

The Content of a Character

Matthew 11:7-19

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Sunday, August 31, 2008
Worship at 9:15 and 11 a.m.

If I had only known. How often have you said that to yourself? If I had only known. . . I would have made a different choice. I would have acted differently. I would have reacted sooner. Sometimes when we feel that way, it's because we lacked critical information when we came to a decision point. More often, signs that we should have seen were there, and we missed them or ignored them.

We can miss God's signs if we are only paying attention to the world's cues and not paying attention to Scripture. It's also possible for us to recognize God's signs but fail to act accordingly. Spiritual regrets are the result.

The goal of today's sermon is to help you prevent spiritual regrets. Let us pray:

Living God, life is too short and too challenging to ignore you. As we approach your Word today, help us to engage it meaningfully. Please illumine the Gospel of Matthew so that we might recognize your plans and purposes at work in history, and respond to them powerfully when we leave here. In the name of Jesus the Christ we pray, Amen.

Today's Scripture lesson is both a revelation and a challenge. It's a revelation because Jesus is there making sure we don't miss the signs of a critical moment. That moment is the key turning point in salvation history, when all of history flipped from awaiting the Messiah to meeting the Messiah. The revelation is there so no one can say, "If only I had known. . ."

The lesson is a challenge because all these years later, we are still called to respond to that exact turning point in salvation history.

So often at critical moments, God's signs come in the form of a person. It could be a person who nudges us, or a person who tells us something we may not want to hear, or perhaps a person who simply models radical obedience to God. John the Baptist was that kind of person and much more.

When the Bible spends as much time describing one person as it spends on John the Baptist, it's because one of three things is going on: we're supposed to be like that person; we're not supposed to be like that person, or we're supposed to see a message in that person.

John the Baptist was a character who got a lot of ink in the Gospels because we're supposed to see a message in him. You might remember that John was born under miraculous circumstances, and became a prophet who lived an ascetic life in the wilderness, wearing garments of camels' hair and living on a diet of bugs and honey.

Not only that, he became a celebrity prophet, whom thousands of people flocked to see. When they came, he called people to repentance and baptized them.

(Parenthetically, I might add that we in America tend to think we invented the culture of celebrity. However, John the Baptist is a good example of the fact that celebrity is pretty much a timeless phenomenon of human nature and human society that contemporary tastes and media capabilities have merely amplified.)

Anyway, so what? Why was John the Baptist, celebrity prophet, so important? Well, you know those maps they have in shopping malls? The ones with a map of the whole layout and a red arrow that says, "You are here"?

John the Baptist is a giant red arrow pointing to the most important time and the most important figure in all of God's history with humanity. In this passage, Jesus comes along and slaps the sticker on the arrow that says, "You are here. And I am here."

John the Baptist, greatest of all prophets, existed to proclaim that the long awaited time of the Messiah had arrived. History was flipping from awaiting and preparing for the Messiah to meeting that figure in Jesus Christ.

Ironically, in today's text, one way that Jesus affirms John's prophecy and places Himself in it as Messiah, is through a series of five miniature puzzles.

I use the term puzzle cautiously, because our Scriptures are never cryptic for the sake of being cryptic. Everything in Reformed theology says emphatically that Scripture is not a secret to be decoded by those in the know. That would be a gnostic heresy or a bestseller. Instead, sometimes Scripture is cryptic to draw us in, like the rhetorical device of lowering one's voice to make an important point.

So just for a few minutes, let's allow ourselves to be drawn into the revelation and challenge of the five miniature puzzles in these verses. Puzzle number one is contained in verses 7 thru 10.

Three times Jesus asks the crowd rhetorically what was so compelling about John. Surely it was not that he had any political power. At the time, John was sitting in jail where King Herod had put him. King Herod, not John, was the one whose reed symbol was printed on coins and who had royal palaces out in the desert. So what was it?

John was compelling because he had a message greater than himself. He announced that the messianic "kingdom" was imminent, and in so doing he fulfilled important prophecies in Malachi and Isaiah. Here Jesus connects the dots between Malachi's prophecy and John the Baptist as a way of saying, "Pay attention. . . I'm not far behind my prophet!"

The second little puzzle is just one verse, verse 11, which says, ". . . no one has arisen greater than John the Baptist; yet the least of these in the kingdom of heaven is greater than he."

The point of the paradox is that while John is the greatest prophet ever, personal greatness doesn't determine standing in the kingdom of heaven. In the kingdom that Jesus is ushering in, whoever becomes humble like a child, like the little ones baptized here today!, is the greatest in the kingdom of heaven.

