

 **Main Street**  
UNITED METHODIST CHURCH



**Matthew 11:2-19**  
**“The Shoulders On Which We Stand”**

September 6, 2015  
(15<sup>th</sup> Sunday After Pentecost)

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**“Following Christ From City Center!”**

VA1: MATTHEW 11:2-19 "THE SHOULDERS ON WHICH WE STAND"

A) vv.2-6 JESUS AND JOHN, PART 1: WHO IS JESUS? //Lk. 7:18-23 (Q), Chap. 11-12 + 13

//3:1-17, 4:12-17, 14:1-12

1) v.2 John's Question On Jesus' Identity Raised By His Deeds. On John: Antiquities 18.116-119

Now when John heard in prison about the deeds of the Christ (i.e. Messiah), Summary, 8:1-9:34, Jail Since 4:12  
he sent word by his disciples (3) and said to him, Time Line, John Forecasts Judgment, 3:10-12, Mercy Came

Q "Are you 'he who is to come,' or shall we look for another?" 3:11, 21:9, 23:39, Are You It? Dt. 18:15, Ps. 118:26

Is. 25:8, 26:19, 29:18-19, 35:5-6, 42:7, 18, 61:1(LXX), 2 Bar 70:9-10, 73:1-2

2) vv.4-5 Jesus' Answer On Himself Echoing Isaiah Fulfilled. Contra John 6:15, He Fulfills

And Jesus answered them, "Go and tell John what you hear/ and see/: (a-b//b'-a') Hear = Chap. 5-7, See = Chap. 8-9  
the blind receive their sight and the lame walk, (3x2), 9:27-31/ 9:2-8, Not Yet Time For Judgment  
lepers are cleansed and the deaf hear, 8:1-4/ 8:32-34, //Dead Sea Scrolls 4Q521, The Already  
and the dead are raised up,/ and the poor have good news preached to them. 9:18-26/ 5:3, Is. 6:1:1 (LXX),

Uses No Titles (11:2), Indirect, Questions Link The Sections

3) v.6 COMMENT: Conditional Blessing, Not Fall Away. Is. 8:14-15, Different Than John Expected!

And blessed is he who takes no offense (is not scandalized) at me." 13:21, 57, 15:12, 26:31-33, Jesus = Obstacle

Jesus As Messiah, John As Elijah, Disciples Meet Rejection

B) vv.7-15 JESUS AND JOHN, PART 2: WHO IS JOHN?

//Lk. 7:24-28 (Q)

1) vv.7-9a Jesus' Threefold Question: Who John Is Not, Contrast John And His Captor.

Q, Q As they went away, Jesus began to speak to the crowds concerning John: 3 Rhetorical Questions: Options

"What did you go out into the wilderness to behold? A reed shaken by the wind? 3:1-6, Coins, Vacillation: Herod

Q, Q Why then did you go out? To see a man clothed in soft raiment? A Dandy //3:4

Behold, those who wear soft raiment are in kings' houses. Effeminate? Taking A Shot At Herod Antipas, Lk. 13:32!

Q, Q Why then did you go out? To see a prophet? Not Herod But His Enemy John

Jesus Had No Doubts About John

2) vv.9b-14 Jesus' Answer On The Prophet John Echoing Malachi & Exodus Fulfilled.

1a Yes, I tell you, and more than a prophet. Assertion + Text, Precursor To Messiah, John Is Last Of The Prophets

1b This is he of whom it is written, 4:2 Chiasm (1-2//2'-1')

'Behold, I send my messenger before thy face, who shall prepare thy way before thee.' Elijah, Mal. 3:1/Ex. 23:20

2a Truly, I say to you, among those born of women John Climaxes Pre-Jesus Revelation, 2 Cor. 3:77-18

there has risen no one greater than John the Baptist;/ End Of An Era/New Age Begins

2b yet he who is least in the kingdom of heaven is greater than he.// Benefits Of Grace In Christ

Even A True Prophet May Miss What God Is Up To

2a' From the days of John the Baptist until now/ //Lk. 16:16 (Q+), 3:2, New Era Begins, Obscure Verse

2b' the kingdom of heaven has suffered violence, and men of violence take it by force. Clash Of Kingdoms

1a' For all the prophets and the law prophesied until John; 2 Eras, Cusp, John Is Subordinate To Jesus

1b' and if you are willing to accept it, he is Elijah who is to come. 17:12, Mal. 3:1-3, 4:5-6, Execution 14:1-12

John As Elijah In Prison Was Hard To Swallow!

