

Are You the One?
Luke 7:18-35
Isaiah 61:10-62:3

Westminster Presbyterian Church
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Luke 7:18-35

The disciples of John reported all these things to him. So John summoned two of his disciples and sent them to the Lord to ask, "Are you the one who is to come, or are we to wait for another?" When the men had come to him, they said, "John the Baptist has sent us to you to ask, "Are you the one who is to come, or are we to wait for another?" " Jesus had just then cured many people of diseases, plagues, and evil spirits, and had given sight to many who were blind. And he answered them, "Go and tell John what you have seen and heard: the blind receive their sight, the lame walk, the lepers are cleansed, the deaf hear, the dead are raised, the poor have good news brought to them. And blessed is anyone who takes no offense at me."

When John's messengers had gone, Jesus began to speak to the crowds about John: "What did you go out into the wilderness to look at? A reed shaken by the wind? What then did you go out to see? Someone dressed in soft robes? Look, those who put on fine clothing and live in luxury are in royal palaces. What then did you go out to see? A prophet? Yes, I tell you, and more than a prophet. This is the one about whom it is written, "See, I am sending my messenger ahead of you, who will prepare your way before you.' I tell you, among those born of women no one is greater than John; yet the least in the kingdom of God is greater than he." (And all the people who heard this, including the tax collectors, acknowledged the justice of God, because they had been baptized with John's baptism. But by refusing to be baptized by him, the Pharisees and the lawyers rejected God's purpose for themselves.)

"To what then will I compare the people of this generation, and what are they like? They are like children sitting in the marketplace and calling to one another, "We played the flute for you, and you did not dance; we wailed, and you did not weep.' For John the Baptist has come eating no bread and drinking no wine, and you say, "He has a demon'; the Son of Man has come eating and drinking, and you say, "Look, a glutton and a drunkard, a friend of tax collectors and sinners!' Nevertheless, wisdom is vindicated by all her children."

Isaiah 61:10-62:3

I will greatly rejoice in the Lord, my whole being shall exult in my God; for he has clothed me with the garments of salvation, he has covered me with the robe of righteousness, as a bridegroom decks himself with a garland, and as a bride adorns herself with her jewels. For as the earth brings forth its shoots, and as a garden causes what is sown in it to spring up, so the Lord God will cause righteousness and praise to spring up before all the nations.

For Zion's sake I will not keep silent, and for Jerusalem's sake I will not rest, until her vindication shines out like the dawn, and her salvation like a burning torch. The nations shall see your vindication, and all the kings your glory; and you shall be called by a new name that the mouth of the Lord will give.

In our story from Luke's Gospel this morning, John the Baptist, who has been in jail since shortly after Jesus' baptism, sends two of his disciples to ask Jesus, "Are you the one who is to come, or are we to wait for another?"

John, you see, was sent by God to proclaim the coming of the Messiah, but he's been in jail. He doesn't know what Jesus has been doing, except that he knows Jesus has not been waging a successful war of revolution. Most Jews in this time expect the Messiah to come, throw the Romans out, and set himself up as the new king in Jerusalem.

Every question has an answer that is simple, and direct, and wrong. This is the simple, direct, and wrong answer to the question of what the Messiah is going to do. God is not thinking as small as Judea, a little province in the backwaters of the Roman Empire. God is not thinking as small as the lifetime of one human being. God is thinking global and long-term.

Jesus listens to the question, and, as is so often the case, he does not answer it directly. He tells these people, "Go tell John what you have seen and heard." And he describes what has been happening around him. "The blind receive their sight, the lame walk, the lepers are cleansed, the deaf hear, the dead are raised, the poor have good news brought to them." He leaves it to John's disciples, and to John, to draw their own conclusion.

After John's disciples go back to John to give him this challenging response, Jesus turns to the crowd and starts talking about John. He explains that John is a prophet, and more than a prophet. John is the one sent by God to prepare the way for the Messiah.

Jesus goes on to bewail the people of Judea in his generation. John the Baptist came, fasting and living like a monk, and they did not listen to him. Jesus came, eating and drinking like everyone else, and they accused him of being a glutton and a drunk. They judged him by the people who came to listen to him, and, since many of his listeners were not respectable, they judged Jesus not to be respectable, either. It seemed that, no matter who the messenger was, they were determined not to listen to God's message, unless it was what they wanted to hear.

The prophet Isaiah said that the Messiah would bring healing and would bring good news to the poor.¹ This is why, when Jesus is asked if he is the Messiah, he responds by pointing out the signs of the Messiah's presence and lets John's disciples draw their own conclusions.

What are the signs of the Messiah's presence today, I wonder? If someone asked us, how we knew that Jesus was present in the world, what would we say?

I hope that the signs we list of Jesus' presence would not include promises of instantaneous, miraculous physical healing. God has not given me that particular gift, and, if God has given any of you that gift, then I would like to speak with you after the service. Modern medicine, though, does amazing things that would have been considered miracles even ten years ago.

