

July 9, 2017: Fifth Sunday after Pentecost (Year A)  
Matthew 11:16-30: Love and Like

Have you ever invited someone to attend a service here at the church, and they responded by asking what they would need to wear? That happens to me a lot. And I'm always happy to tell them it really doesn't matter. I explain to them they might find one person wearing shorts and flip flops, and another person wearing a coat and tie. We are all over the place. And I tell them that I typically wear a tie, but that's just to keep this one old guy at our church happy.

That's not entirely true. It's more like two old guys. I don't mind it. And I understand that I'm in a little different situation because of my job. But I do think people should be comfortable. I'm most comfortable wearing a t-shirt. But I could never do that, because most of my T-shirts would be a distraction. I have very few plain t-shirts. They all say something. I didn't buy them. People buy them for me.

*Trophy Husband* (makes me feel like a piece of meat)

*Super Dad* (puts me under a lot of pressure)

*I speak fluent sarcasm* (Where did you get that shirt? I stole it)

*I'm going to say something sarcastic in 5, 4, 3, 2...*

*Relax, I'm Hilarious* (people expect me to say something funny)

*The Sermonator* (makes me feel like I'm a more dynamic speaker...I keep thinking I should wear it when I'm working on my sermons...clearly I haven't done that yet)

Some of my t-shirts go beyond distracting to being a little controversial...

*Jesus loves you* (then underneath in smaller print) *But I'm his favorite*

Whenever I wear that shirt I worry that someone who doesn't know me, and knows that I like sarcasm, might get offended. The shirt is really intended to be sarcastic, because it's making fun of the fact that some people will say that Jesus loves everyone, but deep down they think that Jesus loves them more, maybe because they go to church more often, or because they don't do certain bad things, or because they do do certain good things. When the truth is, Jesus loves us all the same. But does that necessarily mean he doesn't have favorites?

I think most parents would say they love all their children the same, and they do, but they might have more in common with one than another, and therefore like spending time with one more than another, or maybe they might favor one over the other if one just did something to really get on their nerves. At our home we have a saying, "I love you, but I don't like you right now." It's our way of affirming our love for each other while being honest about the way we might feel at that moment.

Since Jesus was a human being like us, I don't know why we would be surprised to find that he felt this way from time to time. There were definitely some people that Jesus did not like very much. People that got on his nerves, that frustrated him, and made him angry. The people he liked least of all were the ones that rejected him and his message. These are the people he is talking about here; the ones he refers to as "this generation."

He compared them to children sitting in the marketplace, with one group suggesting they pretend they were at a joyful celebration, while the other group suggested they pretend they are in the midst of mourning. We might not be familiar with their method of play, but we have seen this scenario before. One child wants to do one thing. Another child wants to do another thing. And since they can't come to an agreement on what to do, and neither is willing to compromise, they end up doing nothing.

The way they responded to both John the Baptist and Jesus also said a lot about them. John the Baptist was a little rough on the edges. He lived in the wilderness, away from society. He dressed in animal skins. And his

diet consisted of locusts and honey. He called the people to a radical way of life, so radical, they said he must be possessed by a demon. In many ways Jesus appeared to be on the opposite end of the spectrum. He enjoyed life. He went to parties. He enjoyed good food and fellowship. He loved people, all kinds of people. But they had problems with him too. They called Jesus a drunk and a glutton.

You can see Jesus did not think a whole lot of these people. He thought they were stubborn, immature, indecisive, selfish, and greedy, only interested in having things their way. Only interested in a God who would put his stamp of approval on the way they wanted to live, not call them to a different way of living. They wanted a God of their own making. Jesus was fed up with their pride and self-righteousness, for acting as if they knew better than he did who God was and what God was like, for thinking they did not need the gift of salvation that he was offering.

How did Jesus respond to these people? He didn't just throw his hands up in the air and say, "I'm done." He may not have liked them, but he still loved them. So he told them the truth. That they needed to repent. He told them that on the day of judgment they would be worse off than the residents of some of the most wicked, and unfriendly cities known to human history. And this was because they knew better. They had no excuse. Because they had personally witnessed the miraculous power of God that was in work in Jesus. And in spite of this, chose to reject his message.

