

Message: "Dealing with Inner Peace's Fickle Nature"

Scripture: Matthew 11:16-19, 25-30

¹⁶"But to what will I compare this generation? It is like children sitting in the marketplaces and calling to one another, ¹⁷'We played the flute for you, and you did not dance; we wailed, and you did not mourn.' ¹⁸For John came neither eating nor drinking, and they say, 'He has a demon'; ¹⁹the Son of Man came eating and drinking, and they say, 'Look, a glutton and a drunkard, a friend of tax collectors and sinners!' Yet wisdom is vindicated by her deeds."

²⁵At that time Jesus said, "I thank you, Father, Lord of heaven and earth, because you have hidden these things from the wise and the intelligent and have revealed them to infants; ²⁶yes, Father, for such was your gracious will. ²⁷All things have been handed over to me by my Father; and no one knows the Son except the Father, and no one knows the Father except the Son and anyone to whom the Son chooses to reveal him. ²⁸"Come to me, all you that are weary and are carrying heavy burdens, and I will give you rest. ²⁹Take my yoke upon you, and learn from me; for I am gentle and humble in heart, and you will find rest for your souls. ³⁰For my yoke is easy, and my burden is light."

Sometimes I stand amazed at how scripture passages from thousands of years ago remain incredibly relevant to our present reality. Today's scripture serves as just such an example.

There's a very present-day example going on right now that reflects almost perfectly the opening statement of our scripture passage - and it involves the 250th anniversary celebration of our country's birth. The word "Celebration" this year might be a misnomer, for what we are witnessing in the people's response does not seem very celebratory. Or, perhaps, we as a nation are not sure what there is to celebrate?

We are presently in the middle of what has been labeled "The Great American State Fair;" the purpose of the Fair is to celebrate our country's 250th birthday by inviting people to a good old fashioned Americana event with Ferris-wheels and carnival booths and musical talent and America-themed displays all heralding patriotism and national pride. The cost for the event is \$102 million dollars in taxpayer funds -- not donations, by the way. Also of note were the prices charged for traditional fair fare; a pretzel costs \$25, bottled water starts at \$4, a smash burger will set you back \$20; a turkey leg goes for \$23; and a glass of lemonade goes for \$9.

Well, I think most of us are aware of what happened - no one came. Hardly anyone attended - at least thus far.

Organizers have said that around 200,000 people have attended so far; reporters on the ground say that the decimal place on that figure needs to be moved left two places. President Donald Trump stated that his kickoff rally for the fair drew a crowd of at least 45,000 people, but witness accounts, media estimates, and aerial photographs show a more accurate number to be around

1,000 people (and the picture before you shows the crowd at that moment). The 16-day event has faced several disruptions, including withdrawn musical performers, a power outage on its opening day, an algae-infested horribly-smelly reflecting pool, an eyesore of a demolition site on the White House grounds, and severe summer heat - and you know the conspiracy theories are soon to begin.

It's as if people simply don't want to dance to the tune being played by our national leadership.

I think we all know that people are not skipping the event only because of the weather or their favorite entertainer bailing or the cost of pretzels- it's about the generalized yet strong notion that things are very wrong in our country right now. And when things are going wrong, withdrawal often reflects the wrongness.

This is the point Jesus is making in his particular context in our scripture passage today when he says "it is like children in the marketplace and calling to one another, 'We played the flute for you, and you did not dance.'" And today, on the Washington Mall as well as most places in our country, it is evident that hardly anyone feels like dancing.

Nor is there a meaningful response to those who are wailing, as Jesus mentions next. There is great harm being caused by the leaders of the world, our country notwithstanding. Those in power continue to choose not to hear the wailing of those they are hurting - and their cries are growing every day. Between the escalation of ICE raids and veiled immigration detention centers, in the midst of drastically rising rates of diseases we once had a grip on, as five million are unceremoniously kicked off of Medicaid health care, as the carnage continues in Gaza and Lebanon and Ukraine, as we bomb yet another unconfirmed drug boat in the Caribbean into oblivion, as we continue to demonize transgender youth and vilify LGBTQ+ individuals, as we continue to fuel the flames accelerating climate change, the wailing is growing exponentially..... but it seems those in power have grown deaf to the suffering they inflict; they mourn not for those they are hurting.

"We played the flute for you, but you did not dance; We wailed, and you did not mourn." It's as if Jesus is broadcasting this message directly to us today, and it is saying an obvious thing - that our world is really messed up. But he is saying something even more significant, I think - that we, as a species, have messed it up. And even more to the point - that we continue, as a species, to mess it up. If the

condition of our present world doesn't make one feel queasy, one is simply not paying attention.

But then, Jesus does something very unexpected in this passage, something daring and perhaps even offensive - he has the gall to proclaim a pathway to peace in the midst of our nightmare. ²⁸"Come to me, all you who are weary and are carrying heavy burdens, and I will give you rest. ²⁹Take my yoke upon you, and learn from me; for I am gentle and humble in heart, and you will find rest for your souls. ³⁰For my yoke is easy, and my burden is light."

