

Year A, December 11, 2016  
3 Advent  
Christ Church, Mexia

Kahlil Gibran in *The Prophet* tells us that our joy is our sorrow unmasked – the deeper our sorrow carves into us, the more joy we can contain. In other words, the two are inseparable and we are suspended like scales between our joy and our sorrow.

I wonder if John is showing signs of a similar conundrum in the gospel reading today? As we heard in the gospel reading just last Sunday, John referred to Jesus as: “One who is more powerful than I is coming after me: I am not worthy to carry his sandals.” Then in the verses that follow Matthew describes the baptism of Jesus by John when the Spirit of God descended like a dove onto Jesus and a voice from heaven declared, “This is my Son, the Beloved, with whom I am well pleased.” Pretty strong testimony to who Jesus is.

But in the gospel reading today John sends his disciples to Jesus to ask, “Are you the one who is to come, or are we to wait for another?” Why the doubt, you might ask? And, whew, isn’t it a relief that someone else, someone like John the Baptist, has these thoughts – ones like we often have? John is in prison. What? John has been heralding the coming of the Messiah, the one who will baptize with fire! The Messiah is going to make things right! But now I am imprisoned; how can that be? Honestly, don’t we all have days like that – days when we question our faith? Isn’t life supposed to be better? Is Jesus the real thing? When we believe that he is, are we not joyful? But when things go wrong, when sorrow gets the best of us, don’t we begin to wonder?

So, we come to the other part of the gospel this morning – Jesus asks the crowd, what did you expect? Isn’t that really part and parcel of our dilemma? Are we expecting life to be a “rose garden,” so to speak, because we are a Christian? John prepared the way for Jesus, baptized Jesus. In many ways, he is probably one of the greatest prophets in the whole history of Israel. But he ends up in prison and has his head cut off because of a drunken promise by Herod. Does that mean we are doomed, if we follow Christ? No-o-o-o!!! But it doesn’t mean the opposite either.

We do need to consider what it takes to be a disciple of Jesus, a true Christian. And this is probably the most difficult question of all, one that has haunted Christians since Jesus began to call his disciples so

long ago. As Prof. John Burgess observes: "True discipleship is never first a question of our efforts to make Christ known to ourselves and others. The focus never falls first on our acetic achievements, worldly ambitions, or prophetic diatribes (like this sermon perhaps). A true disciple knows how easily we substitute the vain imaginations of our heart in place of the living Christ. A true disciple knows that he or she is still learning how to follow Jesus." John the Baptist had to change from proclaiming Christ, preparing the way for Christ, to becoming a disciple, a follower, of Christ, when Jesus was there to do the work himself. And Karl Barth reminds us that true discipleship is simply to point to all that God has done for us in Christ.

Whatever discipleship is; however you define it, it will involve sorrow at times, but it can bring true joy. Sherwood Wirt, author of *Jesus, Man of Joy* wrote: "We have learned that joy is more than a sense of the comic, more than earthly pleasure, and to the believer even more than what we call happiness. Joy is the enjoyment of God and the good things that come from the hand of God. If our new freedom in Christ is a piece of angel food cake, joy is the frosting. If the Bible gives us the wonderful words of life, joy supplies the music. If the way to heaven turns out to be an arduous steep climb, joy sets up the chair lift."

"... the blind receive their sight, the lame walk, the lepers are cleansed, the deaf hear, and the poor have good news brought to them..." A disciple looks not to oneself, but to Christ. Whenever we live in the works of the Kingdom of God, whenever we live a life like Christ, we ultimately will find joy.

Or to look at it another way - many of you may have heard that JOY means Jesus first, Others next and Yourself last. But I think The Rev. Phil Toole captured it better in his Christmas sermon in 1998. "The 'J' stands for Jesus, and the 'Y' stands for You," he said. But the 'O' is really a zero - nothing. The way to be close to Jesus and to maximize your joy then is to let nothing stand between Jesus and you.

In the name of the one God, the Creator, the Word and the Spirit.

Amen.