3) v.15 COMMENT: Call To Hear And Discern The Times And Ways Of God.

He who has ears to hear, let him hear. // Pay Attention! Hear The One Who Pointed To Jesus!

C) vv.16-19 JESUS AND JOHN, PART 3: NEGATIVE RESPONSE TO BOTH?

John In Jail; Jesus Not Meeting Expectations

1) vv.16-19 Jesus Question And Answer On This Generation That Does Not Listen.

Q "But to what shall I compare this generation? Lk. 7:31-35 (Q), v.16/v.41

It is like children sitting in the market places and calling to their playmates, Spoiled, Invitations To Join In

'We piped to you, and you did not dance; we wailed, and you did not mourn.' Do Not Want To Play Any Game!

(a-b//b'-a'), John's Repentance, Jesus' Wedding Banquet

2) vv.18-19a Both John And Jesus Rejected. Came = Sent, Resistant To God's Prophet, God's Son

For John came neither eating nor drinking, and they say, 2 Possible Capital Offenses, John As An Ascetic

'He has a demon'; Crazy Man, Only A Supernatural Being Doesn't Eat

the Son of man came eating and drinking, and they say, v.19/v.40, Dt. 21:20 (rebel son), Jesus As A Party Animal

'Behold, a glutton and a drunkard, a friend of tax collectors and sinners!' Libertine, 9:10-13, 14-15

Reject God's Agent/Son

3) v.19b COMMENT: In Praise Of Wisdom That Will Be Vindicated. Inclusion With v.2

Yet Wisdom is justified by her deeds." 11:25-30, God's Wise Design Embodied In Jesus, 1 En. 42:2, Prov. 9:1-5

**A Brief Treatment Of IVA1. Matthew 11:2-19**

There are five discourses in Matthew, each preceded by narrative. The Sermon on the Mount (5-7) is preceded by the baptism, temptation, and early ministry (3-4); the mission discourse (10:1-42) is preceded by ten miracles (8:1-9:35); in chapters 11-12 we have the narrative that precedes the parables (13:1-53). The first unit of the third essay is 11:2-9 and falls into three sections: A. vv.2-6, Who is Jesus? B. vv.7-15, Who is John? C. vv.16-29, Why the resistance to both? Each has three components: 1) A question (vv.2, 7-9a (6x), 16a), 2) Jesus’ answer (vv.4-5, 9b-14, 16b-19a), 3) A final challenge (v.6 [a macarism that warns against stumbling], v.15 [a call to hear and discern], v.19b [Wisdom’s vindication by deeds]). The inclusion that bind the three paragraphs into a whole are *deeds* (vv.2a// v.19b), a title: *the Christ // the Son of man* (v.2a//v.19b), *come/came* (vv.2c, 14, 18a, 19a). Matthew’s triples are found in three pairs of Messianic deeds (vv.4-5), three questions *What/Why did you go out?* (vv.7b, 8a, 9a), three uses of *Behold* (vv.8b, 10b, 19b) and three of *prophet* (vv.9a, b, 13). As for sources, the bulk is from Q: vv.2-6 // Lk. 7:18-23, vv.7-11 // Lk. 7:24-28, vv.12-13 // Lk. 16:16, vv.14-15 = M, vv.16-19 // Lk. 7:31-35 with several Matthean edits mainly at the beginning and end of paragraphs. The major levels of exact agreement between Matthew and Luke (Q) are best explained by a common source, likely written.

With 11:1 Jesus continues his traveling work of teaching, preaching, and healing (4:23-25, 9:35, 11:1), disciples in tow. Word of Jesus’ words and deeds reaches John— now imprisoned in Herod’s fortress— and whom we’ve not heard of since his arrest signaled Jesus’ withdrawal, “Now when he heard that John had been handed over, with withdrew to Galilee...: (4:12). John preached *the coming one* who would put his axe to unfruitful trees, bring a judgment of wind and fire, and winnow precious seed from worthless chaff (3:7-12)— all images of separation, but the news John hears is that Jesus is bringing everything but wrath. John announced a future but imminent judgment; Jesus surprises him with an outpouring of divine mercy. Was John wrong on content, or just timing? An embassy of his followers is sent to Jesus, “Are you ‘he who is to come,’ or shall we look for another (of a different kind)? Where do you stand on the time line? Jesus’ reply is indirect. He offers three pairs of statements, the first five of which are healings and the last a proclamation of good news to the poor; all six echo Isaiah’s vision of the messianic age. But if he does the works, is he not the person? John is blessed if not offended by God’s surprising interlude of mercy (v.6). John was right on content, wrong on timing. To be a prophet— even the last and best- does not mean all the secrets are yours. Jesus is God’s surprise.