It stands alone as a difficult enough question to ask regarding Jesus speaking this message into his own time. How could he have proclaimed that peace was within reach for those listening to him 2,000 years ago? These were the rabble of society, the poor, the sick, the outcast, the sinner, the ne'er do well.....these were people who were on the wrong side of society's tracks. It remains an incredibly challenging question for us today as we seek to inject this understanding into the here and now, namely -- How can Jesus provide peace in the midst of all this chaos we face daily in the world today?

I think I had an experience of this exact provision a few days ago in a conversation I had with my neighbor. I've spoken about my neighbors before; where we live we are surrounded by a whole lot of wonderful people who always greet us warmly, keep their lawns properly trimmed, and do not make a whole lot of noise (well, except the one family down the street who set off a few too many fireworks, as we were reminded last night!). But sometimes, with one couple I regularly interact, I have what appears to be a most pleasant neighborly exchange on the surface, yet my insides are burning. This couple is elderly and somewhat frail; they smile a lot, they always greet me warmly; I never speak to them together; over the many years I have known them, I have only spoken to one or the other separate from their spouse - but the content of our conversations seems to always be the same. It tends to drive me mad. Mad as in angry, mad as in insane, mad as in "I want to get away from you as quickly as I can."

And please understand - their manner is very loving; they are good people. It is the substance of what they share that is the problem. In any conversation that lasts more than five minutes, they cannot help but point out how all illegal immigrants are criminals; they go out of their way to point out the horrible things Democrats do; they make it a point to speak of their support of our present Administration, dismissing any morally questionable behavior as media-coverup or false news; they are very quick to change the subject if any hint of opposite

opinion comes out of my mouth. They speak all of these things with smiles and pleasantries - and they never hear what I say in response.

Well, I found myself once again in that situation with a pleasant smiling face telling me things that I didn't want to hear and knew to be wrong and hurtful, and I could feel my heart begin its pilgrimage towards becoming tied up in knots - when I employed my secret weapon, a tool I received when I gradually became a Christian over many years. And as a pastor, I've received several upgrades on this secret weapon, newer and more effective versions that help me represent God more faithfully (I hope!). And what is this secret weapon, this tool, this upgradable implement called?

It is called "Choice." I could choose my attitude in the moment before me; I could choose to hate or understand; I could choose to attack or listen; I could choose to see my neighbor as she sees those of my own particular persuasion (that is, the devil incarnate), or I could choose to see her as a human being trying to figure things out (just like I am).

Of course, I chose the latter. I've learned that our neighbors cannot hear what I have to say, or perhaps they do not want to hear what I have to say - but they are desperate at the same time to be heard themselves. So I listen; I listen much more than I talk. I interject what I can when I can, but it always feels like a pretty one-sided conversation with me listening and them speaking, and I always sense their desire to have me affirm their opinions, which I almost never do - but I do think they know I care for them, as I honestly do, and I think they realize that I will not let even strong differences of opinion keep me from neighborly interactions with them; it makes me wonder how they see me, perhaps as someone who is kindly but misinformed, or someone who simply doesn't know the real story of what's going on - but I sense that they see me for something else entirely - someone who is trying to be present to them as they need someone to be. I can't help but hope I may move them into different thinking or less caustic opinions, but that is never my main goal; my main goal is to let them know I am available to them for whatever they feel like sharing, even if I don't agree with them at all. And I sense they find this helpful, to have a neighbor who listens to them.

My point in sharing this account is this: every time I employ the secret weapon of choice in this way, one of us gains an inner peace the other seems to be missing. I can almost always sense their frustration with the world; they often tell me of their frustration with other neighbors; sometimes they tell me of their frustration with each other. And I have found great peace in providing a place

for them to go with their frustrations, even as they are probably frustrated with me in that I do not join in their criticisms. But it is a power I embody, as do you, as do each one of us, the power to choose how to treat each other, how to see each other, how to be open to each other, how to support each other; such choices embody the power to change the world a little bit at a time. And it brings a peace that can only exist in the environment of caring for each other, as God invites us to do.

In so many ways, if we think about it, choice is our salvation – if we choose wisely. For the Christian, faith itself begins with the chosen orientation of life that aligns with Jesus; to choose the God revealed in Christ is something we have to do every single day of our lives, to be intentional in our living by setting the love of Christ as our standard and setting God's will above our own. Choosing how we live in each and every moment of our lives reveals whether or not it is Jesus whom we have chosen or something lesser; and the testbed of true faith is often revealed in the struggles we undergo because of that faith. But immersed in such faith are respites that can be had no other way – the peace of a conscience cleared of malice or hatred, the peace of hopefulness independent on this world, the peace of a secure love that will never let us go, and the peace of helping others discover the strength of faith over fear. These are pathways of thinking and believing that must be chosen to be implemented; and we are all capable of making such choices, choices that help to set us free from the anxieties of the world.

The peace Jesus offers is a matter of choice – to choose love over hatred, to choose compassion over cruelty, to choose generosity over greed, to choose understanding over animosity, to choose God's way over the ways of the world. The peace of such choices is what gives shape to our inner being and help form our outer lives. If we wish to receive the peace Jesus offers, choose to live the life Jesus offers – loving God and each other in all the ways we can. The peace we receive will not be rational nor predictable – but it will be the only peace that endures.