

Sermon Advent 3 2020

December 13, 2020

Matthew 11:2-11

Grace, mercy, and peace to you from God our Father, and our Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ. Amen. This morning we meditate on the Gospel Lesson previously read, especially Jesus' words, "**And blessed is the one who is not offended by me.**"

I always am intrigued by the interaction John has with Jesus in this portion of Matthew's Gospel. Here John is as the one who baptized Jesus. He's the one who saw the Holy Spirit descend up on Jesus as a dove, manifesting Jesus' anointing as the Messiah. He's the one who pointed to Jesus and said, "Behold the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world." And yet, here he sends these disciples to ask Jesus if He is indeed "the One who is to come," if He is the Messiah, or if they should "look for another."

Now, what's interesting is that Biblical Scholars aren't unified in what this means. There are even church fathers going back to the early church who said that John was merely going through this conversation for the sake of his disciples, that John never doubted. He just wanted his disciples to be led to Jesus. And that's certainly within John's range of activity in the Gospels. He is the one who points to Jesus saying that Jesus must become more and he must become less. But at the same time, it doesn't totally fit with the face of the story here, does it? So, what do we do with it?

Well, on the one hand, I think we can appreciate Jesus' graciousness toward John assuming the case that John was really wondering. Here, John is asking, questioning, about Jesus. And Jesus still exalts John as the faithful prophet he is. On the other hand, I think we can be sympathetic with this, can't we? Sure, we might wonder how John could witness all of these things and still question, but isn't this consistent with the whole of Scripture? You get the Israelites in the wilderness and they saw all of the things that happened in Egypt, in the crossing of the Red Sea, in hearing the Lord's voice at Sinai. You have all of that, and they still constantly sin. And we're the same, aren't we? We constantly hear of our Lord's grace to us, we see His work among us: His blessings, His mercy, His forgiveness spoken into our ears and placed upon our tongues. And yet, how do we so often respond? I think we can sympathize with John.

And yet what is Jesus' response? Well, like I said, He commends John. But He also says, look at all that you see. You see all this great stuff, you see healings, and resurrections, blessings, good news proclaimed that the Kingdom of Light is overcoming the Kingdom of darkness. Which by the way, a lot of this is direct reference, and so also

fulfillment, of things from Isaiah. Isaiah said these things would happen and Jesus fulfills them in the witness of the people. And then He says those words, **“blessed is the one who is not offended by me.”**

Now, in the Greek that word for offended there could be literally translated “scandalized.” “Blessed is the one who is not scandalized by me.” The word means to be a stumbling block, or in more historical works, a trap of sorts. Blessed is the one who doesn’t stumble in believing in Jesus. Blessed is the one who doesn’t get caught in a trap to not believe in Jesus. Blessed is the one who isn’t scandalized, isn’t offended by Him.

Are you offended by Jesus? Be careful before you answer. The disciples were. Jesus said on the night of His betrayal that they would all fall away, that they would all be scandalized. And they did. Even Peter who, all the more, said he would absolutely never fall away. Even Peter fell away.

Likewise, the Pharisees were offended, they were scandalized by Jesus. In Matthew 15, Jesus offended them in telling them that they didn’t honor His commandments. He offended them by telling them that it wasn’t the food that people ate that made them unclean. Instead it was the sin that came out of their hearts.

And as we look at the scandal, the offense of our Lord, we see both of these, don’t we? We see that there is this scandal the world brings to us as Christians. They see scandal at things the Lord says. And they try to drive us away from Him, try embroil us in the scandal as well. For example, I was reading an interview with a musician who professes to be Christian. In it, the interviewer started making comments about Christianity and the offense he found in it; the offense of Jesus saying “I am the way, the truth, and the life. No one comes to the Father but through me.” He then also said how he didn’t like Paul’s professing of right wing views. Of course, I thought that was interesting because Paul really had no concept of left and right wing politics, and it’s really anachronistic to categorize him as right wing, but it makes the point. It makes the point that the message that we see in the Scriptures about sin and about what sin is, and how we are all deeply, deeply sinful, showing forth the sin of our hearts by our actions. It makes the point that all of this is offensive, is scandalous to the world.

So, where are you offended, scandalized by Jesus? Does it scandalize you that He tells you that you won’t get to heaven because of your goodness, but His? Does it scandalize you that He tells you that He is the way, the truth, and the life? Or are there other things that scandalize you.