The middle, longer unit (vv.7-15) has Jesus speaking to the crowds after the emissaries departure. It opens with a barrage of six questions that distinguish John from those who waver with the winds (v.7b) or prophesy for hire with kings (v.8). The one who arrested John is wavering and effete (*soft* // 1 Cor. 6:9), but John is God’s man who publicly denounced the defilement of Herod Antipas’ recent incestuous marriage (14:3-4). John is more than a prophet; he fulfills the Scripture (v.10b) and prepares the way for Jesus: *before thy face // before thee*. He is the last, great spokesman of the old regime and stands strong against violent opposition. As Jesus heaps on the accolades, he also recognizes a shift of regimes has occurred, and that the least in the new administration have greater privileges than the greatest within the old because Jesus is simply God’s best. Something new is afoot! Jesus brings Judaism (“the prophets and the law” [v.13]) to fulfillment. For those with ears to hear, it’s good news, not disappointment. In the third paragraph Jesus offer an analogy about his hearers, and it is that nothing makes them happy. Whether the children’s game is joyous wedding or a dirge-filled funeral, they refuse to play. John the ascetic is labeled demonized, and Jesus the friend of sinners is labeled a rebel son (Dt. 21:20), a party animal. They resist divine revelation, but wisdom will win the day (v.19b). Her deeds are true.

## THE SHOULDERS ON WHICH WE STAND

*“He who has ears to hear, let him hear.”*

Paying attention, listening, understanding, and discernment are all recommended.

M A T T H E W 1 1 : 1 5

Well into her nineties, my Grandmother Lida would gather up and compose herself with a kind of literary formality, close her eyes, access deep files of memory, and recite poetry with delight. By her rocking chair lay a worn and slender paperback, *The Best Loved Poems of the American People*. Beside each poem was a cameo portrait of the author: Walt Whitman, Robert Louis Stevenson. It was her handy companion, and she could not understand how I— as a twelve year old— was not delighted when receiving a volume as a present. I knew enough to say thanks, but inwardly I was not pleased. Such finery, including too close attention to table manners, was for sissies. But to read the poetry now is to hear her voice again. The black robe I wear was her gift at my ordination; I am literally cloaked in her memory.

A poem by Berton Braley was one of her favorites. It embodies a virtue she practiced, which is the gift of encouragement. It’s titled *Do It Now*, and it praises the habit of giving heart to people by praising what’s good. It is— as the management gurus say— about catching people doing something right:

“If with pleasure you are viewing any work a man is doing,  
If you like him or you love him, tell him now;  
Don't withhold your approbation till the parson makes oration  
And he lies with snowy lilies on his brow;  
No matter how you shout it he won't really care about it;  
He won't know how many teardrops you have shed;  
If you think some praise is due him now's the time to slip it to him,  
For he cannot read his tombstone when he's dead.

More than fame and more than money is the comment kind and sunny  
And the hearty, warm approval of a friend.  
For it gives to life a savor, and it makes you stronger, braver,

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And it gives you heart and spirit to the end;  
If he earns your praise - bestow it; if you like him let him know it;  
Let the words of true encouragement be said;  
Do not wait till life is over and he's underneath the clover,  
For he cannot read his tombstone when he's dead.”<sup>1</sup>

After thousands of hours listening to God’s people, I’ve come to a simple conviction: encouragement is in short supply. So isolated have we become that many— even in the church— have no one who believes in them, cheers for them, calls forth the best that’s within them. Some days I feel like nothing but a cheerleader for God’s disheartened people. As stray animals show up when food is left out, and as neighborhood children show up in homes where there is love aplenty, so I find people coming for spiritual encouragement. It costs nothing but time and a listening ear. People are starving. So when I say, “I believe in you, and so does Jesus Christ,” it’s amazing to watch their faces change, if only for a short time. Be an encourager. Not manipulative flattery, but gratitude. Then watch what happens in your own life. I’ve been practicing this now for several years as a spiritual discipline, and the benefits are great. And the more I encourage others, the more God shows me all the gifts that lie covered under crud. Several words of encouragement from people I admired have changed the course of my life. It was strength from heaven. And when she says, “Phil, I respect you and what you do,” I feel as if I could take on the hosts of hell all alone— which is a lie— but it’s still a good feeling. William Arthur wrote, “Flatter me, and I may not believe you. Criticize me, and I may not like you. Ignore me, and I may not forgive you. Encourage me, and I may not forget you.”<sup>2</sup> The Apostle Paul wrote, “... love one another with brotherly affection. *Outdo one another in showing honor.*”<sup>3</sup> The highest example of all is that Jesus was an encourager, as we see in his relations with John the Baptist, his cousin and fellow preacher of God’s new thing.

