

**“BUT DO WE HAVE FAITH?” A Sermon delivered by the Reverend Dr. Geoffrey G. Drutchas, St. Paul United Church of Christ, Taylor, July 9, 2017**

Congregation, this morning we have a very unhappy gospel passage. It recounts a moment when Jesus was in the thick of his ministry and getting almost impatient and very frustrated. He has been preaching for some time. He has been healing many people. He has been trying to spread love everywhere he can. But what has it gotten him? Some big disappointment. His ministry of proclamation is not flourishing as it should. Folks don't seem to have the ears to hear what they need for their own salvation.

Our morning gospel lesson is close to a screed about all this. (*Matthew 11:16-24, 27-30*) Jesus opens our lesson with a question. “To what can I compare this generation?” He then supplies the answer. “They are,” he says, “like children sitting in the marketplaces and calling out to others: ‘We played the pipe for you and you did not dance, we sang a dirge and you did not mourn.’” (*Matthew 11:17*) Yes, the generation he confronts are acting like children, full of impulsivity, who just want to play—and play some more.

“Elsewhere Jesus teaches that unless we become like children we can never know or be received into the kingdom of heaven. (*Matthew 11:25, 18:3*) In that context Jesus is commending to us the innocence of children and their trusting nature, which is something sweet and beautiful. Here, however, in our passage from Matthew Jesus is very explicitly warning us against childishness which is something very different and not at all attractive or commendable or helpful.

If we have any doubt about what Jesus is saying, all we have to do is look to the next verses and the examples our Savior provides of what is amiss with the reigning generation. Jesus cites the troubles of his own cousin John who came out of the wilderness to proclaim that the kingdom of God is drawing nigh and to prepare people for what was coming next.

Now John was a saint—a real saint. Morally and spiritual fastidious, he walked his talk. He didn't drink. He didn't carouse. He wasn't a glutton. He was incorruptible. Calling men and women to repentance from sin, John offered the example of his own pure life. Yet what did guys and gals of that generation say about him? Their exact words: “He has a demon!” In other words, he's of the

devil because no one can be that good and still human. This was their way of discrediting and discounting John and ignoring his call to get back to God.

Jesus then shares with us his own dilemma. As God's son, he's already pure. Jesus doesn't feel the need to say no to everything worldly as Cousin John did. Instead, without getting carried away with anything, Jesus is willing to sit down with anyone, eating and drinking freely. At his mother's demand, he is even willing to turn water into wine so that the guests at a wedding feast can continue to enjoy themselves. (*John 2:1-11*) Yet what does Jesus get for his graciousness, his willingness to be one of the people, rather than standing aloof from them? Just like Cousin John he gets grief. Lots of it. The same generation that put down John puts down him, saying terrible things about him, discredits and discounts him too.

Yet it doesn't end there. This same fickle generation calls for miracles. They want healing for themselves. But they also want Jesus to prove himself.

Ironically, Jesus gives them many miracles because he is who he is and wants to renew and redeem all God's children as best he can. However, as our morning passage underscores, it's never enough. The problem is not John. The problem is not Jesus. The problem is the faithlessness of a generation.

Not all are bad. Jesus does denounce the town of Chorazin. He also says "Woe to you, Bethsaida!" And from what he sees, the residents of Capernaum seem to be headed to Hades for sure. But Jesus holds out more hope for the towns of Tyre and Sidon, just as God did for Judah and Jerusalem in the days of the Prophet Jeremiah. (*Matthew 11:20-24; Jeremiah 33:14-16*)

In fact, in every generation there are men and women who swim against the current, live against the grain of the times, who hear the call to repent of any sins, and stand up for what is right and loving and true. This is what Jesus calls us to do. This is how Jesus calls us to be. This is how Jesus wants us to live in our time and age. When we embrace his way of love and righteousness, we become his true disciples.

There are so many excuses that we can give for going our own merry way, rather than following Jesus. But God sees right through them. Jesus does too.

We should also, being honest with ourselves. We need to set aside all excuses and be true to Jesus in what we say and do. In this way we become a positive example of how men and women should live, whether or not other people want to take notice and learn.

Unfortunately, just as Jesus is pointing out to us, there are some generations that are more faithless than others. People and nations can become so full of themselves that they don't think they need God or are only disposed to embrace him on their own terms. What they're looking for is a God to serves them, helping them get just what they want. Yet as Jesus always makes clear pursuit of self-serving gods is always a dead end. What people think is going to make them happy will lead to frustration and emptiness for themselves and everyone around them. It may be a paradox. But is only when we turn away from sin and selfishness and focus on building up our relationships with God and other people that we find the peace, serenity, and love that everybody in their deepest being wants. All the effort is worth it. In Jesus' own words, "Wisdom is proved right by her deeds." (*Matthew 11:19*) What seems like heavy lifting now will have its reward. Just listen to what Jesus offers us as reassurance: "Come to me, all you who are weary and burdened, 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." (*Matthew 11:28-30*)

Being a disciple of Christ isn't glamorous. Yet in time we will shine, just as the saints do. And for eternity, rather than for just a day—or for ten minutes of fame and celebrity here and now.

In the church today we face a big challenge. Amid a culture that prizes the impulsive and spontaneous as the most authentic way to be, there's more fickleness than faithfulness to be found. Fewer people want to make an abiding, disciplined commitment to anything except what might serve themselves.

On the one hand, we who are church-ed have a responsibility to make the gospel of Jesus Christ as sensible, accessible, and attractive to others as possible. Yes, it's important to go out of our way to welcome everyone to Christ. On the other hand, our life in Christ is about moral and spiritual engagement, not entertainment. We don't have to apologize to anybody for that.

Ultimately, we need to realize and accept as Jesus did that there are always going to be people who make excuses for why they can't walk with him. At the same time, for the sake of our own salvation and the good example we want to set for others, we always need to be make that we aren't making some excuses of our own as to why we aren't walking more closely and faithfully with Jesus, especially if profess to be truly committed to him.

May God deliver us from both childishness and hypocrisy, helping us all to be the faithful, righteous, loving people that we really want to be. **Amen.**