

July 3, 2011 – The Third Sunday after Pentecost [Proper 9A]

Zechariah 9:9-12

Psalms 145:8-14

Romans 7:15-25a

MATTHEW 11:16-19, 25-30

Epiphany Lutheran Church · Richmond, VA

“But to what will I compare this generation? It is like children sitting in the marketplaces and calling to one another...”

Jesus’ words as he addresses a crowd made up both of willing followers and skeptical accusers ring of frustration and puzzlement. Is he lashing out in anger? Is he throwing up his hands in disgust? We’re not really accustomed to hearing Jesus sound like this; that is, wandering into the risky waters of cross-generational criticism. In fact, he sounds here more like us.

“But to what will I compare this generation? They spend too much time buried in their Smartphone!” Or, “OK, Boomer! You are so out-of-touch and old-fashioned! The world is changing! You better catch up!”

“But to what will I compare this generation?” Have you seen the clothes they wear! It’s sloppy and ugly and too revealing! Or Why can’t you old people understand self-expression? My clothes help me be my authentic self in this world!

“But to what will I compare this generation?” That new worship music they’re using is so monotonous and repetitive and lacking depth!” Or, “Those old hymns are boring, hard to sing, and old-fashioned!”

Choose your topic these days—sacred or secular—and it seems like so many opinions of what’s right and what’s good fall right along generational lines. Heads are shaken in exasperation and—if you’re like me, standing in line recently for a cell-phone upgrade that will drag me kicking and screaming into a new generation—beads of anxious sweat form along the ridge of the brow. We know that new is not necessarily improved...and traditional may not always mean wiser. But the debates rage on, and from this morning’s gospel lesson we see that Jesus is no stranger, either, to the friction that occurs when generations of human beings set their habits and expectations up against one another.

In his case, Jesus is frustrated and almost irritated that the people of his day and age are so unreceptive to the message he and his disciples are preaching, which is at odds with the message they’ve heard for so long from the Pharisees’ sermons and the scribes’ teachings. And it’s not just his message they’ve questioned and rejected. It’s also his cousin John’s. The crowds can’t seem to get their heads around the God who is presented in each of their respective messages. The generations of their day can’t fathom the kingdom of heaven as it is proclaimed from the lips of these two newcomers.

And who can blame them? Both of these yokels hail from off-the-beaten-track Galilean towns, far from the traditional academy of Jerusalem. Neither has a formal synagogue training that we know of. One sequesters himself in the desert half the time, eating wild honey and locusts, coming close to civilization from time to time just long enough to dunk people in the Jordan River and publicly criticize the rulers’ morals. The other one hangs out with a bunch of tax collectors and other low-lives, frequenting banquets and parties. Both seem to go against the status quo quite a bit, positioning themselves a number of times as the preferred option to the way things are. But John is too much of an extremist and Jesus seems too lax. John is a little too fanatical, Jesus not fanatical enough. Who would take these guys seriously, especially about matters that the Pharisees do such a good job of explaining, convoluted though they may seem?

This is the situation which both John and Jesus confront: a populace of their own people who can't seem to get their head around a new way of seeing God act and move in the world. To John, the people are hard-headed and ignorant. They need baptism for repentance and need it now, for the winnowing fork of God's justice is in his hand and the chaff will be burned. (We must assume that would be John's reaction to this, of course, for at the time he is currently in prison awaiting what will be his execution for the crime of criticizing Herod's decision to marry his brother's wife).

Jesus, on the other hand, compares the generation to children in a marketplace who resort to gentle and pleading tactics in order to coax the people to dance or mourn. With inspiring words and uplifting promises of forgiveness he has played the flute, so to speak, to get them to "dance" along with his vision of the kingdom of heaven, and they still stand on the sidelines in their stubbornness. Likewise, he has cried the haunting mourner's wail, reminding them of their need for mercy, and yet they remain unmoved.

Have you ever tried to explain your faith to a someone who perhaps doesn't believe? Have you ever tried to convince someone of the love of God or your involvement in the life of a congregation to a person who, for whatever reason, is reluctant to follow? To a large degree, Jesus' experience with people's doubt of and rejection of his message is common to people of each and every age. Whether we encounter difficulty in preaching the gospel of Jesus on a personal level or whether we get frustrated when our congregations don't grow and gather new members, it seems as if the church will always have to live with some level of discomfort or frustration with how we're received by the generation at hand. Statistics indicate that the number of people in society who identify as having no religious affiliation is on the rise. Explaining what God is like and sharing our faith will likely get more challenging.

