

Wicker Park Lutheran Church

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I know I know, I was really yell-y during the reading. But you know those days where you are just dealing with *a lot* and it feels like you can't catch a break? Where you've got a bunch of really strong and conflicting feelings swirling around inside you, but for whatever reason you don't have the ability to like step away for a moment and process all those feelings and re-center yourself? And then, because you're frustrated by this whole situation, you start resorting to some maybe...not great strategies to deal with things, and your responses are suddenly just dripping in sarcasm and mockery? Well Jesus had days like that too, and one of those is today. And I know sometimes statements like that can make us feel uncomfortable—we want Jesus to be perpetually calm and loving and inviting and full of mercy—and he generally is, but the fact is Jesus came down to earth, took on flesh, and then experienced the whole range of the human experience, and that necessarily involves at least occasionally being frustrated and annoyed and overwhelmed. And so, it then follows that Jesus had times where *he* was frustrated and annoyed and overwhelmed.

And in today's reading, Jesus has a pretty good reason to feel these kinds of feelings. Right before this speech, messengers from John the Baptist approached Jesus with an inquiry from their teacher: "Are you the one who is to come, or are we to wait for someone else?" And Jesus gives them reassurance, essentially "don't take my word on it John, look at my actions, I've healed people, restored sight, brought the dead back to life, you are a man of great faith, you *know* what this means." Then he gives what will be his final parting words to John, "and blessed is anyone who takes no offense at me." John, his *cousin* who is mere months older than him, is currently in prison, and this time, John is never going to get released. Shortly after this exchange, John will be beheaded.

And Jesus knows this is coming. Matthew makes it clear again and again that Jesus is fully aware of the path set before him by God, and John plays such an important role in that path, that it would be silly to think this portion of the plan was kept a secret from Jesus. John's time is rapidly approaching and Jesus knows it. What sorts of feelings do you think you'd feel if you were in his place? Sorrow? Frustration? Guilt? Defeat? Anger? Dread? Probably some mixture of these and others? But he's in the midst of preaching to a crowd right now and so he doesn't get time to break down about it. And I see him both celebrating and mourning his cousin in his address to them. Calling John "a prophet

and more than a prophet” naming him the one foretold in scripture who would prepare the way for the Messiah. And then he continues that speech with today’s reading. And he starts that by chastising and mocking everyone in the crowd.

Usually when Jesus calls people children, it’s a term of endearment, but...you know how you love--your kids or your niblings or friend’s kids or the kids—or if you are a kid, how you love your siblings or friends or cousins—and you usually like spending time with them and everything. But you know those days where they ask you to play pretend with them, and you do, but it seems like they keep changing the rules to the game and getting upset with you because “you’re not doing it right!” And you’re not *trying* to ruin their game, you just genuinely don’t understand what they’re expecting from you. In Jesus’ example he’s talking about children playing in the marketplace who are getting upset that people who are traveling in and out of the market are not stopping to play with them. That they were playing pretend at having a wedding and passerby did not stop and celebrate sufficiently enough, and the children yelled at them for that. Then they rapidly switched the game to playing pretend at a funeral possession instead and now they’re upset that passerby are not playing that game correctly either because they wanted you to tear your clothes and really wail. Meanwhile, you’re just trying to pass through to or from the market and you’re carrying a bunch of stuff and stressed yourself with tasks you have to do and don’t have the bandwidth to puzzle out what these kids—who are complete strangers to you—and who seem to keep changing their minds want.

That is the image Jesus uses to describe the people. And yeah, maybe it’s not his best moment. But he’s frustrated! He knows John is going to die soon, and so many people rejected John’s message because they didn’t like that John was out in the wilderness away from society and eating bugs and honey and abstaining from anything pleasurable in life, and because they didn’t like those things, they found excuses to dismiss his message. “The man’s got a demon! That’s why he’s acting like that. We shouldn’t listen to his ravings.” And then Jesus came and then many of the people rejected Jesus’ message because they didn’t like that Jesus was amongst the people eating good food and nice wine when he could have and took genuine pleasure in being around his friends, and because they didn’t like that, they found excuses to dismiss his message. “The man’s drunk! And he hangs out with tax collectors and sinners. We shouldn’t listen to his ravings!” But Jesus says hey, instead of judging us by our personalities, look at our actions. If we were really both just raving fools, would John’s ministry of repentance and spiritual revival have been so far reaching? Would I have been able to heal so many? Wisdom is vindicated by her deeds. How often in our own lives do we dismiss the work others are doing because we don’t like their personality or disagree with the way they live their lives? Even though we do actually agree with their goals?

