

In Jesus' preaching—and even in His life—the crowds come up against the power of God's Word. It is fascinating collision. And the question is always, how will they handle it? And even more, how will we respond to the presence of God's Word?

The Word of God is powerful—even if we think it is not. I like the way the Apostle speaks about the Word of God in Hebrews 4, “The word of God is living and active, sharper than any two-edged sword, piercing to the division of soul and of spirit, of joints and of marrow, and discerning the thoughts and intentions of the heart.”

And the Prophet Jeremiah says it with even more force, “Is not my word like fire, declares the LORD, and like a hammer that breaks the rock in pieces?”

By the time we get to Matthew 11, the mood among the crowds is beginning to change. They took a great interest in John. They liked the way he confronted the Pharisees and the Herodians. They probably even recognized that his call to repentance had real integrity. Life is meant to be lived with character and virtue and kindness. It is never good to be turned in on yourself.

And as Jesus began His ministry, they remained interested. Jesus proclaimed the kingdom of God and the crowds listened to His teachings. They noted His miraculous work—healing the sick—giving sight to the blind—hearing to the deaf. And as with John the Baptist—they liked Him pushing back against the rich and powerful. They were fascinated and curious—maybe even hopeful.

But now, we sense the beginning of some impatience with Jesus. And He notices it too. The newness has worn off. Jesus' priorities vary from their own. He hasn't overthrown the Romans—or even the Herodians. After some time with the faithful preaching of John—they turn right back to their old ways. And they sense the tension in Jesus' words.

In chapter 11, we find the crowds questioning Jesus' identity and mission. In chapter 12, we find outright opposition. They have the privilege of being the very first generation to receive the Messiah. Salvation history plays out right in their faces. The time is drawing near for them to respond. Are they for or against Him? There is no middle ground. The privilege is obvious. Responsibility is a paramount theme throughout chapter 11.

This is the generation that witnessed John's ministry—the greatest prophet the world had ever known. And he serves to prepare the way for Jesus—who stands among them full of grace and truth. Jesus calls them to listen. He calls them to maturity—to set aside their childish agendas—and recognize the priority of the kingdom of God. This is a moment for faith—and for trust. It is a moment to follow Jesus Christ.

Instead, this generation childishly demands their own agenda. They refuse John and Jesus. They condemn them both. They prefer their sin. And they do more than take up picket signs—or rant and rave to their neighbors about the evils of the prophet and the Messiah—they turn to violence.

Now, there is some disagreement about the nature of the violence that Jesus talks about in verse 12, as he says, “From the days of John the Baptist until now the kingdom of heaven has suffered violence, and the violent take it by force.” But the context makes it

clear. This verse could just as easily be translated, “The kingdom of heaven is being violently attacked, and violent men are trying to destroy it.”

This is about John the Baptist being imprisoned for confronting King Herod in his sin. This is about the way in which the crowds respond to the preaching of John and Jesus. And this is about what will happen in Jerusalem—in the betrayal, trial, suffering, and crucifixion of Jesus.

The world reacts to the kingdom of Jesus Christ with violence and rejection. But Christ turns their violence into the salvation of the world—even while He holds them responsible for that violence. All of this is in service to God’s purposes. And this saving irony—this theology of the cross—is at the heart of Matthew’s passion narrative.

Throughout, Jesus is at odds with local culture, and so is John the Baptist. And that should cause us to examine our own relationship to the culture—to the crowds. With His remarks, Jesus introduces us to the tension of the age in which we live too.

Remember what Peter says about those who follow Christ, “But you are a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, a people for his own possession, that you may proclaim the excellencies of him who called you out of darkness into his marvelous light.”

The Christian faith means that we are going to turn away from the dictates of the crowd—of the world—and live in light of the kingdom of God.

Jesus has come into this world with His kingdom of grace. Sins are forgiven. Reconciliation is achieved for us. We are restored to a right relationship with God in Jesus Christ—all by His grace Jesus alone works for the renewal of our standing with God.

Things are still fundamentally broken in the world. The kingdom has not broken in with its full glory—not yet. John will die in prison like the prophets before him. People will continue to be at odds with God, rejecting Jesus—not seeing Him for who He is.

And this is why Jesus says just before our reading, “Blessed is the one who is not offended by me.” And here is another one of those short pithy sayings—that also packs a punch.

Jesus becomes the form of the beatitudes from Matthew 5 at the beginning of the Sermon on the Mount—blessed are those who are persecuted for righteousness sake—inviting others to share in the glory of this very unusual kingdom.

And it seems—to further connect the beatitudes—the poor in spirit—those who hunger and thirst for righteousness—those without stake in the current regime—are the ones not offended by Jesus. Those not caught up in the ways of the world—dance to the music Jesus makes. Those without the lust for power—join with Jesus as He mourns over Jerusalem’s unwillingness to repent.