### TURNING TO THE TEXT

He was an odd man, clothed in a prophetic uniform of camel’s hair and belt of leather, the uniform of Elijah of old, living as a solitary in the harsh desert of Judea. He as

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<sup>1</sup> [www.happyotter.com/hopoem/p\\_d.html](http://www.happyotter.com/hopoem/p_d.html)

<sup>2</sup> Google search for *quotes on encouragement*.

<sup>3</sup> Romans 2:10.

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born to parents Elizabeth and Zechariah as a miracle baby in their old age and raised with the call of divine destiny upon his life. Before his conception the angel Gabriel promised, “And he will turn many of the sons of Israel to the Lord their God, and he will go before him in the spirit and power of Elijah...”<sup>4</sup> John was filled with the Holy Spirit in his mother’s womb and leaped at the presence of the prenatal Jesus, his younger cousin by six months. His was a pious, priestly family with an only son marked by God before his birth, a voice that would one day cry in the wilderness, “Prepare the way of the Lord. Make his paths straight.” Johanna ben Zechariah, John son of Zechariah, but because of his ministry as a preacher of repentance and baptizer in the Jordan, we know him as John *the Baptist*.

It had been centuries since the Spirit stirred the living voice of prophecy in Israel. Scripture was on the scrolls and read each Sabbath, but there was no living word from on high. There were scribes and rabbis and priests aplenty, all keepers of Jewish tradition and temple ritual, but the office of the prophet was vacant till John appeared. Luke says “...he was in the desert till the day of his manifestation to Israel.”<sup>5</sup> Solitude was John’s closest companion, and it was there that he learned to hear from God and developed a hunger for righteousness as his deepest appetite. And when let loose from his confines to speak the Word of the Lord, people came out in droves, out of Jerusalem and the villages to hear his hard words and be washed in River Jordan for the forgiveness of their sins before the axe hit the root and the wind and fire fell from above and the chaff was separated from the grains. To be baptized by John was to cry to God for a new and clean heart. If you’ve seen the last scene of the great film *Field of Dreams* with all the cars streaming in at dusk with lights on, they you have an image of the crowds that walked across the wildness and down to the Jordan to see if the rumors were true, that God has raised up a new voice.

John had a hard message. He said it was not enough to have a Jewish heritage and claim Abraham as father. No inherited religion. No saying *I’m a good Methodist and my grandfather built this church*. God has no grandkids, only first generation sons and daughters. What God wants love and obedience; nothing else suffices. And when John’s word cut through their religious charades and they felt the waters wash over them, they were awakened and prepared for the next stage of divine revelation,

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<sup>4</sup> Luke 1:16-17. On the details of John’s pre-arrest life and ministry, see the large blocks of text in Luke 1:1-25, 39-56, 57-80, 3:1-22.

<sup>5</sup> Luke 1:80b.

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which was not what anyone expected, not even John. To be a prophet— even the last and greatest— is to see only a part of what God’s up to, but John was true to his call, and that’s what made him great. He paved the way for Jesus and in his violent death forecast the violent death of the one who followed him. In a very real sense, then, Jesus stood on John’s shoulders and was in debt to his ministry of preparation.

One day a carpenter from Nazareth showed up at the Jordan and took his place in line with other sinners. After initial resistance, John baptized him, the lesser welcoming the greater into his divine destiny, “This is my beloved Son with whom I am well pleased.”<sup>6</sup> Without so much as a word of reply, Jesus then left for forty days of fasting and spiritual warfare in the desert, while John continued to preach and baptize.<sup>7</sup> What God was doing took a leap forward with Jesus, but it would also be in the deepest continuity with what God had already begun in John. Both had the same message of God turning to his people and of the people welcoming the rule of God and its benefits, but their styles would differ. John warned of imminent judgment and was an ascetic, a man of discipline and self-denial; Jesus, on the other hand, injected a season of mercy between John’s vision of judgment and the promised end; he was accused of enjoying the company of disrespectful people; to his detractors he was, “a winebibber and a glutton, a friend of tax collectors and sinners.”

