

To (Not) Take Offense

Matthew 11:2—11

I remember the Sunday I was confirmed into the Christian faith. A few high school students and I (around the age of fourteen) had gone through a series of classes and we had time to drill our beliefs that Jesus was the way to go; and just when we were about to walk into the sanctuary, in front of the whole church, my friend Alice leaned toward my ear and whispered the following: “I don’t believe any of this, but my Mom would kill me if I didn’t say I did.” A little shocked but trying to remain cool, I asked why she didn’t believe what she was about to say that she did, and her reply had something to do with *evolution* and *dinosaur fossils*; and I replied, “So what?” “So evolution just makes more sense to me,” she said. And the next time I saw Alice was three years later, at a delicatessen; and she was pregnant; and flippantly I wondered whether or not her mother had been offended with the news.

People take offense for all kinds of reasons. Alice’s mother would have been offended if Alice didn’t recite the words of belief in Jesus, but perhaps not with her teenage pregnancy. And maybe, in my naiveté, I was offended by Alice telling me what she told me about her disbelief just before both of us would be reciting the same words of belief. And likewise, given the provability of evolutionary theory and the lack of provability with regard to Jesus as the Incarnation of God, perhaps Alice was offended that I wasn’t joining in her skepticism. And, you see, as I consider all of these potential and possible feelings of being offended, I can’t help but identify with what John the Baptist conveys to Jesus through the grapevine of his own desperate disciples: “*Are you the one who is to come, or are we to wait for another?*”

Let's face it: the same person, who last week declared his firm belief in the ***“one more powerful than I”***—the same off-the-grid eater of locusts and wild honey—the same prophet who threatened the Pharisees and Sadducees with purging fire—is also the voice of the one in prison. John the Baptist no longer enjoys the freedom of announcing a coming kingdom from his perch in the wilderness. He's in jail, awaiting execution, by King Herod Antipas. And wouldn't John the Baptist have the right to expect a courageous rescue from God's Anointed King? Wouldn't it be perfectly in sync with the style of Messiah to rile up the crowd, to foment a revolt and to miraculously spring John from his dungeon cell? And yet, none of that is going to happen—and that's offensive. And with his question, this splasher of sacred water may be experiencing a little buyer's remorse. And who can blame him if his hopes are dampened?

By the same token, for the sake of argument, let's consider the possibility that Jesus is the real deal; and if he is anointed by God as Messiah, maybe he's a little offended by the very question as to his identity. Maybe Jesus has a right to expect more certainty from his cousin. I mean, after all, Jesus' mother, Mary, went to visit John's mother, Elizabeth and according to Luke at least, as a fetus, John leaped in the womb. But now not so much. *So, Jesus! Care to comment?*

Well, for what it's worth, Jesus *does* have a comment. And it's a rather elusive, frustratingly indirect, comment. (*Jesus, you're not answering the question!*) But in verses four through six, we can listen in:

“Go and tell John what you hear and see: the blind receive their sight, the lame walk, the lepers are cleansed, the deaf hear, the dead are raised and the poor have good news brought to them. And blessed is anyone who takes no offense at me.”

Now, of course, that's not all Jesus has to say. In verses 7 and following, he will go on to speak to the crowds. But notice how he's turned the interview around: *Hey everybody, when you were so enthralled with going out to John, "What did you go out into the wilderness to look at? A reed shaken by the wind?" (No, that would have been a waste of time.) "What then did you go out to see? Someone dressed in soft robes?" (Come on, you're not that stupid.) "Look, those who wear soft robes are in royal places."* And, it's as if Jesus is guiding those in the crowd along—just like he's guiding us in this midst of our crowd. Faith in God's active presence in the world has nothing to do with what's popular or what's pleasing to anyone's ego. And if I were to point to one verse that highlights the transformation to which John the Baptist—and each of us—has been invited, it comes in verse Matthew 11:11:

"Truly, I tell you, among those born of women no one has arisen greater than John the Baptist; yet the least in the kingdom of heaven is greater than he."

