

Are You the One?

Matthew 11:2-11

When John heard in prison what the Messiah was doing, he sent word by his disciples and said to him, “Are you the one who is to come, or are we to wait for another?” Jesus answered them, “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.”

Have you ever had a moment when something didn't go according to plan? Maybe we had planned on taking a trip to see family. We bought our plane tickets and packed our bags and then the phone rings with the news that someone in their house tested positive for Covid. Maybe we had hoped that a medical procedure would help fix an issue, but then the doctor says that things hadn't gone according to plan. Maybe after three years of pandemic living, we had hoped things would be a bit different by now. And what's the feeling when our expectations fall through? Disappointment of course. John the Baptist is sitting in prison, drawing ticks on the walls as he awaits his execution. He has heard the whispers about what Jesus is doing since his baptism and somehow, we get the impression that it's a bit different than what he had expected. So he tells his disciples to go to Jesus and ask, “Are you the one, or should we be waiting for someone else?”

Right away the text is curious. John has given his life to pave the way for the coming Messiah except Jesus isn't living up to his expectations. After all, John was the one who baptized Jesus. He saw the dove descending. He heard the voice declare Jesus being the chosen one. He knew the one coming would be more powerful than he was. Yet, still Jesus is not quite who John expected him to be. Now John has read his bible. He knows what the old prophets said about what God's promised leader would do. So naturally he wonders: where's the sharpened axe to chop down the tyrants? Where's the refining fire of justice? Isn't there, at the very least, a pitchfork of judgement to separate the good from the bad? Where's the promised vindication or the eradication of evil once and for all!? So John wonders if Jesus is the real deal or not. “Are you the one or should we wait for someone else?”

Well, we know how he feels. We have expectations as well. We have read the stories about miracles and God's authority. We know the prophetic promise of God's justice to come. Every year we sing, “Joy to the world, the Lord has come/Let earth receive her king.” And we know what it feels like when we read the stories about God's kingdom, holding them up side by side with the news, and doesn't it seem like Jesus is in charge. What do we do when we read the healing stories and the illness isn't cured? What do we do when we place our hope in the Herod's being plucked from their thrones only to witness the cruelty happening in Ukraine or at our own borders. We have expectations of God, don't we? And when our expectations aren't met, we end up disappointed. Maybe we even ask the same question John does, “Are you the one, or should we be waiting for someone else?”

So, Jesus answers the question. What does he say? He says, “Go tell John that people are being healed. The poor have dignity. Eyes and ears have been opened. Creation is being restored.” He quotes the list of healing promises from the book of Isaiah. But notice if we read through that list, Jesus leaves something out. You see, before we get to the list of healings in Isaiah there is another promise: that God will deliver the people with righteous vengeance. But Jesus doesn't

mention it. Why not? Because God is not a punishing God. God does not inflict violence to scare people into submission. God knows that there is no such thing as righteous violence. There is only violence. And violence is a disease, which cannot be cured by spreading it to more people.

You see, violence is like that incident which happened last week in Morris County. Some people shot up a Duke Energy power station—rumor has it to stop a drag queen show occurring that night—but they took out all the power for the entire county. It is a perfect illustration for how violence works: everyone loses! It's why Jesus leaves out the retribution part of the Messiah's job description. So he basically answers John's question by saying, "God's promises ARE being fulfilled, BUT your expectation of me misses the point. Your expectation of God misses the point."

Well, what do we do with that? Since when does someone let go of their power peacefully or without a fight? How does a group of twelve unarmed disciples overthrow an empire? Perhaps it's the same way a small bald man in India overthrew an empire. Or the same way a Black preacher and a woman named Ella Baker sparked a fire of justice without violence. Or the same way the most recent Nobel Peace Prize winning journalist, Maria Ressa, talks about how the persistence of truth not violence is what ultimately matters. How does God's kingdom break through? By a group who are so dedicated toward wholeness and healing and truth-telling that they insist there is another way. By insisting that with violence—even righteous violence—nobody wins. Violence is a disease which can't be cured by spreading it to other people.

We know it isn't a popular message. Especially for a society addicted to guns and war and protecting its influence in the world. Which is why Jesus says, "Blessed are those who do not take offense by me." In the Greek the word for "offense" is literally *skandalon*. Blessed are those who aren't tripped up by the scandal of God's love which has nothing to do with violence despite what scripture says. The bible is wrong in that regard. God does not desire violence, we do. Which is why so many times violence is done in God's name. But the good news is that there is another way. Jesus insists on a way that promises restoration to creation, and dignity for the poor, and a Spirit of healing and compassion for perhaps even the oppressor if we aren't offended by the scandal of it.

"Blessed are those who do not take offense at me." Nobody said this following Jesus thing was going to be easy. There will be expectations. There will be disappointments. We might even have moments along the way when we wonder if our investment in faith is worth it. But blessed are those who are not scandalized by the ways of God's love, but instead are set free by it. "Joy to the world, the Lord has come. Let earth receive her king."