I hope that the signs we list of Jesus' presence would not include the idea that Christians of a particular so-called "Dominionist" theology control the government, and that they will make laws to make themselves rich and to force everyone to live in the

¹ Isa. 61:1

way that they believe people should live.² If Jesus had wanted to use worldly power to force people to live moral lives, he would likely have been born in Caesar's palace in Rome.³ He would have done what the people of Judea expected, and used military force to take over the world and rule it in God's name.

If you remember, though, exactly that sort of worldly power was offered to Jesus once, and he turned it down, in the wilderness.⁴ Jesus is not very interested in top-down power, or in ruling by fiat and giving orders. Jesus is interested in changing the hearts of ordinary people, one by one.

So what signs should we describe of Jesus' presence in the world?

If we are following Jesus, what should we be looking for?

Let's look at what Jesus did.

Jesus healed the sick. Historically, the Christian Church did not invent the idea of a public hospital, but the Church has built far more than any other organization, here in Columbus and all over the world. Christians did drive hospitals becoming places of healing, rather than only a place to die with dignity.⁵

² https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Dominion_Theology.

³ As a side note, if using the power of government to force people to live moral lives worked, then Prohibition, a Christian-created and Christian-directed social experiment, would have been a grand success. Instead, it vastly increased the power of organized crime in the United States and increased violence, without achieving the touted goals of significantly reducing rates of drunkenness and domestic abuse.

⁴ Luke 4:5-8.

⁵ https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Hospital#Early_examples

Jesus fed the poor. The Christian Church feeds the poor every day, here in Columbus and all over the world. We at Westminster take part in that both through our checkbook, with our mission fund dollars, and through our personal service, at HM3, Hoge Memorial Church's weekly dinner and worship service on the Hilltop.⁶

Jesus taught anyone who would listen. The Church has founded educational institutions on every continent except Antarctica. These institutions teach everything from Aesthetics to Zoology, with a heavy concentration in practical fields that aim to alleviate human suffering, like Medicine.

Jesus stood up to the powers that were, both religious and political. Historically, the Church goes through cycles of this. We fight against the abuses of power, and then we become the powerful, and then, being human, we end up abusing power ourselves and other Christians fight against our abuses. Lather, rinse, repeat.

That record of imperfect obedience is, however, no excuse to stop trying. It is better than no one fighting against abuses of power, and we serve a God who wants "justice [to] roll down like waters, and righteousness like an ever-flowing stream."⁷

Jesus treated people in a way that was radically, scandalously, different from anyone else.

He would have been entitled to look down at people from a pedestal. In addition to the obvious, that he was God and no one else on Earth was, he was Jewish, a

⁶ <http://www.hogemempresby.org/HM3.html>

⁷ Amos 5:24.

member of God's chosen race, descended from King David, and David's true heir. He was male, in a world where that was assumed to, yes, make him better than any woman. He was without sin, surrounded by people who were sinful.

But Jesus did not treat people that way. It scandalized the people who thought they were better than others, but Jesus would speak with anyone, whether they were male, female, Jewish, Samaritan, or Roman. He would listen to anyone, and take their concerns seriously. He would not do things that were wrong just because someone asked him to,⁸ but he listened and helped anyone who asked. His apostles, or messengers, included blue-collar guys and a tax accountant, an ex-government collaborator and revolutionaries.⁹ His disciples, the larger group of people around him, included both men and women.

The Church, being made up of human beings, has an imperfect record in this area. But we continue to try. We continue to try to treat the vulnerable better than does the world outside our doors. We continue to lift up voices that have been silenced, and work to lift up people who are oppressed.

When Jesus was asked if he was the Messiah, he did not give a direct answer. He pointed out the things that he was doing and that were happening around him, and he let the questioners decide for themselves.

⁸ Witness the Temptation in the Wilderness, Luke, Ch. 4.

⁹ Luke 6:12-16. Simon Peter and Andrew, James and John, were fishermen. Matthew, aka Levi, was a tax collector, meaning both a tax accountant and a government collaborator. Simon the Zealot and Judas Iscariot were members of different anti-Roman revolutionary groups.

My sisters and brothers, Jesus wants us to follow him. He wants all of us Christians, or “little Christs,” to be able to say the same thing. He wants us to be asked if we are Christians, and for us to be able to point to the things happening around us. None of us will get it perfect; none of us is Christ. But Christ walks with us every step of the way.

Christ helps us. He gives us words when ours fail. He gives us rest when we are tired, inspiration when we are discouraged, peace when we are disturbed by the world around us. He gives us forgiveness when we fail to hit the mark, and love even when we do not love ourselves. But, then, like a football coach with a sacked quarterback, he sends us back onto the field.

My sisters and brothers, the world is better than it was in 30 A.D., because of the work of God through imperfect tools, first and foremost God’s Church. The world is better, but it’s not where it needs to be.

Let us all follow the signs of Jesus’ presence, and see what kind of difference God can make in the world through us.

AMEN.