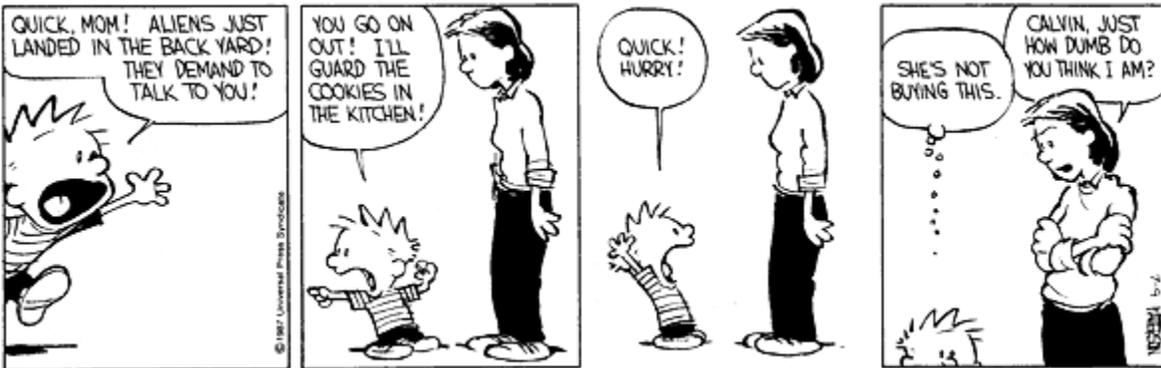


Community Presbyterian Church
Cedar City, Utah

Sermon
July 3, 2011
Romans 7.15-25, Matthew 11.16-30
"Hidden Things"
Pastor John Guthrie



One of the characteristics of Calvin & Hobbes that makes the strip so entertaining is that you can always count on Calvin to act like a child, even if he talks like an adult.

There's an interesting coincidence in today's reading from Matthew, although it is entirely possible that Matthew writes that "coincidence" on purpose. Children appear twice in the reading. In their first appearance they appear indeed childish. Jesus tells the crowd assembled that "this generation" is like children playing, calling to one another, "We played the flute for you, but you did not dance. We wailed, but you did not mourn." By itself this saying is a little obtuse, but fortunately Jesus explains in large part what he means.

John the Baptist came neither eating nor drinking, that is, he came practicing self-restraint, fasting, abstaining from alcohol, and he was accused of having a demon. Then the Son of Man, that is Jesus himself, comes eating and drinking, that is, enjoying good food and wine, and he is accused of being a glutton and a drunkard. This explanation furthermore makes clear to whom "this generation" refers: it means the religious authorities: the scribes, Pharisees, Sadducees, lawyers, and chief priests who are continuously scrapping with Jesus in the gospels.

Remember what my friend the Episcopal priest says we should think whenever we run across the Pharisees in the gospels: they were simply good religious folks like you and me. You and I have to be looking for Pharisaic behavior in ourselves. One way to interpret the criticism that Jesus is aiming at the religious authorities of his day is to see that they are constantly finding fault with everyone and everything. I really wish this particular interpretation weren't a really valid one, because what Jesus has done here is to take aim straight at none other than...me.

You see, I was born a perfectionist. I have always striven for perfection myself, and expected it from others. Be very much aware that I have never achieved perfection, but I have held it up as an end, anyway. And my tendency to expect it from others is always present as well.

Fortunately as I have grown older my perfectionist tendencies have moderated significantly, but they are still present.

My expectations of others ultimately falls into that category of sin which Jesus condemns when he commands us to remove the log from our own eyes before we go looking for the speck in our neighbor's eye. We have to get our own lives in order before we can begin to help others do that, and frankly, we never get our own spiritual lives completely in order. That's what Paul writes about when he says that none of us are righteous. In today's passage from Romans, Paul laments that he does not do what he wants to do, but the very thing he hates. So powerful is the sin that lives within him, and us.

Paul cries, "Wretched man that I am, who will save me from this body of death?" Then he immediately answers his agonized question: "Thanks be to God through Jesus Christ our Lord!" I understand Paul's distress. How about you?

Jesus tells us in this brief parable about children that we are to be constantly discerning what God is doing in our personal lives, in our church, and in our communities. Yes, we are to be using our particular gifts of the Holy Spirit to the best of our ability in the service of the church. And yes, we are to give all that we have in pursuit of the ethical life laid out in the scriptures. And yes, there is to be no moderation in our care for the poor, the widow, the orphan, the alien, and the stranger. And yes, we are to love the Lord our God with all our heart, mind, soul, and strength.

But in the walk of discipleship under Christ, "to everything there is a season, and a time to every purpose under heaven" as the preacher writes in the book of Ecclesiastes. In other words, it is entirely possible for us to push ourselves and others to perfection in a particular direction, which is the wrong direction. Gee, I've never seen that done in the church before. (That was sarcasm.)

