

July 9, 2023 Sixth Sunday after Pentecost
Ladue Chapel Presbyterian Church
Matthew 11:16-19, 25-30
"A Surprising Fit"
Douglas T. King

I have what I consider a slightly embarrassing predilection to admit to you today. When I am eating at a restaurant in my Central West End neighborhood, even as the waiter is extolling the virtues of the night's specials, I already know what I am going to order. At the Brasserie I am getting the braised beef. At Edera I am getting the Bolognese. At the Drunken Fish I am getting the spicy salmon roll. Once in a while I will jump into the deep end of the pool and order wild boar or something else that is funky and different, but not most of the time. I know what I like and it is comforting to have my expectations met. Why risk being surprised by something I may not like?

This trait, unfortunately makes me a prime candidate to be one of those children calling to each other in the marketplace to whom Jesus referred. "We played the flute for you and you did not dance and we wailed and you did not mourn." Jesus is speaking about how the people rejected both John the Baptist and himself because John and Jesus did not match up to their expectations of what a messenger of God or a savior should be. They were not looking to be surprised.

For the infinite creator of the universe, who exists beyond our understanding of both space and time, we sure do have a lot of specific expectations about who God is and how God will choose to be at work in the world. We squabble over the right way to worship God. We argue over what God's will is in particular circumstances. Christians have burned other Christians at the stake because of differing theological opinions. Not only do we have some very specific expectations about God, we can also be brutal when others

have expectations that are not in tune with our own. And this has been true for people of faith throughout history.

John the Baptist cannot be speaking for God. He is too severe. He is out there in the wilds screaming at us to repent. My God is more gentle than that. My God would never encourage anyone to yell at me. My God is not so judgmental.

Jesus? Sure, he is a nice guy. I love his stories about seeds and lost coins and sons finding their way home. But don't you think he and his disciples end up at a few too many parties with questionable sorts of people? And what is up with the healing on the Sabbath, in the synagogue no less? My God is not quite so sloppy about the company with whom the divine keeps. My God is not quite so lax about how the Sabbath is celebrated.

At some point as we grow in our faith we develop an understanding of who the divine is. It is some amalgam of what we have been taught and our personal beliefs. And frankly we take some ownership of that conception of God. And we might even start inadvertently using the phrase, "my God" as if we had some sort of ownership of the divine by the way in which we have conceived of God.

Now Ladue Chapel is not exactly known for a strict adherence to tight theological boundaries. We are not the kind of place that would burn someone at the stake for having a different view of the Trinity. We might have a collection of "my God" assumptions we carry around but we are not vehemently opposed to people who have other ideas on the matter. I like to think of us as a congregation of generous orthodoxy.

But just because we are not overly judgmental in how we view other people's images of God that does not necessarily mean we are open to having God surprise us in how the divine

reveals Godself to us. We can be just like those scribes and Pharisees who could not recognize Jesus because he did not meet their thoroughly researched expectations of God.

What I would say is the more absolute certainty we have about God, the less we really know. When we build a taut theological system by which we understand God, we find ourselves putting God in a box. Kierkegaard wrote "Where there is certainty there is no faith." So how can we respond to this suggested paradox? What do we do when Jesus says that God has "hidden these things from the wise and the intelligent and have revealed them to infants." Is the answer to deny our strong Presbyterian heritage of scholarship and choose a faith that is intentionally simplistic?

No. The life of the mind is a gift from God that should not be squandered. But sometimes all of the systems and theories, and high falutin' notions we carry around about who God is can lead us to a place of complacent self-satisfaction that ends up actually insulating us from the divine presence.

So what do we do? How do we diligently pursue knowledge of God without becoming trapped by what we learn? I think the answer is to be found in the famous closing lines of this text which begin with the words, "Come to me..." They bring me back to how Jesus responds to those curious enough to approach him early in the Gospel of John. There are many ways that Jesus could have tried to explain himself to those he encountered, but he says, "Come and see." If you want to learn about God, about Jesus, in the end the answers are not found neatly wrapped up in our preconceived theological ideas. The answers are found in continuing the journey.

It is telling that Jesus talks of how these things are revealed to infants. Infants and toddlers are in a constant quest to be on the move; from their first efforts to scoot across the floor on their backsides to those tenuous attempts to put one foot in front of the other and go gingerly

stepping across the floor. And all of that movement is not without purpose. It is driven by a relentless curiosity. Infants and little ones are delighted by what may surprise them around the next corner. The game of Peek-a-Boo will never go out of style. And in the midst of that delight they learn about the world.

Those first followers of Jesus had no idea who he truly was. No one provided them with a theological theory about Jesus. They were just curious, curious enough to come and see. They were curious enough to join the journey. They were by his side as he was teaching, healing and loving, loving us all enough to die for us. If we want to grow in our understanding of God, we need to do just that. We need to be consistently curious. We need to be willing to follow.

Jesus says, "Come to me, all you that are weary and are carrying heavy burdens, and I will give you rest." That line always rings in my head as a pretty universal invitation. Regardless of circumstance, the human condition includes times of weariness and burdens for us all. We all need rest. We all need to be restored and refreshed and renewed.

But the next line is not what we expect. We are invited to find rest and then Jesus is placing a yoke upon our shoulders. We are told the yoke is easy and the burden is light but I am a little suspicious. Yokes are designed to help a beast of burden bear a heavy load. Why would we need a yoke at all if the burden is so light in the first place? The Greek word from the original text that we translate as "easy" has a more nuanced translation that is "easy to wear." The yoke we are being offered fits each of us specifically and perfectly.

When we accept the invitation to follow Jesus it is not that our lives are made magically easy. It is that when we join the journey we learn that it is not about God belonging to us and fitting into our categories and ideas, but about us

belonging to God. The yoke fits so well because we belong to God. When we realize that we belong to God the burdens of this life are put in proper perspective.

This amazing reality creates the possibility that we can be surprised in a variety of ways about who God is and who God is calling us to be. God knows us better than we know God. Let us come and see what it is like to follow Jesus by volunteering at the food pantry at Trinity Church, or baking casseroles for Saint Patrick's. Let us come and see by teaching Word and Wonder or helping with Vacation Bible School. Let us come and see by attending Adult Education or going to a Bible Study. Perhaps even trying something outside our usual routines and comfort zones. We might just learn some surprising things about who God is and who we truly are.

Let us continue being our Presbyterian selves and valuing our theological wisdom. But let us not stop there. Let us continue to be curious. Let us accept the invitation to come and follow Jesus and possibly be surprised by what happens next. Those of us that could not dance when the divine flute was played just might find ourselves dancing.

Thanks be to God. Amen.