

“All John Gets for Christmas” / Matthew 11:2-11 / 15 December 2013

Oh, I feel John-the-Baptist's pain, don't you? Poor old John-the-Baptist is languishing in prison because he dared to speak hard truths to the powerful of his day. He knows he's doomed, but even in his prison cell, he'd been hearing that maybe Jesus was going to be the one to rescue Israel from its oppressors. Finally, in great impatience, he sends his friends to ask, “Okay, if you're the messiah, why aren't you doing anything to redeem Israel?” Anyone who has ever voted for a president has asked the same exact question: Okay, isn't it time to get busy with the agenda that I thought you had in mind when I voted for you? I feel the Baptist's pain. It's as if a kid woke up on Christmas morning, rushed down to the Christmas tree, excitedly tore the paper and the bow off his only present, and it turned out to be a pair of dress socks and a few clip-on neckties. He's disappointed with Jesus. Is Jesus really who we hoped he would be?

Well, the kids have left for Sunday school now, so let me tell you how a small boy came to be disappointed once long ago. Let's call this kid “Ryan.” It was Christmas 1975, and he was five years old, but he still remembers it all very clearly. For Christmas, he wanted nothing more than one of those big plastic horses that you could ride, the kind that was suspended by springs from a metal frame. Ryan's grandmother took him to see the Jolly Elf, who shall remain nameless. They went to the Five-and-Dime on the main street in New Bethlehem, in Clarion County. It's hard to believe nowadays that there used to be department stores on the main streets of rural towns, and each with their own Jolly Elf in December. And yet, that's how things were, and there was a long line of children from far and wide, waiting among the tall fake candy canes to sit on his lap.

When Ryan's turn rolled around, he started to get nervous. Something was not right about this guy in red. He didn't look like the Jolly Elf in picture books, much less the one on all the Christmas specials on TV. He was too thin, and he was wearing glasses. Then, as Ryan climbed up on that big red velvet knee, he could see for a fact that he was being played. The Elf had a big belly, but the rest of him was lean, which didn't make sense. Besides, his belly was shaped wrong, as if he'd shoved a pillow up his shirt. This disappointment was sinking in when Ryan noticed that the man was clearly wearing a wig, one that did not match his beard. The beard was really the last straw. This imposter's beard was made of cottonballs. Glued together cottonballs! So many thoughts flooded through the kid's mind. “Does anyone else here see what I see? Is my grandma in on this scam? Does the real Jolly Elf know about this charlatan? Or is this pretender the only one there is? Am I the only one who's cracked the code?”

Well, the bogus Elf carried on the charade, gave a jovial laugh and asked what Ryan wanted for Christmas. Ryan told him he wanted a ball. Now, anyone who knows this kid, who is now all grownup, knows that he has never willingly laid hand to a ball in his life. But what was he supposed to do? Negotiate with a poser? The faker in the red suit laughed and hurried on to the next kid. But Ryan told his grandmother what he'd seen, and so she took him to visit another counterfeit up in Clarion. This guys' gig was a little more convincing, but it was too late. Ryan had become a doubter. He knew about the humbug at the Five-and-Ten, so he was ready for the one at Montgomery Ward. He no longer believed in all the Christmas quackery. He knew what the Elf should look like, and when he didn't see it, he despaired of Christmas altogether. But Ryan did get a riding horse that year. He always thought of it as something like “hush money,” to keep him from sharing his discovery with all the other kids.

This is John-the-Baptist's problem, too. He knows what the long-awaited one is supposed to look like. He knows what the messiah ought to be, and this Jesus guy might be nice and all, but he doesn't fit the bill. John is asking, “What, is this all I get for Christmas? Is this all Israel gets? This footsore, roving preacher who wanders from place to place healing the sick and telling the poor about their great worth? The world is still going on as it always has. Nothing has changed. Power and violence are still linked. Injustice still reigns supreme. A real messiah would fix this stuff! What about some divine retribution?” John-the-Baptist is disappointed with Jesus. You've surely shared his disappointment from time to time. Jesus, why aren't you fixing things in my life? Why aren't you

repairing a broken world? All you do is feed the hungry, and tend the sick, and show mercy, and love, and hang out with the downtrodden and whisper hope and self-worth to the poor.” To which Jesus replies, in essence, “What else should a messiah be doing? Isn't that enough?” Truly, the world has its many expectations of what Jesus ought to be about; some are right and some are wrong. Many people would like to say that Jesus is mostly just our ticket to heaven. But it's possible to be a beloved friend of Jesus—as John-the-Baptist was—and still be wrong about him. Here's a good rule of thumb: If it's not good news to the poor and broken, it's not the gospel of Jesus Christ.

Well, I must admit that Jesus can be a little disappointing. Consider that Jesus never wrote a book. In fact, a man of his social class in that time and place probably didn't even know how to read. He was often quoting the Hebrew Scriptures, so he surely had great swaths of them memorized, but that doesn't mean he could read them. Over the years, the church has ascribed all kinds of power to Jesus, but in his day, he had less political power than you or I. He couldn't vote or publicly disagree with the government. He was just a landless laborer in a far-flung province of the Roman Empire. He had no freedom of speech, and indeed the empire ended up executing him exactly because of all the taboo talking that he did. He owned nothing but the clothes on his back. The gospels tell us that he had no home, that he and his band of vagabond friends were fed by sympathetic women. And yet, for all his wanderings, he never strayed more than fifty miles from Nazareth. He didn't have a horse to ride. He commanded no armies. He collected no paycheck. You'll find very little about him in the historical records of the day. In fact, John-the-Baptist is better documented by ancient historians than Jesus of Nazareth. By rights, any one of us should be more famous, more influential than Jesus of Nazareth. It's no wonder that John and others are disappointed by him. He's just not the kind of guy you'd expect to change the world. And yet, did he not change the world? Is there any spot left on this globe where his name is not at least recognized, if only as a byword to be muttered by someone who stubs a toe? Is there anyplace left where people don't believe that they know what Jesus of Nazareth is all about?