One way to spot a prophet is that they stand up for God’s honor and are no respecter of persons. All have to deal with God, the high and the low. So it was that John brought the word of God to bear on King Herod Antipas by publically criticizing his marriage to his brother Philip’s wife. It was immorality in high places, and John named it. For this he was arrested and imprisoned in the desert fortress of Machaerus,<sup>8</sup> with the proviso that his disciples were still able to visit their leader, perhaps to bring him food since none was normally provided. As Matthew will later tell, John’s head was cut off because the King made a drunken promise to an exotic dancer who happened to be his step-daughter.<sup>9</sup> So great was John’s effect on Herod that, when news came to the palace of Jesus’ miracles, the king feared he was John

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<sup>6</sup> 3:17.

<sup>7</sup> 4:1-11.

<sup>8</sup> 14:1-14.

<sup>9</sup> 14:1-14.

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the Baptist raised from the dead!<sup>10</sup>

John’s was a bridge ministry; he stood as the end of the old age and at the border of the new thing God was doing. He is the climax of the Old Testament because the mantle of Elijah– as promised by Malachi– is upon him, and he is the doorway into the New Testament because he ushered Jesus onto the stage. It was Mary who gave Jesus flesh, and it was John the Baptist who prepared the audience ahead of time. If Jesus was bridegroom, John was best man. With John the crowds were spiritually and morally reawakened, and with Jesus the kingdom of God was on display. Jesus stood on John’s shoulders, and it was John’s imprisonment that was the sign that phase two of kingdom ministry was to begin.<sup>11</sup> Several of Jesus’ disciples were first followers of John.<sup>12</sup> John was the moon who lit the night till the sun should rise in God’s new morning.

**1) vv.2-6 The Identity Of Jesus Clarified.**

So this is where we find ourselves at the start of Matthew 11. John is no longer free, but he’s not yet dead. He’s in prison, receiving reports and trying to make sense of it all. He’s heard about the words and deeds of Jesus, whom he is willing to label *the Messiah*. But what does it mean? Why has the fiery judgment not come to pass? Is Jesus the goal, or is there someone on the way after him? John is literally dying to know. His legacy is at stake.

It’s not hard to understand his confusion. He expected one thing from God and was surprised by the fresh wave of divine mercy that came with Jesus. Even prophets have to learn that God is not here to meet our expectations or operate according to our time lines. God is perfectly free to show mercy and delay judgment. Verse 2, “Now when John heard in prison about the deeds of the Christ, he sent word by his disciples, saying, ‘Are you *he who is to come*, or shall we look for another?’”

John was asking for the prophetic time line. Am I a true or false prophet? Having a word from God, as John did, does not mean doubts and confusion are

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<sup>10</sup> 14:2

<sup>11</sup> 4:12-17.

<sup>12</sup> John 1:35ff.

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erased. Prison and waiting for the sword to fall can undermine anyone's confidence. John was involved in spiritual warfare of the most intense variety and was calling powerful men and women before the bar of God's judgment. Their response to him was a violent one. Jesus said as much, "From the days of John the Baptist until now, the kingdom of heaven has suffered violence, and men of violence take it by force." Real prophets meet real opposition, from corrupt leaders and the spiritual forces behind them. John was a spiritual and a political threat, and if the people took his words seriously, whatever support the King and the religious hierarchy might have was challenged. His desert ministry made the Jerusalem temple irrelevant. One was made right with God not through sacrifices but through baptism and a changed life.

Think of not only the moral but also the political impact of Dr. Martin Luther King, especially towards the end with his mounting critique of the Vietnam War, and there you have an analogy of the shaking John brought. Prophets of God are dangerous; only after they are killed are their accomplishments understood and monuments erected. Such voices are not satisfied with hot revival meetings out in the desert; their voices reach down the corridors of power to Oval Offices and call for righteousness in high places. Revival starts with individuals getting right with God, but it does not stop there. It calls for structural and societal changes. The gospel of the kingdom of God in Jesus through the Spirit is a personal *and* a social gospel; it is about *me the man* and *you the woman* and also about *We the people*. It is not satisfied till the evils that keep people sick and beaten down are addressed and remedied. The kingdom is about piety *and* politics.

