

Sermon
July 5th 2020
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Matthew 11: 16-19; Romans 7:14-25

Good Morning. I would just like to start by acknowledging the profoundly absurd situation we're in or may feel we're in. There's a lot going on, on a macro and micro scale. For many it's been a whacky week so I just want to say upfront that it is totally okay, to not be okay right now. Church is not just meant for times of joy, it's also a good place to mourn and every emotion in between those two.

Alright, let's dive in to some good ol' Gospel. It is nearly impossible, if not impossible, to not read scripture through our own modern eyes. This is not a criticism per se, neither right nor wrong, necessarily, simply an acknowledgment that we always carry our context with us and it is through the lens of our own lives and experiences that we read scripture.

When I first read Matthew 11:17, "We wailed and you did not mourn," the first thing that came to my mind, was our current confrontation with the continuation of centuries of mourning that people of color have had to endure in this country. I couldn't help but think of wailing mothers, grieving their murdered sons. I couldn't not hear the cries from the ICE detention centers, for the indigenous women gone missing, and for trans populations murdered simply for being who they are. They wail, but we have not mourned. We read on in verse 18 and 19 and I confess I felt the familiar pulse of a story that said "damned if I do, damned if I don't." Jesus tells how if John fasted he was accused of having a demon, but if he ate, he was a glutton. John too could not win. There were larger forces at work already against him from the start. Black folks kneel peacefully and accused of being unpatriotic, they can protest for their rights in the streets, and they're accused of violence or starting riots. Condemned from the start.

Confronted with these ever-present realities, the frustration of a polarized nation, that sometimes even reaches into the context of our own communities, I think to myself what do we do? What can we do? How do we fix, change, resist such powerful, massive institutions? I mean, I can't even get my socks to match in the morning, and yet as a church we often find that we have a mission, a calling, to seek justice-- how do we do this? Particularly in a pandemic? It's overwhelming at times.

Good news is, I think Jesus gives us a glimpse of answer. In verse 19 he says, "Yet Wisdom is vindicated by her deeds."

Now, this sounds like something of answer, there's vindication to be found, that's a solid, hopeful sign. Other than that, however, I don't know about you, but when I first read that statement it was not otherwise immediately obvious to me what Jesus meant by these words. Which, to be fair, seems to line up with his usual style of communication in terms of parables and whatnot...

So, anywho, for the next few minutes we're going to dive into Wisdom, knowledge, and how those things might possibly lead to some sort of vindication.

So, Wisdom, if not in your text, and it wasn't in mine, should really be capitalized. Wisdom, is a name. She is the feminine manifestation of the divine in Jewish tradition, she can be found in Proverbs and the Wisdom of Solomon among other places. She did not, however, necessarily start with the Jewish tradition nor was her reputation and influence confined there. Wisdom, also known as Sophia, was an incredibly prominent figure in the ancient world, and even into the medieval one. So what is wisdom? Well, Socrates, the famous ancient Greek philosopher who was also killed by his own state in 399 BC, and who greatly informed much of Western thought including that of the early church, was famously declared by the Oracle at Delphi to be the most wise person in the whole world.¹ The reason, Socrates was considered to be so wise, was because he did not think he knew that which he did not know. In other words, he was conscious of his ignorance. To be wise then, is not the opposite of ignorance, it is the awareness of one's ignorance, the awareness of how much we do not know.

Knowledge, on the other hand, was not how we might think of it today, in terms of a specialization in a particular field, or an vast accumulation of dates, names or histories. Knowledge had nothing to do with acquisition of facts; knowledge was about value.² Knowledge was understanding the value of good and evil, of death; knowledge was knowing how to live well. "At the basis of Socratic knowledge is the love of the good,"³ and to get there, to "do knowledge" as it were, was fundamentally to question oneself.⁴ I don't know about you, but I found this utterly fascinating. To be knowledgeable, to be wise, was not necessarily to be the PhDs of the world, the Neil DeGrasse Tysons, or the Stephen Hawkings. To be knowledgeable and wise was to be the humble of the world, the self-reflective, the questioning, the kind and the curious, the Mother Teresa's perhaps or quite honestly, maybe those who seldom do make history. Perhaps the Elijah McClains of the world, who bring music to stray animals to comfort them, perhaps like a modern St. Francis.

