

“Wisdom's Deeds” / Matthew 11:16-19, 25-30 / 6 July 2014

“Wisdom is vindicated by her deeds”? That's a curious thing for Jesus to say. “Wisdom is vindicated by her deeds”? I once promised to write a paper about this phrase back in seminary, in Greek class, but all the New Testament commentaries were wholly stymied by Jesus' words about wisdom's deeds, so I chose the path of least resistance and picked an easier text for my paper. But now, more than a decade later, those ancient words are still exactly where I left them, calling out to be heard and understood. And I must admit that I'm still haunted by these enigmatic words, for I sense in them something powerful, and true, and relevant to our lives in an ever-changing world. But I'm not sure I like what Jesus is saying. Two men are sent by the same God—John the Baptist and Jesus. John's message is, “Repent.” Jesus' message is, “Rejoice.” This is more than just a cosmetic difference. It's a deep disagreement about who God is and who we are called to be in this world, and how we are to live. “Wisdom is vindicated by her deeds.”

On YouTube, you can find a pair of video clips that are meant to be viewed one after the other. They emphasize the differences between cats and dogs. The first is “The Sad Dog Diary,” and it begins with the adorable sad face of a dog, maybe a boxer, and there's mournful tuba music playing in the background. The dog narrates words of worry and adoration, as he meditates on the strange ways of his “dearest human,” who is a good and a kind person, but who is absolutely clueless in the ways of the world. Dog feels the need to take care of the naive human that he adores, warning him about the dangers of things like vacuum cleaners, lawn mowers, and men who wear hats. The reverent dog must teach his wise but helpless human, by example, how to express affection and how to behave in the world. Much of the video is too crass to be repeated here. But the dog speaks lovingly, tenderly to his diary and muses on life with his precious human. “Dear diary, it has occurred to me today that my dearest human never sniffs me the way I sniff him. It really hurts that he never licks me back. Dear diary, my dearest human asked me where the ball was, when it was clearly in plain sight. I brought it over, and he threw it even farther away, then asked me where it was and was very happy when I brought it again. Perhaps this is a metaphor? Dearest human leaves each day, and I am happy when he returns. It's all too much to comprehend.” The sweet faces of various dogs appear on the screen, all filled with sorrow, as the narrator speaks with deepest concern. “Dear Diary, cat pointed out that when I shake hands, I'm often unaware of what I'm shaking on. For example, when I shook the neighbor's hand this morning, I have no clue what I agreed to. None. Cat says this is how the devil buys souls.” The dog video is all affection, misunderstanding, and deepest admiration and concern for “dearest human.”

The sequel to “The Sad Dog Diary” is “The Sad Cat Diary,” which takes a very different approach to living with a human. “Dear diary,” the same mournful voice narrates, “the authorities have removed the pair of black pants from the couch. There is no longer any place for me to sleep. I have vomited three times in protest, but there is no sign that anything will change. My only other hope for rest is on the computer keyboard, which is nearby, but sadly, no one is currently using it. I will wait.” Again, the sad faces of various cats appear on the screen. “Dear diary, my food dish is now half empty. I fear that I shall starve to death. I have pointed out my predicament to the authorities, but they are either stupid, deaf, or just cruel. This may be my last entry. Dear diary, I have decided to plead with the authorities to rub my belly. I think it'll do me good in my current condition. I would like to receive two rubs exactly; a third one, and I will bite them, as per protocol. Wish me luck. Dear diary, it is three in the morning. The authorities have closed the door to the bedroom. I can only assume that they have forgotten about me and have left me here to die. As a last resort, I will stand post for the rest of the night and sing the song of my people...in hopes that they rescue me. Dear diary, my attempts to destroy the terrible plant have all been for naught. Somehow, almost as if by some evil magic, a new one has appeared in its place. I will have to start over now. Like Sisyphus, I am bound to hell.” In contrast to the dog's diary, which is all adoration and helpfulness, the cat's diary is all puzzlement, and despair, and hatred for the unreasonable “authorities” who hold him captive.

Of course, the dog and cat diaries are just humor, almost certainly created by a dog owner. I don't pretend to know what goes on in the minds of animals. I've certainly known some sweet and affectionate cats as well as some distrustful dogs. But the two contrasting videos illustrate two basic approaches to life. One suggests that there is a higher being who is our friend and who is worthy of all faithfulness and adoration. The other suggests that there is some demanding authority out there who must be placated and petitioned if we are to get our needs met. These are two very different postures for living. One is a posture of trust; the other is a posture of self-protection. It's reminiscent of the two different emphases we find in Jesus, whose message is "Rejoice," and John the Baptist, whose message is, "Repent." It's a deep disagreement about who God is and who we are called to be in this world, and how we are to live. How can both things be true?

