

“Are You the One?”

Matthew 11:1-6

December, 12 2010

It is always a relief when someone ELSE asks your question. When I began my student career at Clemmons Elementary School, I believed that if Mrs. Lockhart – who I LOVED - explained it, then I should understand it. I did not want to ask for any kind of special help. In my mind, that meant one of two things. Either I was dumber than everybody else OR Mrs. Lockhart was not very good at her job, and I simply could not entertain either one of those calamities. So, what a relief when I had a question, and someone ELSE asked it. Even better if the questioner was also the smartest kid in the class. After all, if the one with all the answers does not know the answer, then we do not feel so bad about not knowing it ourselves.

That means that we are in good shape this morning because someone else asks the question. *Are you the one who is to come, or are we to wait for another?* This question pops up in one shape or form for just about every person in the church, including the strongest, most faithful, most competent Christians. Is Jesus the one? Do we agree with his version of faith and what it means to follow God? Has the church really gotten hold of something that makes a difference, or is this business of Christmas and its Christ just a charming story – something to inspire seasonal generosity and greeting cards with pretty pictures and colorful presents by a glittering tree? Why DO we do all of this? Is it because Jesus is the one?

Since the question seems to threaten our holiday cheer, we don't ask and don't tell. When we come to the prayer concerns every week, nobody has ever raised their hand and said I'm struggling with my belief. God is letting me down. I don't know if God knows what he is doing. Can you pray about THAT? Is our silence in that area because we don't have those thoughts ever? Or, because we do not want our hands to be in the air in this place where we are supposed to celebrate strong faith and passionate spirit? Either we are dumber than everybody else or God is not such a good god. We simply cannot entertain either one of those calamities.

So, thank heavens when we are knocking around in our own brains, we can look up and notice whose hand IS in the air. It is the hand of the smartest kid in the class. John the Baptist! John is the one who said wonderful things about Jesus. John is the one who, when cousin Mary came knocking, recognized Jesus from his mother's womb and leapt with joy –like he'd had a prenatal Red Bull. John is the one who has been out and about telling everybody to prepare the way of the Lord; make his paths straight. John is the one with the radical faith that puts him as a prize contestant on *what not to wear* and has him dining on bugs by candlelight. And, John is the one who knew Jesus the moment he laid eyes on him at the river Jordan. Do you remember that? John had been telling people to repent and get baptized because the kingdom of heaven was coming. And, Jesus – of all people – takes heed. He walks the aisle with every head bowed and every eye closed - to respond to John's message. Jesus – of all people - shows up to be baptized...by John! And, John OF COURSE tries to talk him out of it – after all, he is Jesus, for the love of God. John said, “It is I who should be baptized by YOU.” He KNEW who Jesus was. In his heyday, John was the Superman of faith – he's the one with the highest GPA. And, would you look at that? He's the one slouching in his chair with his hand held up in defeat.

*Are you the one who is to come, or are we to wait for another?* Doesn't that seem out of character for big, bad John the Baptist? He hasn't been living under a rock. He has kept up with Jesus and he knows that Jesus long ago packed up his hammer and nails, brushed off the sawdust and is now well into his ministerial career—healing and teaching and feeding. What about that does John not get? Are you the one? Or, should we wait for another?

Well, in John's defense, things were not going well for him. In the first place, he was in jail. God's work does not always lead to smiles and hugs and touchy feely sharing. The work of the Lord led John into some serious jail time. The background to that is that Herod, the leading politician, did a bad thing. He married his niece who was already married to his brother. John the Baptist was old school. He did not snuggle up to Herod and say, "It's ok, buddy. That's just the way you are." No. John named Herod's actions for what they were and Herod took offense. Politicians don't like preachers calling them out on anything, much less adultery! So, John was in a heap of trouble with Herod, and his head was about to be served up on a silver platter, literally. Nothing was going the way he had hoped. Nothing was going according to plan. How frustrating. For crying out loud in the wilderness, the Messiah was supposed to change things. He was supposed to fix it so that the wicked no longer prospered and the righteous, like himself, were saved – at one word from the Messiah, the very walls of prison should come tumbling down. That's what a Messiah was supposed to do when he arrived on earth. He was supposed to take care of things. But, Jesus the Messiah? Nice guy, but he sure was not flexing his muscles and winning over the prestigious people of his day – which was part of the problem. Jesus was not impressed by your name, or your ancestry, or your money or your job, and that meant that he was in trouble himself...all the time... he wasn't living up to anybody's expectations, especially John. While John was making his way in the dessert by changing bugs into lunch, Jesus was waltzing around weddings in Cana changing water to wine. While John crossed the street to maintain his purity and avoid traffic with sinners, Jesus crossed lines to eat with all of the unfit, unclean, and unworthy people he could find. Worst of all, while John spent his entire life warning people to repent and save their souls, Jesus came along and told them to leave the saving to God. What they were called to do was love one another. Over and over, John handed Jesus the ax, urging him to strike at the rotten wood of the world. *Come on, Jesus, take them out.* Over and over Jesus said, no, pointing out the new growth, the green places that John could not or would not see. Jesus and John did not agree on what the one who is to come would do. And, this not only confused John. It broke him. "Are you the one, or are we to wait for another?"

