

Wading River Congregational Church

SERMONS IN PRINT

PETER J. VIBERT, PASTOR

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Luke 7:24-35

"Never Satisfied"

We left Jesus answering a question from the imprisoned John the Baptist, who seemed doubtful or – better – disappointed, in what he was hearing about Jesus' ministry – enough to ask Jesus "Are you the one?" Jesus reminds John that he has been opening the kingdom of God to "the poor" – the outsiders of 1st century Judaism; the sick, the lame, the blind, the lepers, the demonic, the tax-collectors and prostitutes, the soldiers, the aliens.

1) *Who was John the Baptist?*

Now Jesus turns to the crowds and asks what they think about John the Baptist. "What did you go out in such numbers to see in the desert?" Three times he asks, rhetorically, to get the people to admit to themselves that they had gone out to hear and see a prophet – the first one to appear in Israel in centuries. "Why then," Jesus is asking implicitly, "if you knew he was a prophet, did you not embrace him as God's messenger?" What were your expectations, and how did John answer them? What did you want of him?

Jesus says here, and in other talks to the crowds, that he has the highest opinion of John. "Among those born of women there has been none greater!" John is *the messenger*; the "Elijah" who was to come again, the "voice in the wilderness...preparing the way" that Isaiah had foreseen; the "messenger of the LORD" that Malachi had prophesied. And if that is

true, implicitly the question again is "Why do you not follow the path John prepared? If John prepared the way of the Lord, why do you not see that the Lord is now here?"

But great as John is, and important as his message is, something even greater is happening through Jesus: "the kingdom of God" is now being opened to all who will believe, and at this point the believers are overwhelmingly "the poor" who have been excluded so long from the religious life of Israel. From Jesus' viewpoint, "the least person in the kingdom" is greater even than John, the greatest of the prophets. A new era has begun, which breaks decisively with the past, with assumptions about who is acceptable to God, and with expectations about the life of faith and leadership in the community.

2) *How Did People Respond?*

So Jesus sets up the contrast between those who embrace John and Jesus, and those who reject both. He does that with a small and telling parable, of *children in the marketplace*. We have to imagine a dusty and hot Middle Eastern market square, in days before books or TV or video games, where kids sit in the shade of the buildings and play musical instruments, or games with dice and counters and pebbles. They call out to one another, and to the adults busy about the market stalls, "we play the flute but you do not

dance!" The saying was likely a commonplace proverb; you can find the words as far back as *Aesop's Fables* from the 6th century BC!

What music do you *want*? Or - more pointedly - If we call the tune, *why won't you dance*? Here is the expectation game at work again, and it runs in both directions: "*We play a funeral lament and you will not cry!*" Why won't you respond to our expectations?

Who are these children? According to Jesus they are "*the people of this generation.*" They are the people who did not take John the Baptist seriously, but were merely curious; they are the people who do not embrace Jesus, but stand by skeptically and critically; they are led by Pharisees and Scribes who criticize Jesus for his claims and especially his associations with sinners. And they have been trying to call the tune for John, and now for Jesus, and complain about how John and Jesus have responded.

John had come as an ascetic, a man of the desert, a prophet of old, but the disbelievers discounted him as "*a crazy man from the wilderness*" - like the demoniacs who lived in rags in the caves. Yet Jesus, the carpenter's son and teacher and healer, who mixes with very ordinary people, who eats and drinks like everyone else, is being denounced as "*a glutton and drunkard and friend of tax-collectors and other sinners.*"

By his parable, Jesus is saying to the crowds and Pharisees: "Make up your minds! What do you want? Are you only going to criticize? Will anything satisfy you?" Are your expectations so fossilized or so flimsy that you only know what you *don't* want, and not what you *do*? Can you admit that God is at work in John and in me, or will you turn your back on each of us for different so-called "reasons"? You who were baptized by John know the truth about both of us; you

who refuse to hear him are now refusing to hear me, even if your "explanations" for rejecting us are different. In reality, you are rejecting God, and you know it. Stop making excuses! God and his wisdom are true and will be vindicated. Make up your mind whether you will embrace his will or reject it!

