

Jesus, The Savior We Need

Matthew 11: 16-19, 25-30

Some time ago, I was talking with someone from another congregation. The person was going on and on about what a wonderful pastor they had back in the 1950's, a Rev. Carlson. According to this church member, Rev. Carlson was a terrific preacher, had a great personality, and everybody loved him. But that person said, one day Rev. Carlson's ministry in that church came to a crashing end.

I wondered what had happened. Did Rev. Carlson get caught stealing money from the church? Was he running around with some woman? But it turned out that it wasn't anything like that. No, that church member said what brought Rev. Carlson's ministry to an end was that on a particular October Saturday afternoon, some church members saw Rev. Carlson walking down the main street of town wearing a sweatshirt. Apparently in that community, back in the 1950's they had a pretty clear picture in their minds of what a pastor was supposed to look like, and a guy walking down the street wearing a sweatshirt wasn't it.

In a way, that was the same issue that Jesus faced. I don't know for sure if Jesus ever walked around the streets of Nazareth or Jerusalem in a sweatshirt, but it seems that people in that day had a pretty clear picture in their minds of what the Messiah was supposed to look like, of what the Son of God was supposed to look like, and as far as they were concerned, Jesus wasn't it.

Here in the 11th chapter of Matthew, just prior to the part where our text for today starts, John the Baptist is asking the question: "Are you the one who is to come, or are we to look for another?" In essence, "Jesus are you the one God has sent to us, because you aren't exactly what I thought we were looking for?" As you may remember, John was what you might call a fire and brimstone sort of preacher. He stood out at the Jordan River and hollered at the top of his lungs that if people didn't repent, that if they didn't change their ways, God was going to get them.

John seemed to be anticipating that when the Messiah came, that when the Son of God came, that person would be even more fire and brimstone than he was. When Jesus came

along, patting little kids on the head, telling tax collectors and sinners that God loved them, Jesus didn't exactly match the picture that John the Baptist had in mind for what the Messiah should look like.

Or, later on in this 11th chapter of Matthew, Jesus rails against the towns and cities where he had been teaching and healing. Jesus rails against them because by and large they refused to believe in him. The basic reason that those people refused to believe was because – just like John the Baptist – Jesus didn't match the picture that they had in mind for what the messiah should look like. In Particular, it seems that they were put off by the fact that Jesus spent so much time hanging out with the “wrong” sort of people. They were put off by the fact that instead of spending his time with the “good” people, the “religious” people, patting them on the back and complementing them on how very good they were, Jesus went out of his way to socialize with the “bad” people, telling them how God cared about them and how God forgave them for their sins.

In the face of that opposition and rejection, Jesus told that short, little parable that we heard today. Jesus said, “to what shall 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.’”

What Jesus is describing here is a familiar scene – a bunch of kids sitting around, bored, because they can't agree on what game to play. In Jesus' parable, apparently some of the children had their minds made up that they wanted to play by having a pretend wedding – that's probably what's meant by “we played the flute for you, and you did not dance.” But the other kids apparently had their minds made up that they wanted to play by having a pretend funeral – that's probably what's meant by “we wailed, and you did not mourn.” But since neither side in that argument would give in and change their minds about what they would play, they all ended up just sitting there and doing nothing.

Quite likely what Jesus was getting at in that parable is that sometimes we get it stuck in our heads about the way that we want things to be that we just tune out anything that doesn't match our way of thinking. And that's what happened with the people in Jesus day. They had it so stuck in their heads about what the Messiah should look like, that when the true Messiah, Jesus, stood right there in front of them, they just tuned him out because he really didn't match the picture that they had in their minds.

One of the main reasons Jesus didn't match the picture that they had in their minds was because of having a soothing, calming effect on people, more often than not Jesus irritated people. Jesus irritated people because he pushed people out of their comfort zones. Jesus irritated people because he told people that no matter how much they prayed,

no matter how much they read the Bible, no matter how much they believed, that didn't count for anything if there were people who were hurting and felt excluded and left out, and they didn't do something to reach out to those people and welcome them and help them. When Jesus told people that, Jesus got their goat.

As everybody is probably aware, if someone "gets your goat," that means that they do something to really irritate you. But did you ever wonder where that expression comes from? For centuries goats, for some reason have been considered to have a calming influence on horses. Especially before big horse races, owners would make a point of putting a goat in their horse's stall so that when it came time for the race, the horse would be calm and focused. But sometimes an opponent would sneak into a horse stall and take the goat away. The result was an irritated and nervous horse that tended to perform badly in the race.

I believe what this passage in the Gospel of Matthew is forcing us to ask ourselves is:

Does Jesus ever get our goat? Does Jesus ever irritate us? That may sound like a strange question. But does Jesus ever push us or stretch us or force us out of our comfort zone in some way? Does Jesus ever cause us to change what we do in our lives? Because if that is happening, if Jesus isn't getting our goat, at least from time to time, the Jesus we think we know probably isn't the real Jesus. He's probably nothing more than a figment of our own imagination.

The true Jesus stands before us not necessarily as the Savior that we might want or that we might prefer. But the true Jesus stands before us as the Savior that we need. When we hear Jesus' voice in the Bible, or in prayer, or in worship, and he gets our goat by challenging something about us that he wants us to change, don't ignore him. Don't just dismiss his words because they're not what we want to hear. Because what Jesus is

trying to do is move us from where we are to where God wants us to be. God wants us to be more like Jesus who cares about us and all people so that he cries out:

“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.” Amen!!