There's a link between the spiritual awakenings of the early 19<sup>th</sup> century and the later abolitionist movement which was a factor in the Civil War. To make the link you have only to read the words of Lincoln's Second Inaugural from March 1865, six weeks before his death. His words are American prophecy chiseled into the north wall of the memorial that bears his name. His seated gaze is ever directed to the Capital at the other end of the great plaza, and we hear him say:

"The Almighty has His own purposes.... Fondly do we hope, fervently do we pray, that this mighty scourge of war may speedily pass away. Yet, if God wills that it continue until all the wealth piled by the bondsman's two hundred and fifty years of unrequited toil shall be sunk, and until every drop of blood drawn with the lash shall be paid by another drawn with the sword, as was said three thousand years ago, so still it must be said 'the judgments of the Lord are true and righteous

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altogether.”<sup>13</sup>

Both the form and content of Jesus’ answer to John are important. The language is not new but old; it is from the prophet Isaiah who told of the healings God would one day bring. What Isaiah saw ahead of time unfolded in front of Jesus day after day as God the Father backed his proclamation of the kingdom with the signs and wonders. What we have in verses 5 and 6 is Jesus’ summary of his own ministry, and he is not a bit embarrassed at the flagrantly supernatural dimension of it, in fact, he delights in it, “Go and tell John what you hear and see: the blind receive their sight and the lame walk, lepers are cleansed and the deaf hear, and the dead are raised up....” And if that rattles your world view and makes your paradigms of the possible tremble, then good. The kingdom of God is not just words, even true words, but divine power. And I wonder, Why so few here, Lord? And when I see a small miracle— as I did just last week— I ask, Why not more? A flood of miracles is across the earth, especially in places where the gospel is pressing against the boundaries of animism and polytheism and other entrenched religions. Lest you think that such is not Methodist, I offer an example from John Wesley’s *Journal* for December 26, 1761. Wesley was quite an investigator of such reports:

“I made a particular inquiry into the case of Mary Special, a young woman then in Tottenham Court Road. She said: ' Four years since I found much pain in my breasts, and afterwards hard lumps. Four months ago my left breast broke, and kept running continually. Growing worse and worse, after some time I was recommended to St. George's Hospital. I was let blood many times, and took hemlock thrice a day. But I was no better; the pain and the lumps were the same, and both my breasts were quite hard, and black as soot; when, yesterday’s night I went to Mr. Owen's, where there was a meeting for prayer. Mr. Bell saw me, and asked, " Have you faith to be healed?" I said, "Yes." He prayed for me, and in a moment all my pain was gone. But the next day I felt a little pain again; I clapped my hands on my breasts, and cried out, " Lord, if Thou wilt, Thou canst make me whole." It was gone; and from that hour I have had no pain, no soreness, no lumps or swelling; but both my breasts were perfectly well, and have been so ever since.”

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<sup>13</sup> [www.bartleby.com/124/pres32](http://www.bartleby.com/124/pres32).

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His final comment on the incident was this: “Now here,” he wrote, “are plain facts: (1) She was ill; (2) she is well; (3) she became so in a moment. Which of these can with any modesty be denied?”<sup>14</sup> Were Wesley to reappear in our day, he would have a hard time among his own offspring. He’d be seen as much too biblical, much too attuned to classic doctrine, much too ethically demanding, much too interested in the poor, and much too open to the supernatural.

Jesus did not argue with John. Instead, he asked John to consider the evidence, “What Isaiah promised is what I’m doing. Draw your own conclusion, and to that I add a warning. Don’t let your ideas about what you thought was going to happen make you miss the marvelous mercy that’s being poured out. Blessed is he who takes no offense at me.” The content of Jesus’ ministry was a surprise. John was once at the cutting edge of what God was doing, but now he’s on the decrease and Jesus on the increase. Someone once said that it’s often the leaders of the last move of God who most criticize the current move of God. An example of this is the way United Methodists habitually take shots at the Charismatics and Pentecostals who are our historical and theological offspring. It takes grace to cheer for others who go beyond what God allowed you to do, and that is the grace Jesus offers John. It was a powerful word of encouragement and challenge for a man who would soon die.

Oh, and one more thing. Jesus did not understand his miracles, even the raising of the dead, to be the climax of his work. Impressive to us, but not most important to him. “Yes,” he reported to John’s disciples, “it’s true. Where I go, the blind see, the lame walk, lepers are cleansed, the deaf hear, and the dead are raised up,” and then he broke the pattern and surprised them with a sixth piece of evidence, “and the poor have the good news preached to them.” The people at the bottom, some of whom had family members who were touched, are encouraged by the good news that God is setting things right! The left outs are not longer left out; the ignored are no longer visible; the ones at the edge are brought to the center of God’s concern.