And then Jesus goes into a full on rant. Which we skipped because it had a lot of geography. But in it Jesus is going off on a handful of Judean cities near the Sea of Galilee, because in these cities, Jesus did all sorts of feats, and even with all these signs

and wonders before their eyes, the people didn't repent and believe in him. Yeah that person can walk now but...I heard that Jesus guy? After he healed all of those lepers, he and his *friends* all sat around getting drunk and celebrating! He's not the kind of person we should be associating with! Anyhow, Jesus rants about this for five solid verses and the important part from here I want to highlight from is that in that time, Jesus goes from being frustrated to full angry ranting. Is it his best moment? No. Is he going through a lot and has a lot of really valid reasons to feel angry right now? Absolutely! John will soon be losing his life as a result of his ministry, and despite his cousin's steadfastness and obedience towards God, the people still were jerks to him. And Jesus knows an even more gruesome death is in store for him and he is doing *so much* trying to help people and still people are giving him all this crap! And he has been trying to hold it all together but he's reached the end of his rope and all of his frustrations just start pouring out. And I'm sure you've been there before too, we all have, where now that you've started ranting it's just going to keep going and the words are pouring out of your mouth and maybe you didn't even realize how much some of these things were bothering you until you found yourself shouting them but you did but your realize now that it's true. And you could just keep going and going and you have no plan, this is all just raw feelings and now you're on a roll and it feels like you could just keep going on and on forever.

And I know, I know these are not fun feelings, we general don't like to dwell in them. But today's good news is found in those feelings. First that Jesus had those feelings too. You are not a failure for feeling that way from time to time. That is such a *normal* part of being human that God made flesh felt that way sometimes too. You are not alone in feeling that way, and God is absolutely capable of relating to you when you feel that way. And the second part of today's good news is that Jesus models for us what we can do when we do feel that way.

He starts to pray. And yes, the prayer also starts off as frustrated and passive aggressive but as he continues onward in prayer he begins to re-center himself. He is able, through prayer, to remind himself who he is and who God is. "No one knows the Father except the Son...and anyone to whom the Son chooses to reveal him." And there's a lot of self-reflection in that statement. The only way the people can come to know God is through Jesus and...in this moment Jesus is not really doing a good job at that task. But from this moment of prayer, of taking all his anger and fear and sorrow and frustration to God, Jesus is able to recalibrate rather quickly. And that is not a special Jesus-only privilege, we are all invited to do the same, God can absolutely handle your anger and isn't going to judge you, and like Jesus, you can use that time in prayer to bring your thoughts and emotions back to the sorts of places you'd rather they be.

Because just look at the massive turn around that time in prayer had for Jesus. He was able to go from focusing on himself and his own feelings to looking outwards and

considering the people around him. There is no doubt in my mind that Jesus is weary and carrying heavy burdens, but he already knows what he can do when he feels that way, and the people around him don't. He was able to, just seconds before, lay his heavy burdens before God and find rest in his soul, and by doing that he is able to go from full rage to this moment of gentle empathy and welcome and offer some of the most reassuring, loving and comforting words in all of Matthew's gospel. He knows how to do this already, because as the Son he knows the Father, but the people around him? They *need* Jesus to help them get there. And he does, by giving them a real life example of how they can use prayer when they are feeling overwhelmed, and the kinds of rest their souls can have through this sort of relationship with God. And all of that came about because of one moment of chit chat with God when Jesus was feeling very very angry.

And so my challenge for all of this week, is to learn from Jesus and the next time you're feeling those kinds of feelings, take a moment to pray about it, and see what sorts of transformations God can do in you. It sure beats a full on rant, right? Amen.