I can remember feeling offended by a mop and a bucket of soapy water. It was September of 1996, and my father's aneurysm had just bled out and his heart had just stopped beating. His body was lying there, and everyone in our family had gathered around to say goodbye. And, because we needed to rest the muscles in our cheeks from crying so much, we stepped aside and pulled the curtain and tried to come to terms with the finality of it all. But here comes this custodian steering a bucket with the handle of his dirty mop; and something about the way he ripped open the privacy-curtain deeply offended me. And, before the nurse intervened, I said to him, "Hey there. That's a person! This isn't just some clean up on aisle six! That's a person, and this matters!" And, of course, I was over-reacting. But in retrospect, I can begin to see what God was doing.

The waters that overflowed that bucket were like the waters of the Jordan—and God was inviting me, challenging me, prompting me to do what I dread doing. Which is—*detach*. *Detach my ego*. *Let go*. *Surrender my need to take offense*. And faith in Christ Jesus, during this Season of Advent, follows a similar pattern. I love what Richard Rohr says in his book, *The Tears of Things*. In a chapter called, ‘*Unfinished Prophets*,’ he writes: “John’s purity code moralism is the common substitute for the mysticism we see in Jesus.” In other words, we can always, always, always take offense to what we perceive the world, or God, or the custodians are doing to us. But that’s ego. And while in some sense, there’s nothing wrong with asserting the ego of John the Baptist, **“the least in the kingdom is greater”** than that. You and I *can* stick to our guns. We *can* draw lines in the sand. We *can* insist that our idea of Christ is the right one; and we’re willing to die for it. Those are good places to start. And yet, all the while Jesus is meeting and mystically making healing-opportunities with the blind, the lame, the lepers, the deaf, the dead and the poor.

Think about this: in the scenario’s I’m about to describe, which is more likely to engender the wholeness that Jesus has come to bring:

- You’re offended that a clerk at the store has said, ‘Happy Holidays’ in stead of ‘Merry Christmas’—and so you make a point to saying so to his employer, and if you aren’t satisfied, you might even launch a boycott.
- Your Jewish friend has invited you to her celebration of *Hanukkah*, and for a moment, you wonder if you might interject the lyrics of a Christmas carol just as she going to light the Menorah. At the last second, however, you decide to invite her to *Christmas Eve* instead.

You see, while it's definitely true that John's Gospel records Jesus as speaking very directly to his disciples, here in Matthew, it's different. In the Gospel of John, Jesus will say, "***I am the Way, the Truth and the Life,***" but here he's encouraging us to *walk the way, to experience the truth of our interpersonal relationships and to die to the ego-centered life in order that we might frolic in overflowing Life of the Holy Trinity*. In John's Gospel, Jesus will say, "***I am the Bread of Heaven... I am the Good Shepherd... I am the True Vine... I am in the Father and the Father is in me.***" But in order to arrive a level where we can comprehend the BLESSING of those statements, we're invited to hear Jesus without the applause, without the cultural reinforcement and without the insistence that my 'Jesus' can kick your 'Jesus' ass.

Now, does it offend you that I used those words in worship? Alright, I give up. *Your* Jesus can kick my Jesus' bottom or buttocks. But, you see, I'm not sure that ego-centric victory is going to get us any closer to the transformation or to the enlightenment that God has planned for us in the coming of Christ. I'm not sure. I'm not sure. I'm not sure. Does *that* offend you that I'm not sure? Or that I mentioned the possibility that God took on the musculature of the gluteus-maximus? We can only hope. And then, we can only hope that we move beyond the need to become so offended.

Here at Northwood, it's clear that people love and support one another, and that the intimacy of your connections to one another continues to be a great strength. But, as your interim pastor, today's passage beckons me to wonder where we go from here. And going from here to wherever there is might, to some, be offensive. Are we willing to risk the offense?

In a previous church that Sheryl and I served as co-pastors, the number of people attending our single worship service was getting too big; and we were trying to decide whether or not to go with two services. An elder, who was prone to gossip and innuendo, came to us and said, she liked the church the way it was, and that having two worship services wouldn't allow her to know everybody; she wanted to know everybody and everybody to know that she was the one in the know. So we prayed about it; and in prayer, it seemed as if God were telling us something potentially offensive: Do we want to know everybody—with all their egocentric likes and dislikes, their loyalties and their grievances? Or do we want everybody to know Christ... or to feel known by the one who is *“the least in the kingdom of heaven”*?