Let me say this clearly. Unless the church in America turns itself out of its elegant sanctuaries and into the most despairing segments of our communities, we are in long term trouble. And if you find yourself recoiling inwardly and hiding from such people, then you do not know the heart of Jesus. The kingdom of Jesus is for all, but especially for the poor. Perhaps the quickest way to open yourself to the power

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<sup>14</sup> Daniel Jennings, *The Supernatural Occurrences of John Wesley* (Sean Multimedia, 2005), 43.

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of God is to put yourself in situations beyond your comfort zone where nothing else works. As people with a can-do attitude, we don't like problems we can't solve. We don't like empty hands. This is where we learn to turn to God and pray, "Thy kingdom come." It's not about programs or plans or grand strategies. It's about Jesus letting us in on his stuff and giving us his heart for all people, and especially for the poor.

**2) vv.7-15 The Identity Of John Clarified.**

It is in the middle section, verses 7 through 15, that Jesus' heart of encouragement is most clearly displayed. As Lida would say, "If with pleasure you are viewing any work a man is doing, If you like him or you love him, *tell him now...*" John was in prison, perhaps in doubt, perhaps not quite so pleased judgment had not come and that mercy was being extended. But Jesus spoke in exalted terms about John, his ministry, and his precise place in God's kingdom economy. It is a good thing to have friends who will not only speak well in your presence but even more in your absence, and that was the quality of friend Jesus was to John.

Jesus wanted the crowds to understand what a prophet had been among them. John wasn't a hollow papyrus reed blown this way and that by the winds of public opinion. He was not for hire as a court prophet, living near the powerful and wearing fine silk clothes. What they went out to see was the real deal, a flaming messenger of God, the last of a breed and more than a prophet, next to Jesus the greatest man who ever lived. He fulfilled the ancient visions of Malachi and carried the ministry of Elijah to its conclusion. John was the point man who drew the first fire. This is the man who was stuffed in a dungeon and who would soon lose his head. What more could Jesus say? "Truly, I say to you, among those born of women, there has risen *no one greater than John the Baptist....* For all the prophets and the law prophesied until John; and if you are willing to accept it, he is Elijah who is to come." I believe Jesus intended these words to get back to John through the grapevine. John the Baptist could die in faith knowing that he had the favor of his cousin Jesus. He'd been faithful to his calling, and that was enough. Discouragement and cynicism at the end of life is always a temptation, particularly when things have not turned out as you planned.

With his words of praise, Jesus saved John from such an end. He wanted John to die well. Jesus was a mighty encourager, and he calls us to do the same. But also note that he did not rescue John. Jesus raised the dead, but he did not prevent John

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from having his head cut off. He was not permitted to do so. But there is another message here, and it is self-referential by Jesus, "...yet he who is least in the kingdom of heaven is greater than he." What is coming to expression in Jesus is a quantum leap ahead, so far advanced that the greatest in the old regime is less than the least in the new. Jesus is more than a prophet; he is God the Son come in flesh, and in him there is an eruption of new light and fresh power, as demonstrated by the catalog of miracles and the climactic call to preach the good news of the kingdom to the poor.

John's ministry only makes sense and finds fulfillment in the work of Jesus that follows him. And if John is Elijah who was the last prophet before God's own coming, then who is Jesus? He is the coming of God. He is the *before thee* of Malachi's prophecy, the one born of woman without the help of a man; he is the one who has the perfect right to say *until now* and to set up the marker between the old and the new ages. And when he concludes with the call to hear, "He who has ears to hear, let him hear," Jesus is asking for the crowds not only to appreciate John for what he was but to appreciate him for who he now is. Don't miss your moment, he said. The main attraction has arrived.

**3) vv.16-20 The Fact Of Spiritual Resistance.**

But there is a danger to all such talk of revival and reformation. That is because it severely underestimates the entrenched structures of sin and evil and spiritual resistance in which we all embedded and that seem so natural because we've have never known anything else. None of us has ever been through the rigors of a divine visitation like the Great Awakenings of the eighteenth and nineteenth century or the Pentecostal explosion of the early twentieth. When to come into church was to come under intense conviction and have your sins exposed. People would cry out and fall to the floor, not as a display but under the touch of God's holy presence. Jesus was a hidden village guy for three decades. While adults sold goods in the square of Nazareth, children played games with one another. Two of the favorite games Jesus saw, and which he no doubt participated in a child, were *let's play wedding* and *let's play funeral*. When the leader piped wedding songs on a reed flute, everyone was supposed to dance, and when they played dirges, everyone was supposed to throw dust in the air and send up the wails of mourning, just like adults when death came.

