

Gaudete

15 December, Anno Domini 2024

St. Matthew 11:2-11

Grace, mercy, and peace to you from God our Father and from our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ.

Saints of God,

The Word of God, unvarnished by the equivocations of reason and sinful desire, is not for the faint of heart. It reveals things that you don't want revealed and hides things to which you want answers. It demands things you don't want to give and forbids things you crave. It is unyielding. That is why in our day the church is plagued by embarrassment about what the Bible says. It's why we stutter and stammer when we are confronted on the "hard" issues - evolution, homosexuality or transgenderism, divorce, the authority and historicity of the Bible, abortion, assisted suicide, the exclusivity of the Bible, Baptism and the Lord's Supper, and any other of a host of topics. We all pray no one asks us about these things because we are ashamed to say what the Bible, what God Himself, says.

This is what Jesus reveals when He turns to the crowds and asks them about their expectations of John. No one was going to go out to the area around the Jordan if John wasn't a stark contrast to what they were already hearing. John was shocking precisely because he didn't care about what you thought of him. He didn't care if you liked or agreed with what he was preaching. One thing and one thing only mattered to John - proclaiming the word God had given him to speak. He wasn't intimidated by the Pharisees with their clout and vestments and titles. He didn't alter the message because of who was in the crowd or because he was afraid of stepping on someone's toes or making them feel uncomfortable. That was, at least in part, the point. He wasn't afraid to simply say "You are wrong and you need to repent and do and believe in this way, the right way, God's way which He Himself has spoken." John did not equivocate or bend in order to make anyone, whether a child or king Herod, like him or be nice to him. He didn't concern himself at all

with measuring the social or political winds blowing all around. They were irrelevant because God had spoken. That alone was true and that alone mattered. John was going to preach that. Nothing less. Nothing more. He was not going to bend in order to blend in or try to make himself more palatable because John knew that he didn't matter. God mattered. The Lamb mattered. Repentance mattered. The forgiveness of sins mattered.

John was a servant, a steward of God's Word. The judgment of John that mattered was God's. John only had to answer to God for his ministry. He would not be judged by Herod or the Pharisees or the crowds. John's preaching made many and powerful enemies. He was ultimately thrown in prison and beheaded because he had the audacity to tell King Herod that his adulterous relationship with his brother's wife was evil and God hated it. No matter. John spoke because it was his office and his duty and because the Word of God is true and because John wanted Herod and his sister-in-law to repent and be saved.

Sure. John could have kept his mouth shut and helped ensure that Herod never had the opportunity to hear the truth. He could have taken the tact that "Herod doesn't believe the Bible anyway and maybe if I can get him to be my friend first, then I can warn him about God's judgment." But that would have been to hate Herod and to be unfaithful to God and John's office.

We are constantly confronted with these same temptations in our own day. There is enormous pressure on you and pastors and on the Church to bend in the wind. The world threatens you with its disapproval, its anger, its cancellations, and its firings. Enemies of the Church hunt for anything they can find to publicly smear and humiliate churches until they cower and speak only what is approved by the world. The government is more than happy to use its power and resources to issue mandates about who can be in church and what they can do in church. Family and friends threaten to cut you off if you dare tell them that they should go to church or stop living together outside of marriage.

And each of us is guilty at times of submitting and remaining quiet because it is

easier, of going along with what is evil because we don't want to be labeled as prudes or old fashioned or Christian zealots. We don't want people to think that we take Christianity too seriously. After all, the Bible was written so long ago by men who were far less enlightened than we are with our science and technology.

