

Sermon on Matthew 11:16-19, 25-30
Fifth Sunday after Pentecost, July 5, 2020
Lutheran Church of the Redeemer
By James Erlandson

Dear friends in Christ....

The gospel today starts with a question: *“To what will I compare this generation?”* Jesus asked this of the crowds, after John the Baptist in prison had sent his disciples to Jesus asking if “he was the one who is to come?” Jesus’ response to John’s disciples was this: “Go and tell John what you hear and see – the blind receive their sight, the lame walk, the deaf hear, the dead are raised, and the poor hear good news.” Then Jesus asked the crowds: “What did you go out into the wilderness to look at?” So after speaking about John as even more than a prophet, but a messenger to prepare the way for him, Jesus asked: *“To what will I compare this generation?”* For many were like children, playing in the marketplace without understanding the buying and selling going on around them. Some considered John the Baptist to be demon possessed because he only ate locusts and wild honey, but Jesus ate and drank with people at dinner, so they called him a glutton, a drunkard, a friend of tax collectors and sinners. So you can’t win, with people so foolish and small-minded! Sounds like Jesus was a bit exasperated! The passage read today skips over verses where Jesus says “woe to those who live in cities where he did great deeds of power, yet they still did not repent!” You should read verses 20-24 for yourselves if you are curious, but it’s not bedtime reading! It’s not “happy talk from Jesus” .

So what was it about this generation of Jesus that he was talking about in such unflattering terms, like foolish children, unable to be satisfied or repent? It could be that his generation in ancient Palestine was a lot like ours today! The people who lived in Galilee and Judah were occupied by a foreign military power, this time by the Romans, who were cruel and merciless in laying down the law. They used the cross to execute those who resisted, and levied taxes to fund the occupation and as tribute to Caesar. The people’s leaders weren’t any better. The high priests and royal household collaborated with the Romans, in order to hold on to their power, and added their own layer of taxes and tribute. The gap between the rich and poor was enormous, with a few wealthy landlords on top, and thousands of poor, landless workers on the bottom. No wonder the people longed for a savior, a Messiah, to rescue them and set things right. But they were confused by prophets like John the Baptist, and even more now, by Jesus. What kind of a Messiah, or king, would ride on a colt of a donkey into Jerusalem to bring in a new “kingdom”? Where was the horse, the army for this Messiah? How could a carpenter’s son, a rabbi, rid them of the powerful Romans without an

army? They were looking for someone much different than Jesus! Because Jesus offered not victory, but healing. Forgiveness and mercy, love for your neighbor – even your enemy and inclusion of outcasts and foreigners. Yes, the ancient people Jesus grew up with had a lot of biases and prejudices, and failed so often to get the point of Jesus, especially the most religious among them who had their own expectations about the Messiah whom God would send. So, they were a lot like us, in so many ways, without the burden of “technology”!

So this is a good question for us to ask ourselves today about this American generation – especially on the weekend of the Fourth of July, when we supposedly celebrate the “Declaration of Independence” from a foreign power called Great Britain in 1776. So I ask you, “*With what will you compare this generation in America today, on July 5, 2020?*” You might like to write some comments in the chat bar. Are there some things that frustrate you about Americans today (of all kinds), regarding the supposed faith and the values we claim, and how much they (and we) fall short? But are there some things that give you hope today about this present generation in America, of all ages, from many nations, languages, cultures and faiths? Are you in any way, what Zechariah called, a *prisoner of hope*?

I started with the context of ancient Palestine where Jesus grew up and the people among whom Jesus preached, taught and healed. What is our context today? Today we gather not in a Temple or dusty village synagogue, but in the comfort of our homes on Zoom to worship and pray. Again, it is the 5th of July, a weekend we have grown up celebrating with picnics and fireworks – how much of that happened yesterday? This year’s holiday was one of the strangest of all, with most celebrations happening in our own backyards with small groups of family or friends, and no large gatherings for community fireworks, except for one big controversial fireworks display happening at Mount Rushmore in the Black Hills, inviting people to gather without physical distance during the midst of a COVID 19 global pandemic. We don’t know how this event will turn out in weeks ahead. But we cannot deny the American context today of living in the midst of a lot of fear – some of catching the coronavirus from someone who may not even be sick, of our neighbor who isn’t wearing a mask, fear of the coming election which may simply raise up more political divisions among us, as if that could be possible any more! We have just experienced a month of social unrest and protests after the killing of George Floyd by police in Minneapolis, that inspired nationwide protests and rioting that we haven’t seen since 1968 when Martin Luther King Jr. was assassinated. We are living in fearful times, when most people in America are apprehensive about the present AND the future – one observer wrote that these days most Americans are the unhappiest they’ve every been. For centuries Native Americans, African Americans, migrant workers and immigrants from other countries have lived under unjust laws and economic systems, without recourse to

change anything, seeing no evidence of transformation of society, repentance by the majority or reparations for their suffering. People seeking asylum in the “land of the free” are unjustly detained in private-run prisons, separated from their children. The gap between rich and poor is getting wider every year, and in many urban communities, people of color experience the police as a foreign occupying power. So many people are dissatisfied with the way things are and want to see a change, but so few people who have the power or benefit from it are willing to change anything. Too many people feel like “prisoners” of their dismal status and hopeless situation in life, instead of like “prisoners of hope” that our faith tells us to be. So that’s where we are in America today, at least in this moment in time. It’s mentally exhausting to live under so much stress.

