

Woes, Weariness and Wisdom

Fourth Sunday After Pentecost

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Text: Matthew 11:16-30

As a preacher, I have this ongoing fantasy – but before that sounds like too much information, let me explain. The fantasy can involve some people talking together, and one person in the group in particular is offering a lot of encouragement and compassion to the others– and another person in the group remarks: ‘you know, you have such a preachy quality about you when you talk to others – I love that! – I really want to be more preachy too’. Or I fantasize that I am invited to speak to a group about some really important issue, and the person recruiting me says – you know, we’ve had too much of that sort of dry, moralistic, haranguing from our speakers (sometimes, if I’m really going all out with the fantasy, I think of this being one of those Ted-Talk events), but we realize what we really need is someone who is relevant and insightful and engaging – we need someone to really preach at us! – please preach as long as you’d like!’ – and I humbly accept the invitation. Or sometimes I fantasize that a parent is talking to a teenager about some issue, and the parent says something really cool that connects just right to the situation – and the teenager says: ‘that really makes sense – please preach some more at me, Dad!’

That is the fantasy - but the harsh reality is that ‘preach’ and ‘preachy’ are not at all positive terms in popular usage. To be called ‘preachy’ is not a compliment; ‘don’t preach at me’ does not put preaching in a positive light. As a preacher I cringe as ‘preach’ is equated with being self-righteous, critical, superior...and you can probably throw in long-winded and uninteresting too...I hear it all the time. Oh well

– I don't expect to change it – and honestly that preachy definition is really all too well deserved. But just in case you think this is just bad news for preachers like me, 'preachy' actually seems to be a characterization of religious folks in general – critical, self-righteous – the kind of people who go to church...the kind of people who have their children baptized. And so now if you are going to be offended by this preacher calling you preachy...then I will point out that the one who started it is Jesus!

“But to what will I compare this generation? It is like children sitting in the marketplaces and calling to one another, ¹⁷‘We played the flute for you, and you did not dance; we wailed, and you did not mourn.’ ¹⁸For John came neither eating nor drinking, and they say, ‘He has a demon’; ¹⁹the Son of Man came eating and drinking, and they say, ‘Look, a glutton and a drunkard, a friend of tax collectors and sinners!’ Yet wisdom is vindicated by her deeds.”

OK – so here Jesus offers what is for us an unfamiliar little saying about a children's play song and then Jesus makes a connection to how John the Baptist and he, Jesus, were both rejected by religious folks – John criticized for being too uptight and Jesus for being too loose. The little children's chant or song seems to be a way that children tease each other - that whether someone is happy or sad, you insist on the opposite. 'That's what you're like' Jesus says to the religious leaders - I'm sure they did not appreciate being compared to annoying children, but what Jesus is really calling them is preachy - religious folks always ready to find fault. When John the Baptist comes as a reforming prophet: 'he's too fiery - too strict - too radical – he has a demon!' ; when Jesus comes with good news for all: 'he's too permissive - too liberal - too scandalous!' (and they said Jesus had a demon too!). Well – here's what I think Jesus is getting at: that religious people excel most at finding fault with others; that religious people seem happiest when they are making other people miserable; that religious people are rigid, self-righteous, and quite annoying! What

the religious really don't like of course, is anyone competing with them for people's attention – it must be a competition after all – but Jesus here refuses to play the game. Instead, Jesus says that what he is after, and what will ultimately show its worth, is Wisdom – God's Wisdom.

So, fellow religious people – Jesus has identified us as chronically judgmental and annoying people. So, assuming we might not want to keep that reputation, what sort of wisdom might we receive to make us less – I cringe to say it – preachy?

