

“A Different Wisdom” – Mat 11:16-19,25-30 – July 3, 2005

Can you hear it? Can you hear the frustration and sarcasm in Jesus’ voice? “To what will I compare this generation? It is like children sitting in the marketplaces and calling to one another, ‘We played the flute for you, and you did not dance; we wailed, and you did not mourn’” Can’t you just hear the petulant whining of those ‘spoiled children’?

We even know the source of His frustration, as Jesus goes on to specifically describe what they were whining about. Apparently, just as with any truly spoiled child, nothing would satisfy the people of Jesus’ generation. John the Baptist came as a stern ascetic, refusing to touch wine and decent food, and they called him demented; Jesus, the Son of Man, came both eating food and drinking wine, and the people accused Him of being a glutton and a drunkard. No wonder Jesus was frustrated – it had to be like dealing with a whole generation of Goldilocks: “that one is too conservative!”, “this one is too liberal!” Not unlike today, the middle ground of choosing neither John the Baptist nor Jesus seems to have been “just right!”

Presumably to avoid offending anyone’s sensibilities, we skipped over a short section that provides in great depth and detail a more complete understanding of why Jesus was so frustrated. “Then He began to reproach the cities in which most of His deeds of power had been done, because they did not repent.” I think we can easily imagine Jesus shaking His head and wondering, “What more could they possibly have wanted to see?” Hearing that John the Baptist is in prison, Jesus has been elaborating on the significance of John, and his ministry. Jesus saw John as the end of a line of prophets looking forward to the reign of God that has arrived – for Jesus John is the Elijah who was to come announcing the Messiah, but now John is in prison, and Jesus is likewise being ignored by the people.

We would expect at this point of frustration, after the people had turned away from John the Baptist and after they had ignored the demonstrations of the power of God at work in Jesus, that we would hear strong condemnations. After all, that would be the reasonable, rational, normal reaction of anyone, wouldn’t it? “Ignore me, eh? Well, I’ll show you!”, is pretty much a universal reaction. And if we were to read the section we skipped, we would hear a bit of that – perhaps that’s why the lectionary skips it – not many people are happy to hear Jesus venting His frustration, preferring instead to hear the softer, gentler, more familiar invitation that follows.

But we should honestly hear that frustration in Jesus. We need to hear the wrenching depth of His emotion that the very people He came to offer life itself shrugged their shoulders and said, “whatever!” We need to hear that frustration, we need to absorb it until we feel that there is no other course of action but to zap them with a cosmic thunderbolt, raining down sulfur and brimstone upon their uncaring, uninvolved heads.

Why? Why do we need to hear and absorb and be consumed by that frustration? Because only when we do, only when we come to believe that there is only one reasonable, rational, sensible course of action to deal with the ingrates that ignored the Son of Man, only then can we truly begin to understand the different kind of wisdom personified in Jesus, the wisdom of God, a wisdom of grace that makes no sense, is not rational, cannot be explained. Only then can we begin to understand the magnificence of God’s grace in Christ, expressed in His merciful mercy towards and forgiving of those very ingrates who ignored what He had to offer.

God’s grace makes no sense, does it? By all that we consider rational and sane, we would expect that in order to earn God’s forgiveness for our sins we would have to clothe ourselves, like John the Baptist, in sackcloth and ashes, that we would have to grovel in humility before God, that we would have to flagellate ourselves with self-doubt, self-pity, self-loathing until we were so obviously sorry for what we had done that even God would have to forgive us. After all, if we follow

conventional wisdom we would have to agree that the only path to God would lie through a valley of self-denial, of purity in thought and deed, that only the precious few who managed to tread carefully through the mine-field of life would arrive safely and unscarred at Heaven's gate, acceptable only because of their hard work and devotion to purity.

That's what conventional wisdom would say today, and even more so in Jesus' day. In both Greek and Hebrew cultures people personified Wisdom. The Greeks with their pantheon of gods and goddesses had room for the Goddess of Wisdom whose name was Sophia, the very word used for wisdom. The Hebrew people tread a little softer on the 'goddess' part, but we still do hear in the Old Testament references to Wisdom personified, for example in Proverbs 8:22-36. Today, especially in this age that follows the Age of Enlightenment, the age of rationality in which we tend to worship at the altar of scientific thought, everything must be rational, reasonable, explainable. For many people even faith needs to be rational, has to be expressed in some kind of algorithmic formula: let salvation be the variable 's', belief be the variable 'b', penitence be the variable 'p', humility the variable 'h'; then we may express the formula for salvation as $s = b^{**3} + p^{**2} + h - \sin + \text{bonus points for being well-dressed, having a nice smile, carrying a floppy bible.}$

"Thank God", or as Jesus said, "I thank you [praise 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." Thank God that neither conventional wisdom, nor even a goddess of Wisdom, rules. Thank God that all wisdom has been incarnated in Christ Jesus, the Logos, the Word. Thank God, because the path of reconciliation is not the tortured algorithm of logic and calculus, an equation that we could never fulfill, but thank God that we are reconciled with God in Christ through the totally irrational gift of grace. Thank God that from Him, through Christ, a different wisdom holds true, a wisdom clear to infants, a wisdom of reconciliation and life offered for the accepting.

"How can this be?", the wisdom-driven skeptic will probably ask, "because it makes no sense." True, it makes no sense, unless you believe Jesus' statements that, "All things have been handed over to me by my Father ..." "No one knows the Father except the Son; no one knows the Son except the Father" – this is a different kind of wisdom, this is not the wisdom of calculation and reasonableness, this is the wisdom of the Word made flesh; this is the wisdom of a world saved through an ugly death on a cross, and the unreasonable resurrection from death that followed, this is the different wisdom of mercy and grace made real by God who gave His only Son that we might have life.

And so with the understanding that this is a different wisdom, we come to and are able to understand the all-familiar saying from Jesus, "come to me, all you that are weary and are carrying heavy burdens, and I will give you rest." But even more so, only with seeing clearly the upside-down, inside-out, makes-no-sense different wisdom of God's grace can we begin to comprehend Jesus' explanation of that rest, that being yoked with Him actually lightens the burden of life. Only with that different wisdom that comprehends the mercy and grace of God at work in Christ can we begin to truly realize that our options are not either to have or not-have a yoke ... the yoke of life's burdens is always there ... but that instead in our faith we have the options of either dragging the burdens ourselves or having Christ take up the load. How much wisdom does it take to solve that puzzle?! I think even Homer Simpson would be inspired to say, "doh!"

Again, echoing Jesus, "thank God!" Thank God that we are not saved and reconciled with him through some impossible calculus of obedience, but that having been saved by Christ's redeeming action, we are now free to work with Him, finding rest in His sharing the load. May God be ever praised for granting us this different wisdom, this insight into life eternal and abundant.