Jesus' immediate response to his own discouragement is to offer thanksgiving that the gospel message is not something to be grasped by knowledge or wisdom or sophisticated reasoning. Faith, as reformer Martin Luther would put it, is ultimately a gift of the Holy Spirit and cannot be conjured by our own strength or power. Indeed, Jesus' teachings are hidden from the intelligent and revealed to the young and inexperienced, the simple and pure-hearted. How many of us find ourselves more captivated by a children's sermon, for example, than by the words preached from the pulpit? And, by the same token, I know many pastors who, like I, are as intimidated by delivering a children's sermon as they are preaching a big people's sermon. A religious system that rightly asks its leaders to attend a seminary and receive a post-secondary degree can send the message that brains are what's required for a deeper faith, or to have faith at all. Pretty soon we forget how the infants see things.

And here is when Jesus reminds us once again that it's not brains that will lead to deeper faith, and it's not a sophisticated understanding about how the universe works that will ultimately cause one to come to Christ. It is not brains we need, but a burden. Our attraction to Jesus' kingdom comes from the desire for an easier burden than the ones we're carrying, a longing for rest for our souls. St. Augustine, a man of supreme intelligence who did not convert to Christian faith until much later in life, once said, "I have read in Plato and Cicero sayings that are very wise and very beautiful, but I have never read in either of them, 'Come to me, all you who are weary and burdened, and I will give you rest.'"

No, it is not wisdom or beauty—although they are there—that ultimately draws us to the way of Christ, but rather the promise of an easier way. It is a hope that draws us—the hope that when we cast our sorrows on this whippersnapper from Galilee we receive something far better than we'd ever imagine. It is an emerging confidence that this whippersnapper will go to the

cross for us and exchange our path of death and guilt and shame for a new life filled with undying love and forgiveness. What draws us is not flashy knowledge and sophisticated arguments that compels us to come to Jesus but rather the understanding that somehow, with his love and his community, our way is indeed made easier, even though following him may be dreadfully difficult at specific times.

Thankfully, this was recently revealed to me again during a week-long youth retreat. Several dozen people of a generation younger than mine spent six days praying and worshipping and studying Scripture. Although spending long days away from my family, sleeping on a hard mattress in a barely-air-conditioned residence hall is not how I'd ideally like to spend a week of the summer, I always return from these events somewhat renewed, not because I've had the opportunity to teach and lead but because the youth always manage to teach me something about trusting in Jesus.

Some speak it quietly in the comfort of a small group, while others take the opportunity to address the whole large group with a reflection on their faith. Some of them speak of heart-wrenching personal hardship and experiences with grief or abuse while others confess a relatively strong faith bred in their home congregations. No matter the method, no matter the venue, one theme is evident in every testimony: these youth desire an easier yoke than the one they carry now in life. They long for a Lord who is gentle and humble of heart. They seek a rest and comfort in a world that simultaneously idolizes youth and also expects them to grow up too fast. And in their prayers and concerns I detect a realization that coming to Christ is not purely an unloading and releasing of guilt and shame and heaviness of heart. I also hear an understanding that Jesus gives something in return. That is, he has a yoke, too. One for us to wear with him. He longs for us to change and grow and bear his Word to the world.

But I must tell you it is not primarily at these types of gatherings that I am reminded of Jesus' promise of an easier yoke and lighter burden. That happens each and every Sunday—indeed, each and every day—when I speak on the phone or share a word with someone in the hospital, when people I serve share their own stories of experiencing God's glory or their own prayer concerns for those they love, when they show up for worship in the middle of a hectic and busy lifestyle to anchor their week in the community of Christ's disciples. And it is people of all generations.

I am reminded of their deep faith when they arrive at the communion rail, hands open, head maybe bowed or eyes lifted up in hopeful expectation taking this guy from Nazareth seriously—not too unlike the children who come up here earlier in the service for a time with the pastor at the children's sermon—I see them wanting what Christ will give, presenting their shoulders once again for the gracious yoke, handing over their heavied hearts in exchange for that easier burden, a burden that brings forgiveness, joy, relief. It is there, in the bread and the wine, where they are reminded that Jesus bore the ultimate burden to give them life.

And then I see those people, once again—refreshed, empowered, head lifted higher, shouldering that lighter burden of the Spirit's transformation making their way back to their seats in the pew. And then making their way back out the door, ready to bear this faith once again this week to any generation they happen to meet in the marketplace. It is a living faith, born on the lips of true infants and children, whether they're 1 or 101...infants and children of God who know the love of the Father because, thanks be to God, he has revealed it to them.

Thanks be to God!