By using this paradox, Jesus again affirms the significance of John the Baptist while demonstrating his own authority to define who's who in the kingdom of heaven.

One more puzzle before we shift gears. Verses 12-13 say, "From the days of John the Baptist until now, the kingdom of heaven has suffered violence, and the violent take it by force. For all the prophets and the law prophesied until John came, and if you are willing to accept it, he is Elijah who is to come. ."

Distressing though it might be, violent struggle was evidence that the kingdom of heaven was real, and breaking into and confronting the kingdoms of the world. That struggle didn't turn out to be the expected political conquest, but it did lead to the violence of putting the Messiah on the cross and to the triumph of the resurrection.

John is not the Messiah, but he is the messenger in the midst of that struggle, sent to fulfill Malachi 4:5, which says, "Lo, I will send you the prophet Elijah before the great and terrible day of the Lord comes."

Jesus doesn't want John the Baptist to be a mystery; he wants the crowds to understand the signs they are seeing. The first three miniature puzzles in this text reveal the identity of John and draw us into the realization of who Jesus must be.

For you skeptics, who might be wondering at this point whether all this was grandiose talk, and who

might be thinking that Jesus inflated the role of John the Baptist to elevate himself by extension, Jesus has an answer.

He says, Look at my deeds. Matthew 11: 4 – 5: “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.” You can’t fake those deeds; they require power and divine spiritual authority.

Of course, recognizing the signs of Jesus and his kingdom is only the beginning. The revelation that the Messiah is here, at work in your life and at work in the world, moving the timeline toward completion of the kingdom of God---that revelation challenges us to respond. We have to go beyond faith as cognition to faith as trust in action.

We don’t want to be like the contemporaries of John and Jesus, referred to as “this generation” who ignored or rejected the advent of God’s kingdom.

That lack of engagement is compared to children squabbling in a marketplace in puzzle number 4. The playmates refuse to engage in a happy, flute-playing game of wedding (arguably a symbol for Jesus’ ministry) and refuse to engage in a sad, wailing game of funeral (arguably a symbol for John’s preaching.)

In any era, the refusal to engage Jesus’ message is probably the most common spiritual failing. It’s easy to think that Jesus is for other people and somehow irrelevant to you personally. But the revelation of God’s work in the world challenges us to do more than that. Go ahead and ask questions. Engage even if your faith hasn’t reached the point of cognition.

As you engage, keep an open mind about the definition of Messiah. Let Jesus define himself. Another mistake that people in Jesus and John’s time made was to reject this new kingdom of God because it didn’t fit their preconceived notions.

In the last puzzle of this text, we’re told that people criticized John for going against social norms and for being too rough-hewn. Jesus, on the other hand, they criticized for eating and drinking with the sinners’ crowd. And Jesus knew what they were hinting at: they thought he was the rebellious son of Deuteronomy 21: 18 who should be publicly accused and stoned to death.

Being ignored and misperceived didn’t surprise or stop Jesus. Through it all, he kept on teaching and revealing the kingdom of God. He knew that in time, his deeds would vindicate John’s proclamation.

John was proclaiming something astounding, that it was time to go from waiting for the Messiah to meeting the Messiah. Centuries of prophecy were leading up this turning point in God’s plan.

It is one of the radical assertions of Christianity that there IS something called salvation history---that God is working out a creative, redemptive plan for the universe that generously includes you and me and the imperfect, suffering world we live in. In that view, no other time and no other figure are as determinative for the course of the universe as the moment when the Messiah came to humanity.

Of course the unfolding of God’s plan doesn’t preclude the flow of politics or freewill-driven human events; it subsumes those things. Elections, leaders, nation-states and movements are all important, but not the ultimate reality of the universe.

Today’s text is special because it’s both a revelation of the bigger picture and a challenge to personal response. Jesus is trying to prevent his hearers—and prevent us---from ending up with spiritual regrets, because spiritual regrets outlast temporal regrets.

You don’t have to look back on your life or meet your maker saying, “If only I had known. . .” The turning point of salvation history is no secret, and the Messiah isn’t hiding from you. Jesus has arrived and wants you to engage him. Stop waiting and go meet him.

If you already know Jesus, challenge yourself to turn cognition into trust and trust into action. Challenge yourself to subordinate your history and your plans to God's bigger history and bigger plans. You won't regret it.