Actually a very interesting example of this very thing comes up in the Gospel text before us. We heard "What did you go out to see? A man dressed in soft clothing?" And it's probably a safe bet to assume that we just thought Jesus was talking about the wealthy and their comforts as opposed to John's camel-skin tunic. But the translators equivocated here, ironically, in order to soften the text and obscure the bluntness of what Jesus said. This word in the Greek is not soft as in velvet or a puppy. This word means effeminate. It refers to men who are soft, who allow themselves to be dominated. Now the world certainly and maybe your own flesh, is offended by what Jesus actually had to say. After all, the world loves and praises soft men and even men who pretend to be women. But that is only because our thinking has been poisoned by the world. Jesus is precisely going after those who abandon who they are and what they are to do in order that someone else may dominate and rule over them. That is evil. Such men are not found out in the world suffering the battle strain of the war against the devil. They aren't protecting their wives and children. They aren't leading. They aren't praying or studying the Bible. They aren't serving their congregation. They aren't speaking up for the weak and vulnerable. They are hiding where it is comfortable, simply doing whatever it takes to avoid suffering. Pleasure is their god and no sacrifice is too great to get it.

It is only our modernized, secularized ears that hear Jesus' words and recoil at their harshness. It betrays our comfort with homosexuality and our failure to see it for the evil that it is and our failure to hold men to account, to let them be ruled by how they feel or what they want or like rather than by their duty. Such ears belong to those who don't take the Word of God seriously and are more concerned about what the world thinks than about the truth and the eternal welfare of their neighbor. Christians are all called to a steadfastness to the Word of God that will bring with it the hatred and persecution of the world. There is simply no way to make it otherwise. It's why God gives armor and weapons. We are all engaged in this war.

God give you His Word as the surest defense against your enemies who seek to topple your soul, who seek to rob you of the assurance of your salvation in Christ, who seek to silence you because you dare to hold their sin in front of them and call them to repentance that they might be saved.

But you don't need to fear them. Their mouths are filled with lies no matter how loud or powerful or credentialed they are. They are fools who will perish in their sin because they refused to listen to and believe the Word of the Most High God which was sent to save them. His Word alone is true and eternal. It will not change or fade away. When God speaks it is absolute truth and you can stake your eternal existence on it. The world and the devil and even your own flesh can scream and rage all they want and cry out about how offended they are and how you should be more tolerant and loving. They are reeds that blow this way and that at the slightest change in the wind. They will prostitute themselves before the opinions of others just to be liked and accepted and not make anyone mad at them. But it will be to the destruction of their souls.

Repent. Pick up the Bible and read it with the deepest intensity and seriousness every day. Study it. Learn it. Pray that God would grant to you the same zealotness and singleness of purpose of John. What God has said is life and truth. God doesn't equivocate. He loves you. He means exactly what He says. Every last word of the Bible is eternally true. The Holy Spirit does't speak more or less than is absolutely necessary for your salvation. If He has seen fit to put it in Holy Scripture, then you can be sure you need to know it for the comforting of your conscience, for your strength in the hour of temptation, and for your faithfulness in your vocation. Boldly and cheerfully believe and confess it. God doesn't need you to make excuses for Him. What God has said, He has said because He loves us and desires our salvation - both you and your neighbor.

And that is ultimately what is at stake. What God says, He says so that we might not perish in sin and unbelief. If John had not fully and faithfully preached God's Word, then no one would have been prepared. Prideful mountains would have remained standing tall, denying their need for Christ. Terror-filled valleys would

have been lost to doubt and despair of God's mercy. The stakes are as high as they could possibly be - eternal life. Equivocation and half-truths are disastrous forever.

I pray for your strength each and every day that your faith would not waiver as the winds of apathy and hedonism and secularism and materialism and scientism blow all around you. I also pray that you may be joyful and bold in your confession of the Word of God.

I ask for your prayers that I would have the devotion and strength of John the Baptist to proclaim the full council of God in season and out of season to you and others. Jesus accomplished salvation for the whole world. He alone is the way, the truth, and the life. God grant that we believe this with every fiber of our being and rejoice to speak that salvation to the world that together we may join the great company of heaven singing the praises of the Lamb.

In the Name of +Jesus.

Pastor Ulmer

(We stand.) The peace of God which passes all human understanding keep your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus our Lord.