For example, we started a bit of a conversation about gender roles in a Bible Class a couple of weeks ago. You know, the fact that we don't ordain women is scandalous in our day. As we talk about those things and when I defend what Scripture says on them, I'll admit there are ways even I bristle. We look at readings like Ephesians 5 where Paul speaks about wives submitting to their husbands. That makes us uncomfortable, doesn't it? We're not those who would profess to be a part of what's often called the "woke" crowd, but it still is something that makes us squirm, isn't it? And I can explain about authority and responsibility, and what all of that really means until I'm blue in the face. That authority, power aren't about having control; that even Christ didn't see equality with God something to be sought after. But the reality is that we, or I'm guessing almost all of us, are still a bit uncomfortable with this. And to prove the point, I'm going to ease us all a little bit and once more explain that those verses don't justify the mistreatment of women, nor do they give us reason to view women as any less intelligent or capable of so many things or as lesser people than men. But the words still say what they say.

Or look at how Jesus preaches about money. That gets uncomfortable too, doesn't it? When you see the generosity of the Widow with her mite, and Jesus says she gave more than anyone else, doesn't that make you squirm? It's because it scandalizes us. It offends our sinful nature.

These offend our nature that likes to go along with the world and take our wisdom from the world. They offend our nature that wants to grab and grab and grab for our own selfish use and comfort and satisfaction. We too are offended, scandalized by Jesus.

But why? Look at who this Jesus is. Look at who He is in His goodness. Look at who He is in His love. Look at what He tells John's disciples: **"Go and tell John what you hear and see: the blind receive their sight and the lame walk, lepers are cleansed and the deaf hear, and the dead are raised up, and the poor have good news preached to them."** This Jesus is the One who did all of that. He is the One, like I said, who brought this light into the world darkened by sin and the suffering that goes along with it. He is the One who entered into this world to save us from death in His life, His death, and His resurrection. That's, of course, the joy of this birth that we'll be celebrating in a couple of weeks. Why would we be offended at this One who loves us so dearly.

In fact, as we speak of scandal, don't we see it? The greatest scandal of all? Don't we see that Jesus is the One scandalized on our behalf on the cross. There He is subjected to that offense, that trap, that scandal of a public execution, the death of a criminal. And for what crime? Not His own, but mine. Not His own, but yours. Why are we offended?

And you see, that's where John's example and His preaching is such a wonderful example in Advent. Think about John. Like Jesus says, did they go out to see John because He was like a reed waving in the wind? No! John didn't adjust His preaching to make sure the crowds were pleased. John was that guy that caused trouble. He was that guy that said stuff, and we all heard it, we'd say, "Well, I don't think I would have said it that way." "I don't think I would have gone so far as to call the Pharisees a brood of vipers, to call them snakes," but that's what John did.

And he did this in a weird way too. As Jesus points out, John didn't come in soft and fancy clothes. No, he came in camel's hair and a belt. He ate locusts and wild honey. And why did the people go out to see him? For that very reason; for the reason that he was a prophet.

He was a prophet who spoke God's Word without equivocation. He was a prophet who preached without worry if someone would be offended. He didn't care if he was called mean, or judgmental or any of that. And as I say that, to be clear, I'm not advocating that you go out and tell everyone just how awful you think they are because of their sin. Or that you yell at them about going to hell because of it. No, John definitely has a role we don't. But I would advocate that you not be afraid to tell the truth of God's Word because it is critical of someone else's sincerely held beliefs. I would advocate that you not worry whether someone will think you're weird because our church is so "stodgy" and "stick in the mud." After all, we're dealing with God and His holiness with these things. Doesn't that require care and steadfastness? It does, but that's a scandal.

Christians, in view of John then, hear his scandalous preaching. Hear how He prepares that way before Jesus calling the world, calling you to repentance. Repent. Repent of your sin, turn from it and make straight the path for the King to arrive. Why? Because of this King's love for you.

Yes, this Jesus is offensive. Yes, He is scandalous. But He was made a scandal for you and for your sin. So, repent of that sin, and cling to Him. His ways are not our ways. His thoughts are not our thoughts. They are so much better. And in the scandal of His love for us shown on the cross, we see just how good He is, which tells us just how much better we are in Him. Better in His love, in His healing, in His making us perfect again in body and soul. Truly better in Him making us blessed just as He is. Amen.