For once, wouldn't you like Jesus to give a straight up yes or no? But, we get, *Go and tell John what you hear and see.* And, by the way, make sure you are hearing and seeing the right things. Here's a clue. Ask John if he remembers what the great prophet Isaiah said about the Messiah – something about the blind seeing and the lame walking. Have you seen the small things – the healings here and there – don't wait for the big things like armies marching in. Look local, not cosmic. Look at the little people, not the big people. Don't you see this is how God works? He sends a baby into this world and not a defensive tackle. He recruits servants not troops. He calls a carpenter, not a mega pastor. He calls you and me, not super sized disciples.

That's all good, but wouldn't the kindest thing have been to send John a word of affirmation? *Be strong, John. It's not long now.* But, that's not Jesus the Messiah. Instead of chopping us all down to our rightful place, he turns to all us sinners who make up John's brood of vipers and builds us UP - sends us OUT to do Kingdom work – little things like speak words of love, help carry a load of grief, steady a shaking hand... efforts that are not nearly as satisfying as a little vengeance would most surely be. I can almost hear John's reply. "Oh, lovely, Jesus. Good for the blind, good for the lame, good for the lepers, the deaf, and those dead people you keep raising. Good for the big fat sinners you keep calling to do your work. You may notice, however, Jesus, that I am still in prison."

"Oh, yes, about that," says Jesus. "Blessed is anyone who takes no offense at me." That can also be translated as "blessed is anyone who does not get tripped up over me" which makes

me think that Jesus is well aware that his work as the Messiah was a stumbling block for some and not what they wanted. He knows he is a big disappointment to big hitters in the faith. But, he reminds them that God's saving power is not always in the BIG things - little divine explosions happen all over. There is a scene in the Sound of Music where the sisters are looking for Maria. One sister says, "I've looked in all the usual places." The Reverend Mother replies, "Considering it is Maria, maybe you should look in the unusual places." Well, when we are looking for God's power, maybe we should look where we don't expect to find it.

When I came here five and a half years ago, I had expectations of what I thought God's saving power should do. God should make us BIG – at least bigger than the Baptists! People would flock to study The Word. We'd have to have TWO services to accommodate the Johnston County masses who wanted to hear a skinny white girl preach. That's how God's power would be unleashed in WMCC. But, that's not how I know God is here. Let me tell you what I've seen and heard. I saw the power of Christ in Shirley Betti's smile when she gathered our gifts for the Angel Tree. I heard the power of Christ when Patrick –even though nervous– felt safe enough in this place with these people to stand up and sing a solo at our impromptu caroling last Sunday. I have basked in the hopeful power of Christ with each new baby, each new life, that keeps being born here. I have felt the joyful power of Christ as our ladies have laughed (and eaten) their way across the state– the power of the Kingdom of God is breaking out in these simple, small ways: generosity, being a safe haven for children, new life, fellowship. And, no, that's not what I was expecting or hoping for God to do. I wanted the spectacular.

But, Jesus came sprinkling his power in unexpected ways. So, tell John what you see and hear. I may not look like what he thought I would. Things may not be working out like he wanted them to, but every now and again, in surprising places, marvelous things are happening – really, really good things. People who were blind to all the love set loose in the world receive their sight; people who were paralyzed with fear are limber with hope; people who were deaf from want of good news are singing hymns. And best of all, most miraculous of all, tell John this. All of these good things, well, they are not the work of one lonely Messiah but the work of God carried out by any and all who believe, and there is no end in sight. Tell him I am the one, but tell him also that yes, he should look for another, and another and another. Tell him to search in every face for the face of God because what is happening here is bigger than any of us. What is coming to pass is as big as the Kingdom of God. And, we – Wilson's Mills Christian Church - are blessed to be a part of it.