

Matt. 11:2 When John heard in prison what the Messiah was doing, he sent word by his disciples³ 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.”

¹⁶ “But to what will I compare this generation? It is like children sitting in the marketplaces and calling to one another,¹⁷ ‘We played the flute for you, and you did not dance; we wailed, 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, ‘Look, a glutton and a drunkard, a friend of tax collectors and sinners!’ Yet wisdom is vindicated by her deeds.”

²⁰ Then he began to reproach the cities in which most of his deeds of power had been done, because they did not repent.²¹ “Woe to you, Chorazin! Woe to you, Bethsaida! For if the deeds of power done in you had been done in Tyre and Sidon, they would have repented long ago in sackcloth and ashes.²² But I tell you, on the day of judgment it will be more tolerable for Tyre and Sidon than for you.²³ And you, Capernaum,

will you be exalted to heaven?

No, you will be brought down to Hades.

For if the deeds of power done in you had been done in Sodom, it would have remained until this day.²⁴ But I tell you that on the day of judgment it will be more tolerable for the land of Sodom than for you.”

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;²⁶ yes, Father, for such was your gracious will.²⁷ All 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.²⁹ Take my yoke upon you, and learn from me; for I am gentle and humble in heart, and you will find rest for your souls.³⁰ For my yoke is easy, and my burden is light.”

July 9, 2017

Three Chairs

Matthew 11:2-6, 11-30

There are three groups of people mentioned in our reading this morning. I've placed three chairs here to represent these three groups. The first was a group of John the Baptist's disciples who come to ask Jesus if he is the Messiah or should they look for another. Jesus answers, "*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 offense at me.*"

The next group represented by this second chair, are those who don't believe, who never seem to be satisfied, and Jesus vents quite a bit of frustration – and judgment – toward them. Jesus says they're like a bunch of children trying to get other children to play with them, but they can't decide what they want.

"*We played the flute for you and would not dance; we wailed, and you did not mourn.*" You can't decide what you want. John came dressed in animal skins and eating locusts, and you said he was crazy for being such an ascetic. The Son of Man comes turning water into wine and enjoying a good party and you call him a glutton and a drunkard. You find fault with whichever way God sends his word to you.

Jesus mentions by name three cities in which he has revealed some of his greatest deeds of power, but it did not change them. They watched Jesus perform miracles and walked away unfazed. Those cities are: Chorazin, Bethsaida and Capernaum. We don't know what Jesus did in Chorazin, but we are familiar with Bethsaida and Capernaum. In Bethsaida Jesus gives sight to a blind man, and Capernaum is where Jesus lives during his ministry. He heals the son of a royal official, the servant of a Roman centurion, he even heals Peter's mother-in-law! Yet there are still many people who do not believe.

Woe to you, Jesus says. If the works you witnessed had been done in Tyre and Sidon (who are mentioned by the prophet Ezekiel) they'd have repented in sackcloth and ashes. If the things you witnessed had taken place in the ancient evil city of Sodom, it would have repented and not have been destroyed. These are strong words.

But there is a third group of people in this chapter. These are the believers. Jesus mentions them first in a prayer of thanksgiving for them. He contrasts those who don't believe as "the wise and intelligent" and those who do believe as "infants," and as strong as his condemnation toward those who do not believe, that is how warm his words are toward those who do.

Come to me, all you that are weary and are carrying heavy burdens, and I will give you rest. Take my yoke upon you, and learn from me; for I am gentle and humble in heart, and you will find rest for your souls. For my yoke is easy, and my burden is light.

Three groups: John's disciples who sincerely search for the truth; the members of "this generation" who have the truth standing in front of them and find fault with him; and those who are willing to be laughed at, looked down on, and be called simple, but who believe.

Those three groups continue to exist, of course.

There are those who sincerely seek the truth but who have honest questions. Jesus respects those questions, too: tell John what you've seen – *the blind see, the lame walk, lepers are made clean, the dead are raised and the poor have good news preached to them, and blessed is anyone who takes no offense at me.* Sincere questions, respectful answers.

Many of us go through times of questioning, as well. There are times when things happen that make us wonder if God really is in control. Life doesn't always seem to turn out the way we think it should; our faith doesn't always protect us from suffering, and we, too, wonder where Jesus is and why things are happening the way they are.

