

Suttons Bay Congregational Church
Matthew 11:16-19, 25-30

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¹⁶"To what can I compare this generation? They are like children sitting in the marketplaces and calling out to others:

¹⁷"We played the flute for you, and you did not dance; We sang a dirge 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, 'Here is a glutton and a drunkard, a friend of tax collectors and "sinners." ' But wisdom is proved right by her actions."

²⁵At that time Jesus said, "I praise you, Father, Lord of heaven and earth, because you have hidden these things from the wise and learned, and revealed them to little children. ²⁶Yes, Father, for this was your good pleasure.

²⁷"All things have been committed to me by my Father. No one knows the Son except the Father, and no one knows the Father except the Son and those to whom the Son chooses to reveal him.

²⁸"Come to me, all you who are weary and burdened, and I will give you rest.

²⁹Take my yoke upon you and learn from me, for I am gentle and humble in heart, and you will find rest for your souls. ³⁰For my yoke is easy and my burden is light."

Folks say that my great-grandmother Kelley was a cantankerous and difficult person. She died when I was three so I don't really remember her, I only know what is said about her. And based on the reports I've heard, she was very picky and difficult to please. The reason I hear so many stories about her is because my family members amuse themselves to no end by making comparisons between Great-Grandmother and me. Let me assure you, I'm not difficult to please, I just know what I want and when I want it and how I want it. I think that a good thing in a person and I don't know why they insist on the comparisons. One of the stories my grandma, Great-Grandmother's daughter, tells about her mother is unflattering which is why I like to think that I'm not like her. When Cool Whip came out on the market as an alternative to real whipped cream, my grandma appreciated the convenience and bought it frequently. And every time Great Grandmother came over for dinner and Grandma served Cool Whip instead of real whipped cream, Great Grandmother wistfully reminisced about how much she loved real whipped cream. And so Grandma, finally fed up with her mother's complaints, bought real whipping cream for dessert one night. As dinner was ending, Grandma went into the kitchen and went to town on that whipping cream, working hard to beat it to just the right fluffiness and texture so that she wouldn't have to field anymore complaints from her mother. When Grandma served that real cream, whipped to perfection, Great Grandmother said, "Well, I sure did like that Cool Whip you used to serve." This is just one of many such stories in which, no matter what anyone did to try and please her, Great Grandmother complained and refused to be satisfied.

Great Grandmother could have been part of the generation Jesus remarks on in this morning's gospel passage. They, too, could not be satisfied—there was no pleasing them. Of them Jesus says,

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¹⁷" 'We played the flute for you, and you did not dance;
We sang a dirge and you did not mourn.'

In his illustration, the children played happy music in the marketplace—dance music, music meant to fill the people with joy—and yet the people did not dance. And so the children, thinking that perhaps the people were sad played a dirge, music to fit the mood of the generation, but the people didn't mourn—the people still didn't respond, even when the children were giving them what they thought they wanted—just like Grandma making the real whipped cream, sure that it would be a welcome taste on her mother's palette and yet Great-Grandmother still complained. Some people just can't be pleased.

Jesus isn't really concerned with the music of the children in the market place, it's just an illustration. His concern is with how the people of that generation had received John the Baptist and then Jesus himself. John and Jesus are set up as opposites. John was an odd man—he wore strange clothes, ate weird food (locusts and honey to be precise), and lived a life that was set apart from the other people. He spent a lot of time alone, out in the desert, he was sort of like a monk. He was really different. And because he was so different, people didn't understand him and they rejected him. And so, along comes Jesus who, early in his ministry, wasn't so different from the other folks of his generation. He was a tradesman—we often think of him as a carpenter but there aren't many trees in the Middle East so it was probably more likely that he was a stone mason. He came from a local family, people knew his parents and siblings. Unlike John the Baptist, he didn't live a life apart. He was social, out and about with the people, having dinner and sitting around talking with folks. Jesus was able to relate to them and their lifestyle. And still, he, like John, was rejected. The people just couldn't be pleased. Of John the Baptist they said, "He has a demon" which was, in those days, a nicer way of saying that he was crazy. And of Jesus they said, look, he eats and drinks with common folks, "he is a glutton and a drunk, a friend of tax collectors and sinners!" And as with the Cool Whip and Real Whipped Cream example—you're darned if you do and you're darned if you don't. The people of that generation just weren't happy with what they got.

And what did they get—they got a messiah. But it wasn't the kind of messiah they were looking for and so they didn't recognize him. First it was John who was sent to the people, sent to send out a warning that the people needed to repent for the one who was to be the messiah was on the way and they'd better get their acts together. But, they didn't believe God's special messenger. And so then God's own self came to save them in the form of Jesus of Nazareth. And still the people did not believe. They were not satisfied that Jesus' resume was of a divine nature. Those folks thought they knew what a Messiah was going to look like, act like, and say and so when Jesus didn't match up with what they thought they knew of a messiah, they rejected him based on their own standards of messiahship.

