

THIRD SUNDAY IN ADVENT

Matthew 11:2-10

“Go and tell John what you hear and see: the blind receive their sight and the lame walk, lepers are cleansed and the deaf hear, and the dead are raised up, and the poor have good news preached to them. And blessed is the one who is not offended by me.”

Jesus said, ***“It is not the healthy who need a doctor, but the sick”*** (Luke 5:31). Jesus’ work is of no avail for you, does you no good, until you are willing to be those, or rather admit you are those, who need Him most: the blind, the lame, the unclean, the deaf, the dead, the poor. Christ will only find room in our hearts when we recognize our spiritual blindness, that we have called evil good and good evil; our lameness, that we cannot limp our way out of our predicament; our uncleanness, that we have defiled ourselves with our thoughts and actions; our deafness, that we are by nature averse to hearing God’s truth; our deadness in trespasses and sins, from which we are able only to be raised by the Word of that same Savior who called Lazarus from his grave; and our poverty, that without Jesus we lack the righteousness and holiness necessary to stand before God and live. Only in a realization of our weakness and our utter helplessness do we find true strength and sure aid in Christ.

And along the same lines, we ought not to be surprised when we find our fellow members to be the same, at times somewhat blind, lame, unclean, deaf, even dead, or poor. They are the same flesh and blood sinner-saint concoction we are until Christ comes. As I’ve told you before, if someone tells you they don’t go to church or are going to stop going because the church is full of hypocrites or false Christians, tell them there is always room for one more. This is a hospital for sinners, not a showroom for saints, and what should you expect to find in a hospital but those in need of medicine, of a doctor?

At the end of our lesson, Jesus warns the crowds not to be confused by John’s imprisonment, to doubt his prophetic calling because of his chains, because he lacked worldly glory. And that temptation hasn’t gone away. Still today we are tempted to judge God’s Word and His prophets and His flocks according to worldly glory. We become disheartened when numbers sag or challenges arise. We grow envious of congregations growing faster than our own. We must ask ourselves at such times, are we longing selflessly for more to come to Christ, however that might happen, or longing selfishly for more to come to us to feed our pride? Our attitude must be the same as that of St. Paul, who wrote to the Philippians as false teachers poached his members and bragged of a grander ministry than his own:

Some indeed preach Christ from envy and rivalry, but others from good will. The latter do it out of love, knowing that I am put here for the defense of the gospel. The former proclaim Christ out of rivalry, not sincerely but thinking to afflict me in my imprisonment. What then? Only that in every way, whether in pretense or in truth, Christ is proclaimed, and in that I rejoice. (1:12-18)

St. John sent his congregation to Christ, the lesser to the greater, and we exist as a congregation to do the same, to point those among us, not to ourselves, but to Christ, the lesser to the greater; not to impress them with the fading and shallow glory of the world, but to impress upon them the eternal glory to be had in the cross and wounds of Christ. As St. Paul said, ***“Far be it from me to boast except in the cross of our Lord Jesus Christ, by which the world has been crucified to me, and I to the world.”***

There's a tree outside my office. It's stunningly beautiful each spring. Few notice, because it's tucked away behind the pines. In the winter it is barer, but there are still buds on it so far. The other day the wind was whirling about the tree, the snow forming a funnel around it. As I watched, birds flew in and out of it, at one time a great flock, at another but two or three. They would land for a while and then disappear, the tree standing alone against the wind once more. Sometimes only a bird or two would land, without the others. No matter how many birds alighted on its branches, the tree remained, battling the wind, still bearing red buds in spite of the winter. That tree is like the church. Sometimes the masses flock into it. Sometimes it stands seemingly alone against the winds of the times, or the winters that so often strike it, times of coldness and indifference. Either way, the tree stands, always there, just as it has been there as long as I've been here. And it will likely remain long after I'm gone, blossoming in the spring, standing guard outside the office window in the winter, soaking up what sun it gets, drawing life from the water that penetrates to its roots, just as the Church soaks up the light of the Son of God and draws life from the waters of Baptism.

Sometimes we miss Christ's Church's beauty, distracted by the towering pines around her. Sometimes we doubt she can survive the winter. But she blossoms all the same. She bears her buds even in the bleak winter. A sinner breaks down in tears and at long last confesses his or her sin and is absolved, made whole. A premature baby, who beat the odds and is born alive, has water poured on his head and becomes a child of God in the NICU. An adult convert overflows with thankfulness for the instruction he or she has received in the Christian Faith. A sick member, in the face of great suffering, confesses a steadfast trust in God's providence and plan. A tired pastor again dives into the Word, not necessarily because He wants to at the time, but because it is his job, and in the end he is for the umpteenth time reminded what a gift it is to be a pastor, to be paid to study God's love letter to mankind, and to share it with others. What has the world compared to that?

Jesus continued to say after our lesson:

“To what then shall I compare the people of this generation, and what are they like? They are like children sitting in the marketplace and calling to one another,

“We played the flute for you, and you did not dance; we sang a dirge, and you did not weep.”

For John the Baptist has come eating no bread and drinking no wine, and you say, ‘He has a demon.’ The Son of Man has come eating and drinking, and you say, ‘Look at him! A glutton and a drunkard, a friend of tax collectors and sinners!’ Yet wisdom is justified by all her children.”

The world didn't want John and it didn't want Jesus. Dance and sing or faint with fasting, only the Spirit can turn an enemy of God into His son or daughter, can give blind eyes sight or open deaf ears, can heal broken sinners and make them whole, can restore peace between God and man and one another. Pray God for that Spirit, and hold fast to Scripture, the very place Jesus pointed John's disciples that they might know Him too. Amen.