Now, John the Baptist was a good guy. Some scholars think he was even Jesus' mentor early in life. But if John was sent by God to decry the evils of the world, to scold, and to withdraw, and to refrain from eating and drinking; if John was called to be an ascetic, and Jesus was called by God to feast, and to drink wine to the point of being called a drunkard; if Jesus was called to be a merry-maker, then what and whom are you and I called to be? Which is it, repent or rejoice? Does truth change? Did God's message change somewhere between John the Baptist and Jesus? Why the conflicting visions of who God is and what God wants? How is John the Baptist a child of wisdom if Jesus is, too? They're so different from each other. Does the truth change?

Think of all the truths that seem to have slipped away over the years, only to be replaced by newer, friendlier, updated truths. An Irish cab driver in New York once learned that I was a clergyman, and he began to regale me with questions about changing truths. Unfortunately, he was asking me about changes that I knew only very little about. He said, "When I was a kid, if a child died without being baptized, his soul went to a place called limbo. It wasn't heaven, or hell, or purgatory. It was just an in-between place where souls float around aimlessly for eternity. You weren't even allowed to put a name on the headstone of an unbaptized child. But since 1965, unbaptized children get to go to heaven. Now, my question for you, Father"—he didn't understand that I was not a priest—"my question for you is this: Is the new truth retroactive? Do all the unbaptized kids who died in 1964 go to heaven, or only the ones born after '65?" The cab driver was sure he had me in a logical conundrum, and the fact that I stammered, unable to speak on behalf of the Catholic Church, probably just egged him on. "And how about eating meat during Lent? Used to be, you couldn't eat meat at all in Lent. Now it's just Fridays. What happens to all those poor schmucks who ate meat before the rules changed? Do they get judged according to the old law or the new one?" Taxi cab etiquette requires you to smile and nod while the driver talks.

I've made the mistake of getting into theological debates with cabdrivers, and it's never pretty. And so, I smiled and nodded. "And what about England? Eh, Father, ever think about England? Holy Father excommunicated the whole country back in the days of Henry VIII. Does that mean all Englishmen are going to hell, all them innocent people? Now that we're not calling Protestants 'heretics' no more, does that mean there will be Englishmen up there in heaven, drinking tea and playing cricket?" On and on the cabdriver went. Finally, when he dropped me at JFK Airport, he said, "Well, Father, I hope I've given you something to think about on your plane ride to Pittsburgh. Oh, and here's another question: How's come you guys don't have to wear your collars anymore? When I was a kid, a priest wouldn't go to bed dressed like you."

The cabby did give me something to think about, but not in the way he'd hoped. We've all puzzled over his arguments in one way or another. I hear it often when people say, "I just don't like the God in the Old Testament." The Book of Joshua depicts an angry, jealous, vengeful God, whereas the parables of Jesus depict a loving, parental, merciful God. When did the one God undergo this change of heart? Surely both things can't be true. Our own Presbyterian General Assembly has been known to redraw the boundaries between right and wrong: divorce, the ordination of women, and now gay marriage. All these things were prayerfully reexamined by faithful people, and the old prohibitions that

once seemed inviolable have been deemed unjust. What would John the Baptist say? Repent? What does Jesus say? Rejoice? The cabdriver was basically saying, “I don't know what to believe because you church people keep changing the rules. Give me something compelling to believe, then stick to it! I'm beginning to despair of the existence of truth.” Perhaps you've been there yourself? If truth can change, then it all collapses into relativity, which is a very uncomfortable place to live. We might not like the old rules, but at least they were safe! You could follow them and be safe. If you followed all the right rules, then you had power over your own destiny. Like the cat, you could live with the demands that the authorities placed upon you, no matter how unjust. Power! Who doesn't want power over his or her own lot in life? Hard and fast rules give us that power—or at least an illusion of power. They make us feel safe.

Jesus' call was never to safety, nor to an illusion of safety. His call is simply, “Follow me.” Into all the changefulness of this world, follow. If the life of faith is all about rules and getting into heaven, then it's actually pretty easy. But rules—as any parent knows—are what you give your child until he or she learns the most basic lesson of all: Do unto others as you would have done unto you. Do unto others as you would have done unto you. This is the rule to live by, and it is at once remarkably simple and confoundingly hard. If you don't believe me, then just try following this rule for a day. Faith isn't about the rules; it's about love.

“Wisdom,” Jesus says, “is vindicated by her deeds.” Speaking of changefulness, the old King James version of the Bible said it a little bit differently. It said, “Wisdom is vindicated by all her children.” In other words, John the Baptist was a child of wisdom, and he was for his day what he needed to be. And Jesus, the supreme child of wisdom, was for his day a wholly different thing. Truth had not changed, but wisdom dictated that that truth be expressed expressed anew, in fresh ways, ways that the world could grasp. Think about this: If the only law is love—love of God, love of neighbor, and love even of self—if the only law is love, then who are you called to be today? It's surely not the same person you were called to be yesterday! What are you called to do? Amen.