Well, Jesus' way of wisdom is a challenging path – because it turns out that the alternative to self-righteousness is not some sort of feel-good fluff; in fact what Jesus focuses on first as he turns from religion to wisdom, is to say 'Woe!' 'Woe to you Chorazin – Bethsaida – Carpenaum' –woe to you' Jesus has come to these places sharing good news – the wisdom of God's grace and God's ways - but the response of religious folks has been criticism and entrenchment – so Jesus says to them: 'Woe'. This 'woe' from Jesus is the kind of thing we often hear as judgment from God – Jesus speaks of a 'day of judgment' – but as you listen to the text, you can see that this is not something Jesus speaks punitively or out of spite – it is a 'Woe' of consequence that Jesus speaks of: to turn away from God's path, God's grace, leads to a way of woe – a deadly path rather than the way of life God provides. So if we are to be followers of Jesus, rather than religious people, part of the language we need to find is that of 'Woe!' – it is not a woe of judgment as we look down at others; it is to look at ourselves and our world and be honest about the consequences of what we choose. It is to see in our world and in ourselves violence and injustice and division, and say 'Woe!'; it is to see in ourselves and world destructive religion and inequity and misuse of creation, and say 'Woe!'; it is to see in and around us the abuse of power, the neglect of children, the corruption of

justice, and say ‘Woe’ – ‘woe...these are not the ways of life – these are not the ways God created us to be.’ It is a ‘woe’ not as the religious righteous sniping from the sidelines, but a ‘woe’ of honesty- and of wisdom - speaking the truth that such paths of woe will destroy us all.

For the way of wisdom, Jesus starts with ‘woe’, and turns to ‘weary’. ‘Come to me all who are weary and carrying heavy burdens’...I learned that verse as ‘come all who labor’ – but I find ‘weary’ to be very meaningful in evoking what Jesus speaks to here. When I hear ‘weary’, it resonates with me - lately, as I follow events global, national, local, personal with family and friends, I have felt weary – so much war, injustice, suffering – such extreme violence - so much division, acrimony, greed – too many children in need, too many problems, too many people suffering senselessly. I am deeply grateful for my life, but I listen to life and I feel weary. And I believe it is a kind of weariness that tires of brokenness and longs for wholeness for this world – and I believe it is to such weariness that Jesus speaks. Jesus as the Lord of creation knows that we are created to want wholeness, to desire true life – and I believe Jesus speaks in a way that understands that the human soul is at some level weary whether you are the oppressor or the oppressed – there is a human capacity and desire to speak to, to turn to a different way.

Wouldn’t that be a different word for us to be able to share than religion often gives? – very un-preachy – to be honest with people about being weary - and to say we know you’re weary too. And then, sharing weariness, to share too this rather peculiar word of comfort from Jesus: ‘I know you’re weary – I will give you rest...now here’s a burden for you’! Jesus does not speak comfort that is a way of escape or denial – no, the Wisdom of God calls us to take on the true burden of our hearts: a burden to care for this world of ‘woe’; the call to be faithful in seeking

wholeness; to carry a constant of trust in God's presence and grace even when there are no easy answers.

So Jesus speaks of a certain kind of Wisdom – that has to do with 'woe' and 'weariness' – which are a way of being not religious, but faithful. And in between Jesus' words about religion and woe and weariness, he speaks to how this is so. Just as he speaks of God's wisdom, Jesus interestingly also says these things are 'hid from the wise and intelligent but revealed to infants.' Well this is not Jesus' way of being anti-intellectual or dumbing-down faith – this is getting to the core of not being preachy, of not being religious. Rather than people who define themselves by knowing so much more than others or who are so much more clever or better than others, those who really hear the good news are people who know how much they depend on God. You know something about this infant, baby Boden we baptized today? – he can't make it own his own – he needs his parents, family. The wisdom infants witness to is that we are all just the same – we depend on God's grace, God's promises, God's gift of life and freedom in Christ to truly live. That is why we baptize Boden today – not to be better-than or exclusive, but to witness to the truth that we all depend on God's grace from birth to death. What if that was our voice – our witness - to this world of 'woe' and 'weariness'? – that we find our humanity in together looking to God for wisdom, for true life.

On the joy of this baptism day, it may not seem to fit so well to speak of 'woe' and 'weariness', but I think in listening to Jesus we find a word of deep wisdom and hope – for Boden, for us, for us to share: to turn from religion to trust in God; to turn from the weariness of brokenness to the gracious burden of a love for God's world; to turn from our illusions of self-sufficiency to entrusting our lives to God's grace.

That is the baptism promise for each of us today, that God's promise to love this world endures and continues to reach out to embrace this world - that the burden of God's heart is to free us from 'woe' and 'weariness' to the wisdom of life placed in God's hands and thriving in God's ways. That is a word about which I could even have a fantasy to say: 'that'll preach!' AMEN.