But Jesus addresses the other group—the more common group in our reading—those who sit in the marketplace, those who flourish in the ways of the world. And they can only think John the Baptist to be a lunatic and Jesus to be immoral. They reject them both. They are in the way—a stumbling block—a rock of offense. They expect John and Jesus to celebrate and mourn in the ways that they demand.

Indeed, they are full of excuses. They reject Jesus because he is not like John—and John because he is not like Jesus. This is utter foolishness—and yet it is the way of the world.

It takes a broken spirit and a contrite heart—a certain humility and selflessness—to see John and Jesus for who they really are. John and Jesus have challenged the assumptions of the culture—of life in the world—of life in the kingdom of God.

And that leaves us some ideas to consider—for ourselves—and for our church. Are you going to deal with Jesus on His terms? Or are you going to demand that He conform to your ideas—or the ideas of the crowd. And we have all kinds of things to consider in this regard—calendar, schedule, morality, priorities, worship, confession of faith.

See, Jesus is always relevant—whether we recognize it or not. And very often, at least according to Jesus in our passage, the culture is not relevant at all. So why should we conform our Church, our confession, our lifestyles to the culture? Jesus alone is our Lord. We should follow Jesus.

In all of this, if you hear the Wisdom of God declared—the whole counsel of God—that is the place to be—regardless of what it might look like to the world—regardless of what they might say.

Wisdom is justified by her deeds—because when Christ the Word is rightly preached and heard, all kinds of amazing things happen among us. The wisdom of God works forgiveness of sins, delivers from death and the devil, and gives eternal salvation to all who believe. And He sets us free for a new life of obedience.

We have been rescued from a generation that does not want to confess Jesus is Lord. And in truth, every generation has this problem. Wherever the sinful nature exists, there we will find active and passive opponents of the Gospel.

And if we are honest, we can even find some of this in ourselves. We like the approval of the crowd. We keep back areas of our life from God. There are parts of us that are not following Christ—that resist the clear teachings we find in His Word.

And think about specifics here—and I want to challenge you in this regard—to follow Jesus—and leave such things behind. The struggle is different for each one of us. But let me give you a handful of ideas. And then, find that one area you are least conformed to Christ—and most like the culture. And then recognize that it is time for a change. Repent—as John suggests.

Maybe it is that one false doctrine you play with when you are not at church. That one political opinion you hold that clashes with God's clear Word. That favorite sin you keep private—that you reserve for yourself. That compulsive need to have attention and affirmation. That one thing you do that makes life hard for everyone else. That miserly way you keep hold of your money. That one person you have not forgiven. That one area of personal identity that you have given over to the world—rather than to Christ.

I invite you today to follow Christ—follow the Word of God—in these areas. Let the Word do its work. It sounds a lot like Romans 12:2, “Do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewal of your mind, that by testing you may discern what is the will of God, what is good and acceptable and perfect.”

By the grace of God we hear the Gospel and believe what it says. We hear that Christ has died for us vicariously, that He has made us His own in baptism. He gives us everything that we need for life, including feeding us in His blessed Sacrament for the forgiveness of our sins.

In a world darkened by sin, the Lord has made us wise unto salvation. He counts us among His redeemed and beloved children. The Lord shines the light of His salvation through the Means of Grace to us. He sets us free from sin—and free for righteousness.

And so we listen. And we follow. We leave behind the ways of sin—even the kinds of things that are so tempting in our times. And we see ourselves as “a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, a people for his own possession, that we may proclaim the excellencies of him who called us out of darkness into his marvelous light.”

We are celebrating 170 years today as a congregation. Let’s rejoice in what God has done among us in all this time. We have a host of pictures downstairs for us to rehearse God’s grace. We are celebrating our roots. And we are celebrating our lives of faith.

But I want us to think deeper. I want us to go back further than the good old days. Further even than the Reformation. Our foundation goes back to the likes of John the Baptist—the last of a whole list of Old Testament Prophets. Along with the Apostles, the church is built on their foundation of faith. And through it all, Christ is our cornerstone.

I like the way Paul says it in Ephesians 2, “You are fellow citizens with the saints and members of the household of God, built on the foundation of the apostles and prophets, Christ Jesus himself being the cornerstone, in whom the whole structure, being joined together, grows into a holy temple in the Lord. In him you also are being built together into a dwelling place for God by the Spirit.”

So, as we embark into the future that God has give us as a congregation—and as a room full of Christians—let’s begin with our two aphorisms in mind. “He who has ears to hear, let him hear.” And, “Wisdom is justified by her deeds.” Let them be our charge for the days ahead.

Let’s be people with ears to hear the Word of God—from John—from the Apostles and Prophets—and from Jesus. And let’s be people who take them seriously—who take them home—full of wisdom—the kind of wisdom that causes us to live as followers of Christ. And blessed are we—when we are not offended by Jesus Christ. In the name of Jesus. Amen.

*+Soli Deo Gloria+*