I don't think Jesus has any words of judgment for our questions. I think Jesus respects our questions. He does say, "In the middle of your questions, don't forget: The blind see, the lame walk, the poor have good news." But there is no condemnation for questioning.

It is different for those who are unfazed by the truth displayed to them. Often they are the educated and elite, the powerful and proud. They find fault with everything – like those who thought John was too conservative and Jesus was too liberal; John was a buzz kill and Jesus was a party animal. They explain away every miracle and roll their eyes at those who say they've felt the presence of God. Some openly say they don't believe, others talk the talk but fail to walk the walk.

Jesus seems to have little patience with the skeptics and unbelievers who look down on those who believe. *Woe to you, he says. It's not that no one has taught you the truth, you've been told the truth and*

you'd rather worship other things. It's not that God hasn't been present and powerful at some point in your life, it's that you yawn at that presence and go back to your lives.

In Jesus' day these would be scribes and Pharisees who feel threatened by Jesus, along with others who just don't seem to care. I wonder who those people would be today. Who would be the modern equivalent of scribes and Pharisees? Feeling threatened by Jesus who might upset the status quo?

Who might fit the description of those who've heard and seen, but who just walk away? Who explain away the witness of others, roll their eyes at such simplistic faith? Where would you find these folks? At work? Coaching little league teams on Sunday mornings? On the golf course? Maybe sitting here in one of these pews?

And then there are the folks sitting in this third chair: the folks who believe, who have faith. Jesus says if you have faith in him, it's like two oxen walking together joined by a yoke that helps them walk in step to pull a wagon or a plow, except one of the oxen is so much stronger than the other, he really could pull the whole load on his own. That makes it pretty easy for the other – not that he doesn't want to do the work, but he never has to carry more of the load than he can.

The people in this chair are those who have come to him. Many come tired and weary – the poor trying to make ends meet; single parents trying to be Mom or Dad and breadwinner; many come carrying burdens of worry and guilt; grief, failure, defeat. These are the folks who come to Jesus and lay their burdens down; or find that Jesus steps in beside them and shoulders the weight for them.

A few months ago I talked about a definition of faith that I found in a book by Marcus Borg, when he said that faith is trust, like when you take your kids to the beach and try to teach them to float on the water. To just to lay back and trust that the water will hold them, they panic and keep wanting to take control, but when they get to that realization that the water will hold them up, they can simply lay back and float. They don't have to *do* anything. The water does the work. Borg says, *Faith as trust is trusting in the buoyancy of God. Faith is trusting in the sea of being in which we live and move and have our being.*¹

Maybe this is what Jesus means when he addresses the people in this chair, saying his yoke is easy and his burden is light. Trusting Jesus is like letting yourself float on the sea, once you let go, there is this wonderful feeling of peace and calm.

Now, I'd like to say that my experience is that once you sit down in this chair, you stay here the rest of your life – just floating on the love of Jesus the rest of your life. But that's not my experience. Sometimes I move over to John the Baptist's prison cell with my sincere questions, things I feel like I have to have answered before I can commit totally. Sometimes I sit in the unbelievers' chair, I have to admit. I see the amazing evidence of God and Jesus Christ all around me, but I still find myself pursuing other gods as though I didn't believe. Sometimes I'm happy with the status quo, sometimes I look for peace in all the wrong places. Sometimes I still think I have to prove my own worth instead of believing that Jesus loves me and that's all that matters.

I think Jesus respects my questions, but, maybe he gets pretty frustrated by those times when I am unmoved by the miracles all around me.

This I do know, when I sit in this chair, when I let go of having to have every question answered, and when I let go of having to be in charge of my life, and give that control over to him...when I trust him to handle things, there is a lightness in my heart; like this burden is lifted off my shoulders and the world seems brighter. Suzette will agree that I'm a lot easier to get a long with; I'm more at peace and have more love toward those around me.

Three chairs:

Belief but with questions, not complete trust.

Unbelief – ignoring the evidence of God's love, the evidence of Christ's power, the evidence of the Spirit's presence, and just going on with your life, living for yourself.

Faith – simple, childlike trust that brings a lightened load, freedom from shame and guilt and fear. Peace and joy and love.

So, I guess the question I would ask you is, which chair would you say you are sitting in today? Is there a chair you'd like to move to?

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¹ Borg, Marcus J. *The Heart of Christianity* (Kindle Locations 542-543). HarperCollins. Kindle Edition.