But to all of this hopelessness and fear, Jesus offers an invitation to each one of us today, to you and me and every child of God. *“Come to me, all you that are weary and are carrying heavy burdens, and I will give you rest. Take my yoke upon you, and learn from me; for I am gentle and humble in heart, and you will find rest for your souls. For my yoke is easy, and my burden is light.”*

Now it would be too easy to just take these words out of context, and think that Jesus is just calling for people of faith to shut their eyes to what is happening around us, to look away from the injustice and cruelty of poverty, of community violence and police brutality, and a blind eye to unjust systems. But remember, my friends, Jesus’ context when he came, and his words to the people in his generation, when he told them, *“Go and tell John what you see and hear from me, how the blind receive their sight, the lame walk, the lepers are cleansed, the deaf hear, even the dead are raised, and the poor have good news brought to them! And blessed is anyone who takes no offense at me.”*

Dear friends, Jesus was brutally honest about the unjust systems and the corrupt leaders who betrayed the people in their care and made life so brutally difficult for so many. He called the leaders of his own religion “hypocrites” for adding sins and rules and ordinances that only added to the burden of the people. He called King Herod a “fox” – a puppet of the Romans who enriched himself by his corruption at the peoples’ expense (where have we seen that today?). So Jesus did not preach a false gospel of closing our eyes to injustice and just “getting along in order to get by” as so many false prophets did and so many do today, preaching on television a *prosperity gospel* of God’s blessings of wealth for the faithful, if only you send checks to me, today. No, this Jesus preached a gospel of hope for the hopeless, truth to those seeking wisdom, healing for everyone in pain, justice for all those living under oppression. Jesus gives this same invitation to you and me today. Even when the truth is not pretty, like the truth of racism in our land, and we’d rather shut our eyes than see it in ourselves.

Jesus tells you the truth amidst all the lies that political leaders and too many preachers tell today. Jesus tells the truth that God is full of mercy and compassion, not judgment or punishment for sins, but forgiveness and reconciliation! Jesus tells the truth that every human being is a child of God, not just those who are privileged, born of particular parents, with a particular faith, from a particular country, of a particular skin color or culture. You, and every child of God has worth simply for being a child of God! Jesus offers God's abundance to everyone, not only a few, an abundance to be shared because there is enough for everyone! So during these days when some political leaders and their followers say that the "truth is debatable", and their lies can be misconstrued as truth, who say "don't believe what you see or hear, just listen to me" – hear instead the words of Jesus to know the real truth, which is the beginning of wisdom! *"Go and tell John what you see and hear"* – in what Jesus said and did: *"that the blind can see, the deaf hear, the lepers are cleansed, the dead are raised, and the poor have good news brought to them."* You have heard me say this three times: do you believe it now? Where do you see truth today, as Jesus would see it? We can never be afraid of the truth, because not only is truth the beginning of wisdom, but as Jesus also said, *"I have come to testify to the truth, because the truth will make you free!"*

Now THAT gospel will preach! *"The truth will set you free!"* – especially on the Fourth of July, a day when we celebrate freedom, even when it is just an "idea" to many people, and not yet a reality! Truth that leads to freedom inspired the prophets and the followers of Jesus, it inspired the signers of the Declaration of Independence and the framers of the Constitution, it inspired Abraham Lincoln to author and pass the Emancipation Proclamation which declared the freedom of every slave throughout the Confederate South in 1863, even though it took years for that word to get through, and centuries later, "freedom" can be an elusive ideal.

But the freedom we have in the good news of Jesus is the real truth we live for and proclaim today: the truth of every person's worth as a child of God, the promise of an abundant life through faith, and the command from God to *"love your neighbor as yourself"*, which is the reality by which we are all called to live, and makes true freedom possible! So let's sing that hymn of faith by which we hear Jesus' invitation to *"Come unto me and rest"*, for when we do come to Jesus, we find not only rest, but find the strength to rise up and walk again! *For Jesus is this dark world's light, who makes the morning rise and all our days bright. So in Jesus' light let us walk, together, till our traveling days are done. Amen.*