



Questions: Are You the One?

June 28, 2015 | Rev. Taylor Fuerst

Matthew 11: Now when Jesus had finished instructing his twelve disciples, he went on from there to teach and proclaim his message in their cities.

² When John heard in prison what the Messiah was doing, he sent word by his disciples ³ and said to him, "Are you the one who is to come, or are we to wait for another?" ⁴ Jesus answered them, "Go and tell John what you hear and see.⁵ 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. ⁶ And blessed is anyone who takes no offense at me."

*The Word of God for the People of God. **Thanks be to God.***

Preaching is a challenging task every time you do it. But look back over the last month and consider all of the newsworthy things happening in the world and in our neighborhood--devastating floodwaters in hundreds of homes in our area. Racist acts of violence in McKinney, TX and Charleston, SC. The threat of a tropical storm. We have already been on a rollercoaster ride. And then on Friday, a Supreme Court decision to legalize same-sex marriage continued the ride. And for some the rollercoaster went way up...and for some it went way down. These rides, various as they may be, are not lost on the preacher. It seems to me that today, as much, if not more than every day, we all need to hear from scripture. We all need to hear from the Lord. And in keeping with our series on the questions God asks us and we ask God--questions we find throughout scripture--we find ourselves in Matthew 11 today.

Jesus has just finished instructing his twelve disciples. "Instructing" doesn't really do it justice because, you see, a chapter ago, Matthew says Jesus was up to something a little more than just teaching. Matthew 10 says "Jesus summoned his twelve disciples...[and sent them out to] proclaim the good news, that "The Kingdom of Heaven has come near." He instructed them to

Cure the sick, raise the dead, cleanse the lepers, and cast out demons. And then he spends the next thirty-plus verses preparing them for what they will encounter, for what will happen when they get in on the ground floor of Jesus' mission.

So it is after he sends them off that Jesus is going on his merry way, teaching and proclaiming his message in other cities, when some of John's disciples come asking, "Are you the one who is to come, or should we wait for another?" Are you the one?

Things are not always as we expect. I've shared with you before that following my seminary graduation, I spent the better part of a year in a program that pairs professional and spiritual development with hospital chaplaincy, a program called "Clinical Pastoral Education." And so, literally the second day on the job, I found myself on the floors of the hospital, in pediatrics and in rehab and in infectious disease, knocking on doors--cold-calling, essentially--walking into patient rooms and introducing myself as the chaplain.

I was 24 years old, and I was female. And I was in Columbia, South Carolina. When I knocked and entered the room of a patient, it was clear to me that the last person they expected me to be was the chaplain. They often thought I was the case worker, or maybe a therapist of some kind, or a patient care specialist, or a random visitor who got the wrong room, or even in some rooms they thought this young woman before them was more likely to be the doctor, than to be the chaplain. As I introduced myself, "Hi my name is Taylor, and I'm the--[breathe]--chaplain..." I would see faces get all screwed up into a facial question mark, and as I would continue my introductory spiel, they would jump in and say, "Wait, did you just say you're the chaplain?"

Eventually I thought it would help if I cleared things up and just wore a clerical collar around the hospital, but that only made things worse. Then everyone in the hall began to make the same question-mark face. People would stop me in the hallway and say, "So, what am I supposed to call you...father? mother?"

Things are not always what we expect.

"Are you the one who is to come? Or should we wait for another?" Because Jesus, you don't exactly seem...like...the one we've been waiting for.

Jesus, in fact, did not seem like the one they had been waiting for. He didn't look like their ideas of what a messiah should be--he wasn't an ascetic who denied himself material things in exchange for spiritual improvement--no, he found the spiritual right in the material, as he ate and drank with sinners and tax collectors. He wasn't a warrior who led a violent resistance to the powers that be, but rather he preached about turning the other cheek and losing one's life in order to gain it.

Jesus refused to bow to expectations that were placed on him, and--funny enough--that hasn't changed even today. Jesus continues to surprise those who hold out expectations for who he is, and how he'll act. And the truth is, we often miss it.

Do you remember some years ago, when the Washington Post set up a camera to watch people walking in and out of a subway station? As commuters passed through, someone stood to the side, playing the violin with his open case laid out on the ground for tips. Over 1,000 people passed by that space, and the vast majority never looked twice at the violinist. They didn't see that it was Joshua Bell, one of the foremost concert violinists of our time. They didn't see that he was playing a multi-million dollar instrument. Out there in that subway station, they expected everything to be as it always was--ordinary.

David Lose puts the question poignantly: Can we recognize great music anywhere outside of a concert hall? Can we find beauty in what we expect to be the filthiest of places? Can we see God at work in the real world, or have we been trained only to look for God within walls of stained glass, and among people who fit our definition of holy?

What is it that keeps us from seeing? What kept the Pharisees from seeing the glory of God in the man born blind, in the story we heard from John? What kept John from seeing clearly the works that pointed to Jesus, the one he had waited for, the one he had prepared for? This is John, John the Baptist, asking this question, Are you the one? The same John who heralded Jesus' coming before Jesus had ever started his public ministry; John who baptized Jesus, but

not before saying, "Wait a second--I need to be baptized by you, and yet you come to me?" But now something has changed; John has doubts about Jesus. From his seat in prison, he cannot tell who Jesus is.

Friends, there's something about that distance. When it comes to spiritual things, when it comes to the work of Christ, we are a nearsighted people. From far away, we cannot see the work of God. It's hard enough to identify this unexpected Messiah in a crowd, with the unexpected work he does among unexpected people. But it is even harder when we keep ourselves at a distance from those among whom God is at work; when we hole up in our prisons of isolation and division, cultivating our theories about this group or that group--about white people, about black people, about immigrant people, about gay people, about conservative evangelical people. When we are isolated from one another, we are left with our assumption that those people must be against Jesus. Jesus must not be among them, surely could not be using them.

Jesus, this unexpected, surprising Messiah, tells us that the only way to know and to see who he is, is to be among the evidence. Be in the trenches where lives are being changed, and count yourself as one of them. Be in the messy relationships with those who don't look like you and don't eat like you and don't love like you and don't think like you, and find that they may not be just as you thought they were. It has been my experience that the greatest moments in which I have grown--the times when I have been converted again and again--have been when I found myself--sometimes unwillingly--up close and personal with those whom I have judged. Face to face with those whom I expected to be far from Jesus, I found that I was the one far off, behind the prison wall. Once I got close enough, what I saw blew my expectations.

When working on planning this worship service, Sean Patlan pointed out that Jesus never answers the question. Are you the one? He never says, "Yes," or "No." In Sean's words, Jesus just says, "Well...what do you think?"

Is he the one? Jesus leaves the question to be determined by the ones who ask it; but John shows us that the question can't be answered from far away. It can't be answered with simply a right doctrinal understanding of who Jesus is. It can only be answered by following Jesus into

the work that he does--we can know nothing of who Jesus is unless we follow him into the unexpected places where he is at work. We can know nothing of what Jesus is doing unless we are in relationship with those whom Jesus is most unexpectedly working through--unless we are on the ground, in the trenches of life to see sick being cured, dead being raised, lepers being cleansed, and demons being cast out. And if we expect that work all to be done by church-y people, by conservative people or liberal people, by native-born people, or by straight people, then we will be like all the people walking by the violinist in the subway station. But if we get close, we will see what perhaps we least expected--the glory of God, right in the midst of the headlines.

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