Most of us are not disappointed by Jesus' humility. True, churches that preach a gospel of prosperity are embarrassed by Jesus' great poverty and powerlessness. But I don't think most of us are disappointed by the fact that Jesus never owned an 8,000 square foot home or drove an Audi. Actually, many of us find it comforting. No, if we're disappointed in him, it's because of his refusal to dance to our particular tune. We want him to be a fixer, to magically solve our problems. And most of the time, he's not a fixer. He doesn't wave a magic wand over our difficulties. He'll walk through suffering with us, but he doesn't often spare us from suffering. We know what a Savior should look like. He should give us easy answers and an easy out, but this Jesus does not.

In fact, whenever people tell me about their own life's disappointments, losses of faith far more grievous than the one that occurred to me when I was five—er, I mean, to Ryan when he was five—when people tell me about how they've become disillusioned with church or God, there's very often an element of this dissatisfaction in their story: Jesus didn't work the magic that they'd hoped. People have been leveling that complaint at Jesus ever since the days of John-the-Baptist. He disappointed me.

Quite frequently the Christ comes to us, and we are so underwhelmed by his appearing—or by his appearance—that we fail to see him for who and what he is. We're so busy looking for what we want from God that we fail to see and treasure what we get. I read the memoirs of an Episcopal priest who had become very famous as an outstanding preacher. Her little church in a rural southern town grew from about fifty in attendance to five-hundred; people were so captivated with her preaching. The little building was packed, and they started having services pretty much all day long on Sundays. I don't know how you become famous as a preacher when you're Episcopalian, and all you get is twelve minutes in the pulpit...or maybe that was the part that people liked. In any case, she never developed a deep bond with her congregation. For her, it came to be about numbers and success. In time, she decided to quit the ministry because she wasn't feeling the love. Her last event as the pastor of that church was to go to a parishioner's pool party. And there she stood in her starched clergy shirt with the

stiff white dog collar. Again she felt the deep disconnect between herself and her people...until someone pushed her into the pool. Astonished, and scandalized, and soaking wet in her skirt suit and her clerical regalia, she began to laugh. And she laughed and laughed until it dawned on her that this was exactly the thing that could have kept her in the ministry. It was too late now; she'd already accepted another position as a college professor. But now at last she knew that if, instead of trying to be superwoman, and saint, and the image of holy success, she should have simply learned to love her people and laugh with them, then she would have made it as a pastor. She had an idea of what she herself was supposed to look like and be, but it wasn't who she was, and it wasn't who anybody needed her to be. What she needed to do was simply embrace her humanity, God's best gift to her and the only thing that any of us has to offer, our simple, genuine, unembellished selves.

How often we miss out on the gifts that God gives and the wonders that God is working—in our lives and in our world—because they're so undramatic; they don't look the grand way we had hoped. There is slow but marvelous healing that takes place inside our spirits, unspectacular but much-needed bits of redemption that occur here and there, now and then. Slowly, day-by-day our blindness receives new vision; our deafness fades as we begin to hear another; even our own little forms of death are raised to new life. Are these things not enough? We want magic and drama, like that Episcopal minister wanted prestige and respect. But “how silently, how silently the wondrous gift is given!” Sometimes God's activity in our life seems underwhelming, but where would we be without the daily, unexciting acts of love? The phone call from a friend, the forgiveness of one we've wronged, the smile of a stranger?

Things aren't always what they seem. A minister went to visit an elderly lady in her home. As the lady talked and talked, the pastor absentmindedly ate the peanuts out of a bowl that was sitting on her coffee table. Finally, when he got up to leave, the minister said, “Oh, I'm sorry. I see that I've eaten nearly all of your peanuts.” The woman replied, “It doesn't matter. Ever since I lost my teeth, all I can do is suck the chocolate off them.”

This unspectacular Jesus is all John gets for Christmas. John sends his people to ask, a little testily, “Are you going start acting like a messiah, or should we wait for someone else?” And Jesus' reply to John is basically this: “Aren't I enough? I'm putting people's lives back together one-by-one, which is the only way it can be done. I'm healing old hurts, giving people new vision. I'm bringing good news to the poor. Just what did you expect a messiah to do?” Notice how Jesus doesn't castigate John for his doubt. In fact, he turns around and praises John. There's another sermon there, surely.

But for today, let's dwell on this fact: Jesus saw his own calling first and foremost to reach out to the poor and broken. Truly, I believe that caring for the poor and broken is the one irrefutable hallmark of Jesus' presence and activity in the life of any church today. The middle classes undeniably need help, but all the politicians are at least talking about them. Jesus has a special passion for the poor; he was one of them, and anyone who claims to be his follower will invest a large part of his or her cares and energies into their well-being.

Jesus is still the messiah who puts broken hearts back together a little bit at a time, so slowly that it's hard even to notice. Never forget that! Whether you feel it nor not, God is doing something new in your life, something redemptive. But what can you do when Jesus disappoints you, when he turns out not to be a fixer or a wand-waver? Put your vision of him aside, and embrace the vision he had of himself. Few congregations do more for the poor and broken than Bower Hill Church does. In fact, I recently told a presbytery executive that you folks teach me more about following Jesus than I teach you. As a church, we do quite well. But how are you doing personally? When you go home today, take a look at how you spend your energies, your time, where you invest your loves. How could