

“The Jaded and the Wise”

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Genesis 24:34-38, 42-49, 58-67; Matthew 11:16-19, 25-30

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Every so often, my daughter’s elementary school will have “Opposite Day.” Everything said and done on Opposite Day is, well, opposite from everything said and done on any other day. Clothes are worn inside out and backwards. When you say you are going into the classroom, you are really going out of the classroom. When you say you really hate candy, that means you really love candy. When you are told to look up, you have to look down. When you need to sit down, you are told to stand up.

Have you ever noticed how sometimes people can fall into a type of Opposite Day without intending to have any kind of fun? You have probably had moments like that in your life, and I know you have dealt with it to some degree. I’m talking about those folks who seem to live in a type of perpetual Opposite Day. When most people want to have turkey for Thanksgiving dinner, they will hold out for ham, and everyone hears how it just won’t be Thanksgiving for them unless they get to have ham. Then the next year, when everybody has had a year to adjust to the idea of ham on “Turkey Day,” and they say, “Okay, we’ll try ham for Thanksgiving dinner this year,” the notorious fan of ham will insist that turkey is always the traditional entrée for Thanksgiving, and who in their right mind would want ham for Thanksgiving?

Then there’s the famous, “Why won’t you come and see me? You never do!” Then when you make the time to stop by, “Oh, you never come at a good time! I just couldn’t possibly see you today!”

Some folks are famous among their friends and family for always being pouty and contrary. They will just never be happy. Who knows why? Maybe it is a way to control all the decision making of a group, or maybe it is their way to feel important or to get attention. Maybe they don’t know any other way to get the attention of others. Who knows? Unfortunately, this behavior tends to do just the opposite. People get tired of the contrariness for contrary’s sake, and tend to quit listening or paying attention to these folks. Gradually the perpetual naysayers are moved to the side of all the action. They become just plain irrelevant to a vital and lively group. Sometimes this happens quickly, but other times, it can take generations.

Jesus, in today’s Gospel lesson, is throwing up his hands over such people. He says, “To what will I compare this generation?” In the verses right before this, he has just given a quick reference to the history of the treatment given to prophets. God has sent prophets in the past, as the people have cried to God for help in their times of crisis. But then when they hear what the prophets have to say, they don’t want to listen. So Jesus has heard of John the Baptist being imprisoned, and he states that “...the kingdom of heaven has suffered violence, and the violent take it by force.”

So now, Jesus says, “To what will I compare this generation?” He has heard threats of violence against himself, and now John’s life is endangered. He has had to look into the faces of people who are jaded and unchangeable and who refuse to hear what he has to announce. He turns to a very familiar children’s rhyme. It was something used by children playing at that time, sort of like children today may say, “Sticks and stones may break my bones, but words will never hurt me!”

This little jingle from the first century, however, probably was used for a child that didn’t want to play any of the games other children wanted to play. This would be a child that was pouting or just plain contrary, a child – or an adult - who would fit our saying today of, “If you don’t do it my way, I’ll take my toys and go home!” And like Jesus, folks today use that little saying about taking toys and going home to apply to contrary and jaded adults.

We played the flute, and you didn’t want to dance joyfully. So we went into the opposite type of game and wailed mournfully. You didn’t want that, either! Maybe you don’t know what you want!

So Jesus looks at those jaded and unimpressed faces of the Pharisees, the Sadducees, the Herodians, the Zealots, and all the different folks in factions who are sure they already have all the answers they need, and he says they are just like pouting children.

“John the Baptist was sent to you by God, and you didn’t like his ascetic and austere and solemn style. Now I’ve been sent by God, and you don’t like my charisma and social outreach to all kinds of people! You have had two very different styles of messengers sent to you by God, and neither of them fits your taste! You don’t know what you want, and you can’t accept the messengers that God sends to you. They are never enough of this, or enough of that. And whatever you don’t understand, or whatever seems to challenge your jaded ways, you work to undermine and eliminate!”

Now, here’s the important part: Jesus doesn’t waste his time trying to win over these people. When folks don’t even understand why they have a need to be the constant obstacle to a group, they aren’t going to be “won over.” So Jesus turns away from them, and turns instead to those who are ready to hear him. He works with those who are ready to be taught, and doesn’t even try to appease the displeased. He moves on with those who are ready and receptive.

He lifts a prayer to God, saying, “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....” Here is one of those paradoxical opposites among the teachings of Jesus. People who are not at the front of the pack, people that may appear

to be rather simple, people that are easily dismissed by the more sophisticated and jaded ones are open to hearing what Jesus has to say.

Jesus calls them “infants.” Sometimes children behave better than adults, you know. Sometimes children can see truths that adults have obscured. Sometimes the outsider of a group sees more clearly than those caught up in the systems and political balancing acts of a group. Do you remember the story of “The Emperor’s New Clothes”? A supposedly wise emperor and his entire court is duped by a charlatan tailor, who insists the emperor has an expensive and magical set of clothes that only the wise can see. So, when the emperor parades around naked, no one dares to point out the obvious, except one wise young boy.

It is because of such persons that Jesus gives thanks to God. These are the people that Jesus can work with, these are the persons he will apprentice and nurture. These supposedly unimportant people will be the investment that Jesus makes of his time in the world. It is the person who is willing to stand up to the ways of greed, to the ways of oppressing some to the advantage of a few, the person who, like that child, can say “But the emperor has no clothes!” that Jesus will say, “Well done, good and faithful servant.”

We’ve celebrated Independence Day this last week, the birthday of our country. Our nation was founded by those who had a vision of a land where everyday, ordinary people could have a decent life. They didn’t have to be lords or baronesses in order to get a decent meal or adequate healthcare or education sufficient to learn how to care for themselves in the world. The idea was that everyone could have a good and free and happy life.

We’ve still not achieved that vision 100%, but that doesn’t mean we should lose the goal of realizing this possibility some day. Our nation was begun by people who said, “No, the world does not have to be one in which power and wealth are given to only a few!” and they stood up to the powers and the jaded faces of their day to step forward into a hard won dream. Are you still willing to stand up to those persons who are driven by greed, to go against the grain and say something like “The emperor has no clothes!” to a world that has capitulated to those labeled “wise,” for whatever reason? How is God calling you to move past the entrenched persons of our day, and instead walk alongside of the “little ones” today? How is God empowering you to stand up for and to be in service to the “little ones” of our world?

Jesus stood up to the jaded ones, and empowered the “nobodys” of his day to become wise in the ways of God. And Jesus paid a great price for doing this, when he was beaten, humiliated, and nailed to a cross to die. However, death could not stop Jesus from reaching out to the “little ones” of our world, and he calls each one of you to join him in his ministry today. But note that all those people that tried to stop Jesus, all those people who were dedicated to being unimpressed with God’s messengers, have

long ago been swept to the sidelines of irrelevancy. All those Pharisees, Sadducees, and others. Their movements died out, and people quit listening to them. But the movement of Jesus Christ has stayed the course of bringing the Ideals of God into this world, and it is still going strong.

May God give each one of us the wisdom that is open to the direction of the Holy Spirit, and the wisdom to discern how to direct our own efforts so that they build up the ministry of Jesus Christ. Amen.