3) *Who Calls The Tune?*

So, of course, we face the question "Who is calling the tune today?" What kind of expectations are being brought forward by the culture, by people inside and outside the church, about the way Christians should live and speak and act - all Christians, but especially leaders?

Jesus and John the Baptist lived and ministered in a culture shaped by centuries of Jewish tradition, religious and cultural. Hundreds of years of post-exilic synagogue Judaism, the rise of the teachers and rabbis, the many apocalyptic writings, the political crisis of weak leadership and repeated foreign rule, all created a particular set of expectations and beliefs about how God acted and would act in the world.

We live in an time when centuries of Christian influence, and even cultural and political domination, have given way to a skeptical era where the levers of power are now largely in the hands of non-believers. But that does not mean that expectations for Christians have disappeared; plenty of people outside the church have much to say about the way the church should function in our society. So who is calling the tune? Are we supposed to be dancing or mourning right now?

In our society, political, social, and ethical debates all still carry religious undertones. But are traditional religious views, for example on marriage, even allowable in public debate on whether gay marriage

should be legalized? What role are religious leaders allowed in public life? Should clergy be celibate, chaste, faithful, or what - and who is to say? Should religious leaders be ascetic "holy men," or back-slapping "good ole boys"?

Do Christian ethics have any public place in our culture? If so, what, and who may speak of them and on what occasions? What is a Christian view of our economic turmoil? Is it more Christian to save than to spend? Are there specific Christian economic priorities? Should the churches be purveyors of gloom or glee over the state of our nation?

Who is calling the tune, and will the church, will Christians, dance? Is torture ever "good"? How do you decide? Is it a matter of whether it "works"? Or are there ethical issues at stake? Money calls the loudest tune in our society: if the government will give you money to support the good works of your faith-based institution, must you give up the right to hire people who share your faith, because that is "discriminatory"? If in the future churches lose their tax-exemption, even though other non-profits keep theirs, will the churches still do social work? Why, or why not?

Will Christianity be pushed more and more towards the margins of our society, and become the private pursuit of certain groups of people - and in a generation or two to die out as a cultural force, like classical music? Will the church be shaped more and more by people who are not even part of the church "calling the tune" and saying "this is how you ought to behave, this is how you are going to be regulated, this is who you can hire and fire and why, these are your boundaries and don't dare step over them?"

Or will the church find her own voice again; get her own house in order, seize the greatest opportunity in decades to speak to people's

lost faith in the gods of money and progress? Will the church learn to ignore the ignoramuses who stir up the crowds, and focus on the Gospel? Will the church work out a theology of culture that will allow her to speak authoritatively and persuasively on public issues?

Will we learn that society has always and will always criticize Christians and Christianity, and learn to deal with that, graciously? Are we willing to be known for what we are for, and not only for what we are against? Will we work and pray and study and worship until we know who we are and what our calling is, and be able to face the "flute-players" in our generation's market place and say "We don't care what tune you play, we are not going to dance to it! We will make our own music, and dance or mourn as *we* see fit, and one day we may allow you to hear *our* music - which we believe is the best of all!"

For most of history, and in most of the world at any time, society has been critical of faith as we understand it biblically. Society is never satisfied with the church. Jesus was criticized, John the Baptist was criticized, and we shall be, now and in the future. The criticism will vary from time to time and place to place, because it has no firm foundation. But God's ways and God's wisdom are true and right and good, and will be proved to be to everyone who follows them, and ultimately will be revealed to all people everywhere.

Meanwhile take no notice of the children calling names across the public square! They *are* children; their games are their games, their tunes are their music, and grown-up believers should not be distracted from the tasks God has given them to pursue. In the end, even the children will learn that God's ways are best. Following Jesus will always be best; he would not dance when they told him

to, but he danced and sang and ate and
drank as he chose in the company of the
friends he had invited into his kingdom.

Let us pray...