sight, the lame walk, the lepers are cleansed, the deaf hear, the dead are raised, and the poor have good news brought to them. And blessed is anyone who takes no offence at me.

Narrator: As they went away, Jesus began to speak to the crowds about John: ‘

Jesus: What did you go out into the wilderness to look at? A reed shaken by the wind? What then did you go out to see? Someone dressed in soft robes? Look, those who wear soft robes are in royal palaces. What then did you go out to see? A prophet? Yes, I tell you, and more than a prophet. This is the one about whom it is written, “See, I am sending my messenger ahead of you, who will prepare your way before you.” Truly I tell you, among those born of women no one has arisen greater than John the Baptist; yet the least in the kingdom of heaven is greater than he.

“The least in the kingdom of heaven is greater than he.” That’s an interesting thing for Jesus to say about John the Baptist. It’s kind of a put down, isn’t it? Jesus says a lot of things about the Kingdom of heaven. He never comes right out and says to anyone, “You’ve made it! You are in the kingdom of heaven!” And we can deduce that no one around him had quite made it into the kingdom because he says John is the greatest person alive but the *least* in the kingdom is greater than him. He tells one scribe, “You’re really close,” He speaks of those who will inherit it – the poor in spirit, and those who are persecuted. He tells lots of parables about it, about people who give everything they have to gain the kingdom. But he says that as great as John is, he doesn’t quite have it. He’s not there yet.

And where exactly is *there*? Jesus does not describe the kingdom of God so much as a place but rather as a **state of being**. He tells the Pharisees not to look for the kingdom’s coming in events but rather that “the kingdom of heaven is *within* you” (Luke 17:21), or rather it *could be* within you if you are willing to go there. Jesus was obviously *there* – otherwise he couldn’t have described it in the many ways that he did (he mentions it over 130 times in the gospels) - But Jesus is clear that no one else was there since John the Baptist was the greatest person alive but was still not as great as the *least* in the kingdom of heaven.

Which makes you wonder if anyone can be there, in the kingdom, in this life. Some would say absolutely not because Jesus was the only one who was good enough to enter it on earth; the rest

of us only get there when we die, or when Christ returns and the kingdom comes on earth as it is in heaven. But I wonder, because Jesus spent so much time explaining it, describing it, and promoting it. Why would he spend so much time telling people about it if it was off limits? Why would he wave candy in front of us knowing that we can't have it? Why would he tell as scribe "You're really close" if he knew there was no way he could ever enter it? So I think one of the fears people have about thinking that we can't "have" the kingdom is that it somehow makes us *equal to Jesus*, and that's blasphemy. But I cannot believe that Jesus would spend so much time and energy preaching and teaching about something that was beyond our reach. I believe that we *can* dwell in the kingdom of God in the here and now if we really want to enter it, which is to say that we allow Christ to really be our Lord in the real sense of the word 'Lord.'

And maybe you believe that making Jesus "Lord" and entering the kingdom is possible in this life, and maybe you don't, but clearly Jesus says that John the Baptist isn't there yet. So the question is, "Why not?" What kept John from entering? For all that Jesus and John had in common Jesus was a kingdom-dweller and John was not. What was the difference? It would be good to know what the difference was so if we really aspire to get there we know what to do or what not to do.

So let's just work on today's scripture passage and the background of this passage. Remember that John has been baptizing folks in the wilderness. He's set up camp along the Jordan River, and his message is "You better repent and get your act together because the Messiah is coming!" And people are coming to him and getting baptized, which is a symbolic cleansing, or a symbolic dying to sin and rebirth into righteousness. And once John baptizes someone, the hardcore followers remain with him in their compound in the wilderness where they established their own church, and those who go back to their homes in the cities and villages we assume live a very righteous life, which for a Jew was about obeying the laws, but they were probably far more hardcore than other Jews. John and his followers avoided anyone who was not as serious about their righteousness as they were.

And here is where we identify two significant differences between John and Jesus. **FIRST**, Jesus took his message on the road; he didn't stay separated from the cities and villages or the other Jews. Jesus had disciples, but he also went into the synagogues and taught. He even went into the homes of Jewish leaders who didn't agree with him. Jesus took his message **TO** the world.

Which leads to the **SECOND** point: Jesus was not interested in attracting only a certain caliber of people, those who were serious about righteousness. Jesus was there for **EVERYBODY**, the righteous and the unrighteous, the sick and the healthy. That confused John and his disciples who thought, "If Jesus was the Christ, the righteous one, the chosen one of God, why was he mingling with so many losers?" Shouldn't he be surrounding himself with the best, most serious people who would be part of his army to bring God's kingdom to earth?

And I think that these distinctions **DO** tell us something about what it means to be kingdom-dwellers. Remember John was not yet in the Kingdom, and Jesus *was*. Another way of saying this is that the Spirit that inhabited Jesus did not yet inhabit John. And I'm reminded of something Paul wrote:

“Now the Lord is the Spirit, and where the Spirit of the Lord is, there is freedom.”

2 Corinthians 3:17

Jesus was truly free. He was liberated, liberated from sin, and thus liberated from the fear that other people’s unrighteousness would get him dirty. Jesus wasn’t trying to recruit some elite religious cult that stood apart from everyone else in their piety. Jesus was talking about the kingdom of heaven when he told the scribes and Pharisees the parable of the prodigal son – perhaps my favorite – which doesn’t just describe God’s grace and acceptance of the wayward son but also points out the dangerous pride of the older brother who feels himself so superior to his younger brother that he refuses to go the party, which to me is a metaphor for the kingdom of heaven. I think there are Christians who are dangerously proud of their own righteousness and who may end up with a similar dilemma when it comes to entering the kingdom of God because they feel themselves too good to enter a kingdom that welcomes riff-raff.

And here’s where I’d like to make that connection to JOY, this week’s Advent theme. Jesus says to the scribes and Pharisees who are critical of him for hanging around with sinners and tax collectors: “There will be more joy in heaven over one sinner who repents than over ninety-nine righteous people who need no repentance.”

You see, ultimately Jesus and John had the same mission; to bring people to God. John’s message attracted a certain type of person, and perhaps the type of person who was prone to a self-righteous mindset; Jesus’ way of life attracted SO MANY MORE. And Jesus’ way of life WAS a way of Joy. And Jesus understood that true joy can only come to you by way of others. When I think of what brings me the most joy – it’s bringing joy to other people. A rollercoaster thrills me and excites me, but it doesn’t bring me joy. Receiving an award makes me feel proud of whatever I’ve done to deserve that award, but it doesn’t bring me joy. JOY comes when I see my wife or my son smile because of something good that has happened to them – whether it’s something I did or something someone else has done – we find joy in one another’s joy. Jesus turned water to wine at a wedding in Cana, and that brought joy to the host and the guests, but I wonder if there are some Christians who would never even attend a wedding where wine was served let alone create more of it for others to consume feeling that they’ll lose righteousness points. While they’re debating what to do, Jesus is probably dancing.

On this third Sunday of Advent we celebrate peace, hope, and joy, and they all go together with the present and future kingdom. We not only enjoy a hope and a peace that allow us to see beyond any problem, any struggle, any difficulty that we face in the world; we enjoy joy, that comes from that same assurance that we belong to God’s kingdom, a kingdom that welcomes the sinner and the saint, the sick and the healthy.