How often have we done the same? Sometimes we are so sure about the way something *should* be that we totally fail to appreciate the way something *is*. And when we spend our time looking for what should be, we miss out on what is. And really, *what it is*, is all there really is in the first place.

And who's to say, like with the children of the generation that Jesus speaks about, who's to say that we really know how it should be in the first place. The people of the generation thought they knew what the messiah would be like, and because they were so sure of themselves, they missed the messiah right there in their midst. And this is the situation that Jesus sets up again and again in the Gospels—the people who we would think would be in the know—the religious leaders, the governors, the wise elders—again and again they fail to recognize Jesus. And why—because they have a standard, a set of qualifications that the messiah must meet. Jesus doesn't meet their criteria and so they think he is a liar and ultimately, they condemn and kill him.

Now the good news for you and me is that—the people in the stories of Jesus' time, the ones who hung out with him and most appreciated him—were folks who never did claim to get it. They weren't concerned with his pedigree or experience, they just accepted him for what he was—the messiah, their friend. And they loved him and felt loved by him—even if they didn't fully understand who or what he was. Instead of knowing about him—they knew him. Instead of thinking this way or that about him—they loved him. Instead of trying to make him into what a messiah should be—they took him for what he was. They, unlike the others, were quite easily pleased. “Hey, you're the messiah—great. Glad to know you. Could you heal this wound on my leg, it's really been driving me crazy.” It's the folks who are open to him, who don't let their preconceived notions of what should/or should not be get in the way of their following Jesus.

And, here's why it's good news for us, the same is true for us. There are some in this world who claim to know exactly what we need to believe and say in order for us to have a relationship with Jesus Christ. That's not true. Sure, there are things we need to do and say in order to be like Jesus taught us to be, but as for having a relationship with him, well now—that's an open invitation with no strings attached. And that's what the end of this passage tells us.

Jesus says, “Come to me, all you who are weary and heavy burdened, and I will give you rest. 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. For my yoke is easy and my burden is light.” Does this mean that it's easy to be like Jesus? No. It means that following Jesus is a whole lot easier than following the kind of messiah that folks had been expecting.

The religious authorities who thought they knew what a messiah should be had made the process of becoming and maintaining one's identity as a “religious person” so cumbersome that it was impossible to meet up to the expectations. The leaders weren't pleased with anyone's religious “performance”—not even Jesus'! It was never good

enough for them. Then Jesus comes along and says—hey, feeling burdened and overloaded by all this religious run around you’re being given by the temple authorities—well, come to me. Follow me if you’re feeling overwhelmed with all of that. It’s a lot easier to have a relationship with God by following me than it is by following them.” And that was his point—that all of the religious mandates, prohibitions, and expectations were standing in the way of people having a relationship with God.

I’ve heard some people in contemporary society describe this as the difference between being religious and being spiritual. Being religious means being “good boys and girls” while being spiritual means having a meaningful relationship with the Divine. And if that’s the case, no wonder so many people these days consider themselves spiritual and not religious. These folks aren’t interested in a long list of “Thou Shalt Nots.” Yes, such rules have their place and they are good rules to live by, but God loves the one who breaks every rule and commandment just as much as God loves the ones who follow them to a “t”. Now, for those of us who do strive to be “good boys and girls” I know this can be one of the most annoying realities of our Christian faith. But it’s true. And, that’s the good news. Because, if we were to be honest with ourselves, we could never really stack up—sure, we can compare ourselves to a mass murderer, a rapist, or a thief and think we’re doing pretty well in comparison. But, we’d be fooling ourselves—especially if we take the Old Testament rules and conditions of what it means to be religious into consideration. Have you ever read Leviticus? If you have, you would know that you are committing a sin, right here and right now from your very pew, if you are wearing an outfit with more than one fiber. Woe to those of you who matched linen pants with a cotton shirt this morning. Imagine trying to keep all of those rules and regulations straight—no wonder Jesus said his way was easier.

And yet, most of the people of that generation couldn’t see it. They couldn’t accept Jesus because they were—ironically enough—too religious! A religious person wouldn’t eat with sinners. A religious person wouldn’t work on the Sabbath. A religious person wouldn’t visit with prostitutes. But Jesus wasn’t a religious person—he was a spiritual person—and that’s what blew them out of the water. They were looking for a messiah who followed all of their rules, and this one certainly didn’t.

And that’s the good news—although we want to do the right things and follow the rules, we don’t have to meet up with anyone’s expectations in order for us to be loved unconditionally by God. And so the least we can do, is to accept ourselves and each other, and love ourselves and each other, as Jesus accepts and loves us. For then our burdens will be lighter and we will find rest for our souls.

God’s not picky, finicky, or hard to please. No matter how we stack up—God love us anyway. And that’s the gospel—that God’s love is for us all—and that, that is what *it* is.