This intentional search for what God is doing right now in our lives and church and community and world is a central feature of this new movement in the church at large which has been given the name "missional." Church leaders have noted continuously that trying to define what the adjective "missional" really means is not easy, because it seems to vary from one church environment to another. But they all tend to agree that an essential part of being a missional church is to be looking for what God is doing right now in our own environments, and then joining in that, whatever it is.

The main idea is that we are not to be, as a church, focused on our own buildings and programs and ministries, continuously maintaining them because that's what we've always done. Rather, missional churches look outside of themselves, into their communities and the world at large, to see opportunities for ministry and service in the name of Christ there, where the real needs of people and collections of people are evident. Missional churches are flexible and adaptable, always looking for new opportunities to use their particular strengths in service outside the walls of their buildings.

A flexible and adaptable Presbyterian church is something of an oxymoron, but it can and does happen. You are aware of the last seven words of the church, I assume: "We've never done it that way before." It seems to me that Jesus is calling us in this very brief parable about children, with its explanation, that there is indeed a time for rejoicing, and there is indeed a time for mourning. The hard part is knowing when to do which, and that's when we need to rely completely on the Holy Spirit and prayer so that we have some real chance of moving in the right direction.

After his parable about the children in the marketplace, Jesus aims rather pointed and piercing criticisms at three towns in which he has preached, for they witnessed his words and miracles yet did not repent, and did not believe. The Kingdom of Heaven had been revealed in those places, and it was not recognized. A warning to us to remember that we also are living right now in the Kingdom of Heaven, and to be working under the guidance of the Holy Spirit to make that kingdom a little more real and present whenever and wherever we can.

Then Jesus returns to this theme that runs pretty much continuously throughout the New Testament, that the wise and intelligent are not the ones who are especially perceptive when it comes to matters of God's Kingdom, but rather infants. Here is where children appear for the second time in this passage from the eleventh chapter of Matthew. Here, however, Jesus does not deride children, but lifts them up for being childlike, rather than childish, as in the parable about the marketplace earlier.

And once again, Jesus takes aim straight at...me! Come visit my office. See shelf upon shelf of books about all things Christian: church health, theology, history, ethics, spiritual growth, apology, commentary, not to mention a few physics texts and my prized three-volume complete set of Calvin and Hobbes comic strips. The point is, in keeping with long-standing Presbyterian tradition, I prize knowledge and learning. Jesus doesn't condemn learning in and of itself, but he does condemn the narrow-minded focus on learning that can and does completely blind a person to the in-breaking of the Kingdom of Heaven.

When it comes to matters of the Kingdom, you and I are to be like children. Indeed, says Jesus, matters of the Kingdom of Heaven are hidden from the wise and intelligent, but revealed to infants. What really happens is that the wise and intelligent are blinded to the work of the Holy Spirit in the world, and the Holy Spirit is at work in the world.

Another trap the church, our church, our denomination, and the church at large can fall into, is relying on its own wisdom and power to carry out what it perceives to be its mission. It is not to be that way. Instead, the church is to constantly recognize itself as the body of Christ, with Christ himself as its head, and to be guided, directed, corrected, encouraged, and empowered by the Holy Spirit of God. We do not do ministry on our own, or according to our own designs. We do ministry in the world as directed by God through the Holy Spirit. And again, we are to be always looking for where God is already at work, and joining in there.

Finally, Jesus says this: "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." If you were to read ahead in Matthew to the passages we will be studying in the next few weeks and months, you would well wonder what Jesus is talking about here. Because he is going to tell us that we must even hate our closest relatives, because to love them more than him is to make us unworthy. He is going to tell us that we must pick up our own crosses and follow him. He has already told his followers, in the Sermon on the Mount, that those who are persecuted for his sake are blessed.

So what does he mean when he says that he will give us rest for our souls, that his yoke is easy and his burden is light? I think he means that in spite of the fact that the walk of discipleship is difficult and requires self-sacrifice, the reward of that walk is ever so much greater. The reward of that walk is life with, in, and for Jesus himself, the light of the world, the bread of life, the true vine, the living water. The Apostle Paul understood that. The early Christian martyrs understood that. Life is not about comfort, security, leisure, and possessions. It's about Jesus,

and only about Jesus. True life is found only in Christ.

And true rest is found only in him as well. I think that's what he means when he talks about rest for our souls, and calls us to come to him, to take upon ourselves his yoke, and to learn from him.

So, beloved children of God, be not childish, but rather childlike. Rely on the Holy Spirit to reveal to you, and to us, where we should be at work in the world. Rely on the Holy Spirit to reveal the secret things of the Kingdom of Heaven, because we will never find them if we rely on our own wisdom and intelligence. And find rest along the way, the bread of life, the living water, in Christ Jesus. All glory, honor, and praise to him. Amen.