No these were not his favorite people. But there were others Jesus was quite fond of, and his response toward them was totally different. Jesus described them as not wise, not intelligent, but infants. Who wants to be in this group? It's not as bad as it sounds. I don't think it's going too far to say that Jesus was being a little sarcastic here. We think being wise and intelligent are good things, and they are, but not in the sense that Jesus is using them here.

Jesus was referring back to that first group of people, the ones who rejected him. They thought they were wise and intelligent, so much so they were not going to fall for the words of a carpenter from a small, out of the way town in Northern Israel. They were the religious leaders, the ones in charge, the ones who made the rules, the ones who prided themselves in following all the rules. The ones who had turned serving God into a burden, one that had become too difficult for most people to bear. They had lengthened the original Ten Commandments to a list of 633 laws that were not only impossible to remember, but virtually impossible to keep.

Have you ever known someone who was just impossible to please? I haven't. Maybe a parent, a teacher, or even a spouse. It seemed like no matter how hard you tried you could not be good enough for this person. Eventually you come to a point where you just give up and quit trying, which isn't really a good thing no matter who it is, but what if this person was God? What if the people you trusted to tell you the truth about God and what he expected of you had set the bar so high that you felt you could never be good enough for God? That was essentially what the Scribes and Pharisees had done. We can add this to the reasons why Jesus did not particularly like them.

The Scribes and the Pharisees sometimes referred to the Torah, or the Law, as it was called, as a yoke, as in the large wooden thing that would be placed around the neck of oxen to direct them where to go. They would say that people needed to put the Yoke of the Torah upon themselves. This was of course the Torah as they understood it...all 633 laws of it. And as we have already established, this Yoke would have been extremely hard to carry.

It would have been heavy, burdensome, and oppressive...essentially putting them in a sort of bondage. And if that wasn't already bad enough, the Scribes and the Pharisees were extremely harsh and uncompassionate in their application of this yoke...no leniency...no second chances...no grace... It all stemmed largely from their spiritual pride. But the people had no choice, no other yoke, no other way of living, that could promise a way to

God...until Jesus came. Unlike the way Jesus felt toward them, Jesus felt so much compassion for these people. Or infants, as he liked to call them.

He said to them, “Come to me, all you that are weary and are carrying heavy burdens, 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.” Can you imagine how wonderful this must have sounded to these people, who for all their lives thought that serving God was supposed to be a burden, and suddenly have come to realize that it’s not. I think some of you can.

But what did he mean by “easy and light”? He did not throw out the Law, as some people like to think. Instead he fulfilled it, he offered the correct interpretation of it. In some cases that meant being more lenient, like with the laws about keeping the Sabbath. But in other cases he was more stringent, like with the laws about divorce, and adultery, and murder...which he taught were first and foremost, matters of the heart.

And unlike the Scribes and Pharisees, he was a gentle and humble teacher. While he was without sin, he understood what it was like to be human. He understood the obstacles people had to overcome in order to live the way God intended. He understood the whole idea of a “work in progress.” With him there was always grace, always forgiveness, always patience.

And there is one more thing we can learn from this...many times a yoke was worn by a team of oxen, not just one. What this passage provides us with then is a powerful image of how Jesus walks beside his followers. He gently leads them by example, showing them how to live a life that is pleasing to God. And he carries the load with them...they don’t have to carry it all by themselves. He helps them be the people that God wants them to be.

In this way, following Jesus ceases to be a burden, and becomes the joy that it was always meant to be. And this is what Jesus does for his favorite people. Are you one of them? Have you let Jesus do this for you?

If you are stubborn and insist on doing things your own way, God will still love you. God will still love you, if you are self-righteous and full of pride, believing your way is the best way, and not open to the possibility that there could be a better way. God will still love you, if you think you can do no wrong, you are not in need of grace, and the call for repentance doesn’t apply to you. God will still love you if you make following Jesus into a burden nobody can bear, a burden that steals the joy that is supposed to come along with it. He will still love you, but his message to you will seem harsh and unkind. It will be one word. Repent.

But if you can come to the end of yourself, and realize that you don’t know as much as you thought you did. That your way is not the best way. That you could not know the truth about God apart from Jesus. If you can admit that you are tired, that you are weary, and that you stand in need of a savior, Jesus will reveal himself to you as the God that wants nothing more than to walk beside you, to lighten your load, to lead you, to guide you, and to give you rest.