So now we've figured out what it means to know, which is to question oneself and to value the good. Sounds simple enough right? Seek to understand or be aware of what you don't know, and with that pursue with compassionate curiosity good values and a moral life. If only it were that easy... In Romans 7, Paul describes just how difficult it is to actually pursue the good. He says "I do not understand my own actions. For I do not do what I want, but I do the very thing I hate.... For I do not do the good I want, but the evil I do not want is what I do." So the way I read this, in my super sophisticated understanding of scripture, was something along the lines of my love for ice cream. I don't *want* to eat the entire pint of dark chocolate truffle ice cream in one sitting, I know it will hurt me, but for some reason I still do it. And it's confusing! Because I know I didn't want to do that, I've got a stomach ache now proving that it was a terrible idea, and yet my actions took a different course. Why do we do the things we say we don't want to do? Why do we say we love our neighbors and want to be good Christians, yet so many who identify with this

¹ Pierre Hadot, *What Is Ancient Philosophy*, trans. Michael Chase (Cambridge, MA: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2004) 25.

² *Ibid.*, 26.

³ *Ibid.*, 34.

⁴ *Ibid.*, 29.

religion of love, compassion and justice, openly support a regime, and yes I'm calling it a regime, that oppresses, commits violence and silences its people. Why do we do the bad, even when we know it's not what we want, when we know it is wrong?

Well, there are many possible explanations to this question that humanity has been wrestling with for as long as we can remember. The answer I have however, in my attempt to be wise is simply that- I don't know. I don't know why we do the bad when we want good. And I'm not going to pretend that I do. I'm not going to pretend that I have managed to solve the problem of evil for you on this fine day in July of 2020. Because the thing is, I'm not sure it really matters. At least I'm not sure the "why" matters so much in this moment. It happens anyway. Understanding why rain falls sometimes and why it doesn't other times is fascinating, can be important for understanding our environment etc., but it doesn't actually change when it falls or doesn't. (I'm not saying seeking to understand the world around us is futile or unimportant, simply that in this moment in time and history perhaps it is not where Jesus is trying to point us.) And the reason I think that is because Matthew says that Wisdom was vindicated by her deeds. Not her thoughts, not her capacity to understand or have a solution in mind, not her desires – but by her deeds.

This is a profoundly Jewish notion. Not that our thoughts are unimportant, but that what matters more is how we act. Christianity has diverged from this in many ways. We often tend to place more emphasis on belief and faith and I am not in any way suggesting that that is invalid or unimportant. What I am saying, however, or what Matthew is saying, is that, for all we don't know, for all we aren't sure we believe, or are struggling to keep the faith in, it's okay. It's okay if we don't have the answers to the world's problems, the nation's, or even our own sitting in our homes today worried for ourselves and our community- It is okay.

The notion that whether or not we understand as being relatively unimportant to our actions is actually quite radical. Especially in our context today. Today, we seem to be under the illusion that knowledge or understanding is a prerequisite to compassion. That I have to know someone that looks like you, or have lived a similar experience myself to show kindness. That's why you might have heard protests in the wake of Trump's bus tapes, or Brett Kavanaugh's appointment; people often justified their upset with phrases like well, "I have a daughter, or sister or wife." As if one must personally be related to a woman (which, aren't we all to some degree?) to be outraged at the way we are treated. In a similar vein, you might hear someone say something like, "I can't be racist, I have a Black friend." Phrases or perspectives such as these, contradict the lesson in Matthew's statement of Wisdom and they perpetuate the lie, that we have to know before we can love. I'm arguing now, that we do not have to "know" in the modern sense of the word, or understand, to love. I do not have to know what it's like to be a Black man in America to have compassion. And I can't know what it's like. I also do not have to understand all of the complexities and struggles of this congregation, the heartbreak of its minister to want to help, to love, to be present. Wisdom, the act of questioning oneself, teaches us that we do not have to know to love, for if we did we could never claim to love God. Because God is fundamentally unknowable.

To me, honestly, this is such a relief of burden. What a blessing, a place of rest. Jesus's words give me so much hope and so much peace, because he tells *us*, that we don't have to have the

answers. We don't have to know why we are the way we are to love ourselves. We don't have to know what's going to happen to our congregation or our community to love each other in this moment. We don't have to have the answers to the greatest conundrums or paradoxes of life or our biggest frustrations. It is enough, to simply know that we don't know and to choose love anyway. Jesus teaches us that even if we never arrive at any specific answers or solutions to the world's problems, that we still have the power, we are still able to love no less fiercely, to seek justice no less vehemently, to love mercy no less passionately. Perhaps, those actions in and of themselves are the answer.

As a wise chaplain once told me, the opposite of faith is certainty. Not only do we not have to be certain, but it behooves every time we are, or think we are, to go back and to question ourselves. To be wise. And to remember that to know, is to be good. To live well, to be kind, to love. We are vindicated by our deeds. Not how many facts we know, nor how many kind thoughts we have, not by our educations or stations, but by how well and how deeply we love ourselves, each other, and God. May we cling to this relief of burden and find hope in the very real ability each of us have to love so profoundly. May we rest in the understanding that even as loving others or ourselves becomes difficult that we follow a God who shows us the way, loves us first, last and all in the moments in between. Amen.