

Garrett Book July 9th 2017

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.”

²⁵ At 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; ²⁶ yes, Father, for such was your gracious will. ²⁷ All 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. ²⁹ 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. ³⁰ For my yoke is easy, and my burden is light.”

- Thank you for having me/Thank you for being here
- Pop Quiz: What's the last book of the bible?
 - Revelation/Revelation of John
 - In older versions: Apocalypse of John
 - Greek: *apo-kalyptein*: To take the cover off (Greek: *eskhaton*: last or uttermost)
 - Latin: *apocalypsis*: To reveal
- Jesus lived in *apocalyptic times*
 - Not “end times,” not eschaton
 - Apocalyptic times are those moments as the human drama unfolds that *reveal* something to us which we had not known about ourselves, or worse, had forgotten
 - Jesus lived in *apocalyptic times*
- “And to what will I compare *this* generation?” he asks
 - He says it's like children yelling at one another “we played the flute but you did not dance; we wailed but you did not mourn”
 - Jesus's analogies are never quite as clear as we want them to be
 - Older Bible commentaries are quick to say that this analogy is about the Jewish population failing to understand Jesus's message (in fact, they seem to think nearly every analogy is about the Jewish population failing to understand his message)—but these commentaries tend to be peppered with anti-Semitism, not to mention that Jesus is a *member* of the Jewish population
 - Jesus talks about *this generation* elsewhere in Matthew
 - When he does, he seems to be talking about the religious authorities who revel in rule enforcement and orthodoxy over sentiment and compassion
 - Following today's gospel, in the 12th chapter of Matthew, we read about Jesus being rebuked for feeding the disciples on the Sabbath, and then rebuked for healing a man on the Sabbath
 - The so-called *this generation* seems to be marked by the suffocating attribute of over-administration
 - The importance of what the children are yelling in the analogy can't be overstated:
 - We played the flute, but you did not *dance*. We wailed but you did not *mourn*.
 - *This generation* seems to be going through the motions, happier to perform the ritual than be evoked by it, than to feel it, than to experience it.
 - The religious authorities of *this generation* have clearly not read Maya Angelou or they would know that to *really* play the flute *is* to dance and to *really* wail *is* to mourn.

- *A caged bird stands on the grave of dreams
his shadow shouts on a nightmare scream
his wings are clipped and his feet are tied
so he opens his throat to sing.*

*The caged bird sings with a fearful trill
of things unknown but longed for still
and his tune is heard on the distant hill
for the caged bird sings of freedom.*

- One cannot be separated from the other without betraying itself
- And the religious authorities of *this generation* must not have read Stephen Dunn when they denounced John and said “he has a demon,” or deprecated the Son of Man and called him a glutton and a drunkard who befriends prostitutes and tax collectors. When they shamed the Divine spark within *themselves* that birthed their humanity, they certainly must not have been familiar with Stephen Dunn who wrote:

- *There are words
I've had to save myself from,
like My Lord and Blessed Mother,
words I said and never meant,
though I admit a part of me misses
the ornamental stateliness
of High Mass, that smell*

*of incense. Heaven did exist,
I discovered, but was reciprocal
and momentary, like lust
felt at exactly the same time—
two mortals, say, on a resilient bed,
making a small case for themselves.*

*You and I became the words
I'd say before I'd lay me down to sleep,
and again when I'd wake—wishful
words, no belief in them yet.
It seemed you'd been put on earth
to distract me
from what was doctrinal and dry.*

- Yes, *this generation* about whom Jesus speaks plays the flute without dancing, and wails without mourning.
 - They're what Paul calls *clashing gongs or clanging cymbals*.

- One of the issues to take with the old Bible commentaries, and in fact many churches, is the insistence that Jesus is criticizing *those people*—namely, the people who aren't in church.
 - After all, the Church *is* the body of Christ.
 - But if *this generation* Jesus is talking about is marked as
 - the religious authorities who prioritize law enforcement and orthodoxy
 - who have forgotten that their first concern is compassion and all else is ancillary
 - who know to play the flute on queue and wail on queue but don't allow themselves to *experience* (to be *roused by*) the spirit that ought to follow
 - Then *this generation* sounds to me more like so many churches and Jesus sounds like the crowds of people who no longer attend church because they say it does so little for them spiritually. Or, more painfully, turn to the church and say “You hypocrites!”
- Dr. Phyllis Tickle wrote in her book, *The Great Emergence*, that the Church goes through a rummage sale—a reformation of sorts—every 500 years.
 - Seeing as the Protestant Reformation is commonly recognized as having begun 499 years and nine months ago, I'd say we're due for another.
 - Meanwhile, nearly every mainline protestant church is seeing a decline in church attendance, and not for a lack of trying.
 - These, too, are *apocalyptic* times—times of *revelation*
 - We are a spiritually hungry people: we are starving, and I suspect we have been for some time
 - More than we hunger for meaning, we hunger for *feeling*
 - We long to be *stirred*, to be *roused*
 - We long to spend less time in our *heads* and more time in our *bodies*
 - We're starved of any passion that runs deep and in our age of Facebook Likes and Twitter feeds find ourselves hydroplaning from one superficiality to the next
 - We desperately want to dance, and to mourn...
 - And so like the spiritually starved followers of John and Jesus, who were led out of their familiar religious institution; and like the spiritually starved followers of the Reformers who were led from their familiar religious institution, so also today we see the spiritually starved people led away from their familiar religious institutions. Led, maybe by the Spirit. Led by something within them and beyond them.
 - Not because the Church is *bad*, or altogether insufficient, but because for some of them, it does not feed their spiritual hunger. It does not feed their spiritual hunger.