The play of children is serious business, and it provided Jesus with a diagnostic image to explain why so few people responded to the ministry of John or his own. Because when the greatest prophet and the only Son can't get much of a positive

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**Matthew 11:2-19** ..... 14

response, and when in the end one is beheaded and the other crucified, it says much about the resistance of their audiences: *this generation* is the designation Jesus used. Greenwood is resistant to God. Main Street Church is resistant to God. Pastor Phil is resistant to God, but that does not make us worse than any other place, only the same. It's our generation and our cultural moment. We are in long and deep cycle of drift, and there is no quick fix, no technique to restore us. So in verse 16 Jesus asks a question as an attention getter for the same crowd who heard him praise John, "But to what shall I compare *this generation*?" which is a generality, and like all generalities can be denied by specific exceptions, but because it is mainly true and largely accurate it has validity, especially since it came from Jesus who spoke under the effect of divine revelation. Some things are true of people *as groups*.

This was the question the Spirit prompted Jesus to ask, and this was the homey image the Spirit pulled from memory into imagination. "It's like children (itself not a compliment to adults) sitting in the marketplace and calling to their playmates, 'We piped to you, and you would not dance; we wailed, and you did not mourn.'" Nothing pleased them. No matter what was offered, they did not want to join in. They simply will not join in with what God is doing. They are resistant and set in their ways and hard hearted and cynical and in the end of bunch of brats! This is Jesus' unflattering, in-your-face diagnosis of his contemporaries.

There are times when I sit down with those who are roughly my children's age and apologize. What did their much-touted baby boomer parents give them? One third of their contemporaries never made it to birth because of abortion. Free-love ended up as mega-death and the recent sale of fetal body parts. That's our legacy. We gave them the drug culture, a rising divorce rate, and a crushing load of debt. We threw out the tested moral standards of our parents and replaced it with nothing. Many have no clue what a healthy home looks like. I would hate to hear Jesus' answer to the question, To what shall I compare *this baby boomer generation*?

Having raised a provocative question, and having given a vivid image of spoiled children, Jesus backs it up with evidence in verses 18 and 19. "For John came neither eating or drinking (playing a funeral song), and they say, 'He has a demon and is evil and a false prophet;' the Son of man has come eating and drinking (as at a joyous Jewish wedding), and they say, 'Nothing but a glutton and a drunk; hangs around all the wrong people; low lifes are his best friends. Can't be much to him!'" Whatever God offers, the answer is, "We don't want any," and these are God's own people, the church of the day! Are we in danger of the same? This was the resistance

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that the greatest prophet and the only Son met in their ministries. And it says nothing about them, and everything about their hearers and the spiritual strongholds in which they were embedded. What does God have to do to get our attention and shake us loose to listen and take up the path of repentance? I'm frankly not sure where to start. Maybe I should start with Pastor Phil! Wonder if I can get him to listen?

Verse 2, "Now when John heard in prison about *the deeds* of the Messiah...." And at the end of verse 19, "Yet wisdom is justified by her *deeds*." Why did Matthew do that? Why make sure the third paragraph closed with the same word that opened the first? Because the kingdom John prepares for and that Jesus inaugurates is about more than new religious ideas. It is about the power of an invading God to shake things loose and set things right. Is it as sobering to you as it is to me that Jesus had an easier time healing blind eyes and straightening crippled limbs and speaking new life to the dead than awakening religious people from their spiritual slumber? The ill and the demonized he could do something for; all he could do for the resistant, many of whom knew of the miracles and had seen them, was ask hard questions, make unpleasant comparisons, deliver the evidence, and wait.

Never underestimate the powers of sin and resistance in the human heart, including your own, and never dismiss the power of social and religious structures to hold people in spiritual blindness. We are up against formidable spiritual powers that prefer to operate invisibly and outside the light of awareness. Jesus offers evidence and pricks the conscience, but that is where he stops. His method is encouragement, not coercion. Through him the Holy Spirit operated freely, but on the other side of the engagement the Spirit could be resisted, and was. No one is ever lost for lack of light, only for resisting the light that is offered. I am grateful for all who have carried the light of Christ to me and on whose shoulders I stand. Without their encouragements, I would not have survived.

**CONCLUSION**

The Father did it for the Son, "This is my beloved Son, in whom I am well pleased." Jesus did it for John before. People do it for me all the time. Let's do it for one another. Let's celebrate each others gifts and overlook each others flaws. Let's build each other up instead of tear each other down. Let's open ourselves to the strange and wonderful energies of the kingdom of God to see what God might do in this church and in this town. Let's honor the shoulders on which we stand and become a people of encouragement. "He and she who has ears to hear, let them hear."

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