

Luke 7:18-35
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Sixth Sunday of Epiphany

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“Are you the one who is to come?”

One of the most striking things about the Gospel accounts is that Jesus almost always offends the people around him. I mean, even while he is described as healing people and doing miraculous deeds -- things that seem pretty great, overall, right? -- Jesus still manages to offend the people around him. And when he doesn't offend, he is either misunderstood or becomes the cause of some great confusion or conflict between parties. Reading some of the parables that he told, it is not too hard to relate to the confusion of the disciples. But it seems that even when Jesus is direct in his speech and in his actions, folks still have trouble understanding his message or they are quickly outraged by him and want to kill him. One could go so far as to say that the life of Jesus, according to our Gospel accounts, is mostly just a sequence of disruptive, offensive events. The Gospel of Luke is full of stories of people rejecting Jesus. And it's really something all the Gospel accounts are unified on -- after all, while the Gospel accounts may differ on a lot of important points, they all agree that he was crucified and that this was the result of people rejecting him and his message.

I suppose that makes sense if we think of Jesus as something of a prophet as many of the figures in the Gospel of Luke seem to do. Prophetic people are often rejected and scorned by the masses. This is, of course, true both in the Bible and throughout history, and it is true in our contemporary times as well. But as Luke's Gospel emphasizes, while Jesus may have a lot in common with prophets, he is *more than* a prophet. A prophet, as a spokesperson for God, *points* to the truth and in the process exposes all the falsehoods and lies upon which we build our lives. The keepers of the status quo either do their best to hide from prophets or they reject prophets. This is why John the Baptist is imprisoned. But a prophet is still simply one who *points* to the truth. The prophet is not herself the truth. Luke tells us that Jesus is *more than* a prophet. Jesus is more than a prophet because he does not merely *point* to the truth, he is in his very person the embodiment and presence of the truth. In other words, there is no gap between Jesus and the truth. That is what it means to confess that Jesus is God. Jesus embodies the truth and as such his very presence is a threat to every status quo. Jesus is disruptive and offensive and finally rejected and crucified because he embodied the truth of God in a world possessed by violence.

When Marcia and I traveled to Germany last year to meet the daughter of Ernst Käsemann and visit the Archive at the University of Tübingen, we visited a museum in Colmar, France to see the Isenheim Altarpiece. If you are unfamiliar, the Isenheim Altarpiece is a massive piece of artwork made by Matthias Grünewald in the early 16th century. The Altarpiece has two sets of wings and in the center stands a poignant representation of the crucifixion of Christ. The piece depicts Christ's emaciated body writhing under the pain of the nails driven through his hands and feet. His body is almost green, depicting a skin disease caused by a plague at the time; he is covered with open sores and thorns. The piece is intended to show Christ's identification with the despised. On Christ's left stands John the Baptist with his massive index finger outstretched and pointing to the Crucified Christ. The Latin text of John 3:30 is written next to John the Baptist's head: "He must increase; I must decrease." There is John the one who, like the prophets of old, merely points to the truth embodied in the one rejected by the powers of the world.

Are *you* the one who is to come? Or should we wait for another?

Our lectionary reading for today begins with the disciples of John the Baptist reporting what they had seen and heard about Jesus. If you remember, at this point in Luke's narrative John is already in prison, having been locked up by Herod back in Chapter 3. So, John needs his disciples to report to him about what Jesus is up to. John has been in prison since before Jesus had even started his ministry, so who knows how much he even knows at this point. But if you remember, John the Baptist has been an important figure in the Gospel of Luke, one who has seemed to comprehend the nature and purpose of Jesus's mission better than perhaps anyone else. In Chapter 1, John's birth is foretold by the angel Gabriel before Jesus is even mentioned. Gabriel appears to Zechariah and informs him that his wife, Elizabeth, who was barren, will have a son. The angel informs Zechariah that John will be this really significant person about whom many will rejoice and who will be "great in the sight of the Lord"; John will be the one who will prepare a people for the Lord. And if you remember, when Mary visits Elizabeth, the baby in Elizabeth's womb, John, actually *jumps* at the sound of Mary's voice! So, John is a highly significant character for Luke's narrative, as one who seems most certain of his own role as well as the divine purpose of Jesus's mission. We see this confirmed in Chapter 3, when people actually inquire whether John himself is the Messiah -- "the one who is to come"; John responds confidently by saying, "I baptize you with water; but one who is more powerful than I is coming; I am not worthy to untie the thong of his sandals. He will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and fire."

John is the one who prepares the way for the coming kingdom; John is the prophet who simply points to the truth embodied in Jesus -- to the one who is to come. But that's why this passage is especially odd. Here we have disciples of John now apparently reporting to him in prison about what Jesus is up to. We can assume that they spoke to John about how Jesus had been healing people and performing miracles and so on; after all, this passage comes directly right after the story of Jesus raising a widow's son! So it seems strange that John would be like, "hey, ask Jesus this: 'Are you the one who is to come, or are we to wait for another?'" It's one thing for others to inquire with confusion about Jesus's messiahship, but John? That should strike us as odd. Luke, then reminds the reader, "Jesus had just then cured many people of diseases, plagues, and evil spirits, and had given sight to many who were blind." Then Jesus replies to John's disciples: "Go and tell John what you have seen and heard: the blind receive their sight, the lame walk, the lepers are cleansed, the deaf hear, the dead are raised, the poor have good news brought to them. ²³ *And blessed is anyone who takes no offense at me.*" It is that last verse that stands out to me, because it seems like it is directed at John. Is even John taking offense at Jesus?

Perhaps John had been blinded by his own expectations of what the Messiah should look like. Perhaps John had expected *more* from Jesus; after all, here he is still sitting in Herod's prison. You can imagine what John is thinking: is this really the one who is to come, the one who will bring forth the reign of God, the one who will free the prisoners and deliver the oppressed? If so, then *why* am *I* still in prison? Why do I still suffer? I have heard about all the great things that Jesus has done, the healings and the miracles, but surely there must be *more* to it than this! Should we be looking elsewhere for a deliverer? Should we be looking for someone else?

After John's disciples leave, Jesus turns to the crowds and seems to turn John's question ("Who are you?") on its head: Who am *I*? No, the question is, who are *you*, John? What did you go out into the wilderness to look at? What did you go out into the wilderness to see?

As followers of Jesus we, too, want to understand what he is up to in our world. Where is the kingdom of God about which Jesus preached? We, too, like John, experience the contradiction between what we see happening in the world around us and what we desperately hope and long for. And we, too, expect *more* out of Jesus. We too ask: "are you the one who is to come? Or should wait another?" Or, perhaps, we believe that we ourselves should get on with the work Christ is unable or unwilling to do. We turn the phrase around: "He must decrease; *I* must increase!" But to do this is to reverse the call of the church. We are not the truth to which Christ points -- we are called to *bear witness* to the truth, and with John the Baptist we are called to point to the Crucified Nazarene. Yet, nothing offends us more than the crucifixion of Jesus, for it means that the truth and the power of God are revealed where we would least expect it, not in the halls of power -- whether in first-century Rome or in 21st century Washington -- but among those despised and rejected by the powers of the world, among sinners and outcasts, among undocumented immigrants and refugees, among the imprisoned and abandoned, those in whom the world sees nothing but a criminal and threat. Blessed is the one who is not offended by the Rejected Crucified Nazarene, the one who does not leave the despised alone! By God's mercy, may we bear witness to the truth.