- When he was in a Nazi prison, during another apocalyptic time, Dietrich Bonhoeffer wrote to his friend Eberhard Bethge about his disgust with the church's participation in the Holocaust.
 - Just like the religious authorities who Jesus chastised, the *this generation* that he talks about, who he calls *you hypocrites*, Bonhoeffer noted that Christians had made an idol of the religious institution and supplanted God with it.
 - Through his *Letters and Papers from Prison*, we read Bonhoeffer sort out his thoughts on what he comes to call *religionless Christianity*.
 - In so many words, religionless Christianity is the Christian faith, stripped of all but its most central principles and practices, and reimagined for a secular world. In fact, he suggests that God is less a deity to be worshipped and more a value to be neared.
- *This* is that reformation that's upon us, the reformation Phyllis Tickle said we're due for: this is the Secular Reformation
 - And if you have your doubts that those who no longer go to church are actually leading a Secular Reformation; if you're thinking "I don't know *what* they're doing, but it sure isn't faith," keep in mind that that is, in fact, what was said of every reformation.
 - The early Church said it of the Roman Church
 - The Orthodox Church said it of the Catholic Church
 - The Catholics said it of the Protestants
 - And now the Protestants say it of the Secularists
 - A reformation is necessarily so radically different that those in the existing church framework struggle to recognize the new framework as it's constructed
- What does the Secular Reformation look like?
 - "Secular Church" is an oxymoron
 - But that deep, primal urge to *experience*, to *feel*, to be stirred by a passion, that desire to dance and mourn—not just play the flute and wail—that animating spirit that's within and beyond is leading people to places of service.
 - To places of community building
 - To places of environmentalism
 - To places of economic and racial justice
 - Non-profits and social enterprises
 - Lancaster is a central player in the Secular Reformation
 - I couldn't begin to name all the organizations here that are contributing to this monumental shift (but I'll name a few)
 - *Two Dudes Painting* is a B Corporation, which, if you're not familiar with B Corps, I'd recommend taking a look at them—the B Corp standard meets rigorous demands of social and environmental responsibility, and financial transparency, acknowledging that a corporation is not solely accountable to its shareholders but to the world.

- *Upohar* is a self-described *social impact catering company* that employs refugee women to prepare menus based on their backgrounds and traditions
- *Assets* is a non-profit organization which trains entrepreneurs, prioritizing social and economic justice, empowerment, and environmentalism. It was founded 24 years ago under the umbrella of Mennonite Economic Development Associates.
 - *Assets* has helped establish
 - *The Common Wheel*: the bicycle shop on the east end of town which, among many other community-building activities, holds the Earn-A-Bike program, an after school program which teaches kids how to assemble bicycles from recycled parts, ending with each student having built his or her own bike
 - *NuLife*: A non-profit organization that teaches women and teenagers from South East Lancaster how to sew by using repurposed clothing
 - *Earthbound Artisan*: (This is an ethically dicey territory; I don't want to advertise from the pulpit) A social enterprise which prioritizes planting native species and providing jobs through hand work rather than heavy equipment. An "open door" hiring policy: we will hire a new employee at a living wage--\$15 an hour—if they have the desire to work. No questions asked.
 - It's our aim to get people outside, to build community among neighbors, to re-instill the sense of wonder about nature that we had when we were children.
 - And this, too, is an avenue to God—it is a dialogue with the Divine. It is fundamentally edifying, as I've always found that when I work on the land, the land works on me.
 - It challenges me, existentially. As John Muir said "When we try to pick out anything by itself, we find it hitched to everything else in the Universe."
 - Abstract as it may be, when I talk with clients about eradicating non-native species, I'm struck by what that means, when I—a white American—descend from a history as invasive as kudzu.
- There are, actually, *no* avenues of compassion or stewardship that fail to lead to God
- And what these organizations have in common are this: through the sacred act of Creation (whether that's a garden, or a dress, or a bicycle, or a meal, or a mural) in community, and with the stamp of humanity—those little

imperfections, the crooked stitch or brush stroke, the *absence* of automation—they are feeding that spiritual hunger.

- They are making the profane sacred, as the Christian tradition always has.
- They are participating *even unbeknownst to them* in the Secular Reformation.
- This *artisanal spirituality* is the spiritual practice of “making,” and it puts these reformers back into our bodies, back into the handwork of our ancestors that fulfills something deeply human that we had forgotten. They are *dancing*.
- And greater yet, these organizations have their eyes set on the horizon; they are fundamentally *hopeful* organizations; they envision a better world; they envision a resurrection; they envision the Kingdom of God—a place of equity, justice, peace, and communion with all things. God be with them.
- Call to action
- My prayer this morning is that, in this apocalyptic age that *reveals* the “awful” that we’re capable of, it also reveals the Good News: that God is stubbornly with us; that Christ is once again on the outside looking in, that the Spirit is moving now as much as ever; and that, as Bonhoeffer wrote, “Before God, and with God, we live without God.” Amen.