

Sermon "Letting Go of Our Comfort Zones"  
Kirk of St James  
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One of the most recognizable fairy tales for young and old alike is *Goldilocks and the Three Bears*. While there are a number of themes and morals that can be pulled from this story one of the messages that stands out is that of moderation. Three times there is the refrain of things being too much, too little, and just right. If you want an interesting on-line rabbit hole there are some hilarious perspectives on this particular fairy tale, for example, "Goldilocks eats and sleeps in three bears house and there are no consequences." The internet really is the wild west of the modern world. This story has persisted because it taps into fundamental parts of the human experience. The message of moderation is one we have likely experienced as simply being good advice. Weather is the perfect example, we don't want it too cold, or too hot—we want it just right!

Well in Matthew today we find Jesus having to push back against societal expectations, but before I get into that I will give a little background on this passage that will be helpful to keep our reading in context. In the book of Matthew there are five great discourses, and after each one there is what is called a narrative section. This particular part of Matthew today is located after the second discourse which contains the commissioning of the disciples. This is the narrative that happens after that commissioning. These passages "demonstrate the complete lack of proper response on the part of the people in general and especially the opponents of John the Baptist and Jesus. The interpretation part (vv.18-19) sarcastically contrasts John and Jesus..." This illustrates the absurdity of the slanders directed against them. It is something like the slightly modified, "Your darned if you do, and darned if you don't." This is a situation where there is simply no winning, and people have completely missed the main teaching.

Jesus' listeners keep changing the rules of the game when the actions didn't serve their wants and needs. If you have ever played games with children, you might find this same principle at play, the rules keep getting modified with the aim of them eventually winning the game, even if it is not fair. For example, in the game Trouble, if they land on your player, you get sent home, but you land on theirs it doesn't count—not that I am speaking from experience!

The disciples have been commissioned to share the Good News, but how they should do that, there was no winning strategy. Jesus compared the people to fickle children. “John came “neither eating nor drinking” and they did not care for his style at all. He was too old school for their taste—too stern and demanding. “So, they played the flute, and said, “Come on, John, lighten up. Lay off the hellfire and dance to our tune.” Then Jesus came and he was ready to dance—dance as they had never dreamed! Every meal was a party, as long as everyone was invited. Then they wailed about the company Jesus kept and called him “glutton” and “drunkard.”” There was no winning, and we hear a little bit of Goldilocks, “John was too stern, Jesus was too loving, we want something that keeps us feeling comfortable.”

That is not how the Kingdom of God works. The message of Jesus and the message of the parables is meant to turn our worlds and our expectations upside down. I always come back to this idea of what is comfortable in our lives. I will be the first to tell you that I love to live in within my comfort zone. It is known, it is cozy, it does not ask too much of me, and it is easy—I don't have to think about anything. The problem with comfort zones is that we don't grow, we don't change, and sometimes when something is left alone for too long it can stagnate.

Here is part of the problem—the people Jesus was speaking to did not want to change the direction they were going in. The idea that God's kingdom could be about more than revenge, regaining power, and defeating their enemies was not a message they were interested in hearing.

The kingdom Jesus was talking about was about love, and forgiveness and welcoming the stranger. The Israelite vision of the promised kingdom of God was about revolution, war, swords and spears, it was about using violence to defeat violence. People as terrible and cruel as the Romans could not be conquered any other way. “So, do not tell us we have to love people after what they have done, we need to destroy them, and get justice in the ways that we understand”—and the truth is? We likely understand this all too well.

When we look at the world, when we see suffering, and injustice, when we see things happening that are blatantly wrong and causing harm—we want to see consequences. We do not want to see people let off easily or without paying the price. We see things like this play out in our world all the time. Systems that prop up injustice and inequality, power and money buying up resources and creating landscapes where it is impossible for people to thrive, instead they are forced to scrape by. It is infuriating and we try to find our way through—how do we use our voices, and our love, and our care to try and make it a better world? How do we ask for accountability in the areas we need it most?

This is where the second part of our passage comes in today. When Jesus promises us that all things are held in God’s hands. When Jesus aligns himself not with the rich, powerful, and elite but rather among the marginalized and those bearing heavy burdens. As theologian Karl Barth insisted that, “righteousness always requires favoring the “threatened innocent, the oppressed poor, widow, orphans and aliens...God always stands unconditionally and passionately on this side and on this side alone: against the lofty and on behalf of the lowly; against those who already enjoy right and privilege and on behalf of those who are denied and deprived of it.” If you have ever heard of a movement called liberation theology it expands on

this, it reminds us that Christ has always been a Christ for the powerless, disenfranchised, and marginalized.

Today in our readings we are reminded that as disciples of Christ we have been called to live our faith, and our lives in light of God's deep love for humankind. How do we speak to those on the margins, and those who are hurting among our community and wider world? How do we come alongside those whose burdens are heavy, and hearts are weary? The second part of the Matthew reading today is not meant to absolve us from action because, "God will take care of everything," it is a call to service, and a reminder of who most needs our help. There will be times in our lives where we are much like Goldilocks, wrestling with faith that at times feels like too much and other times not enough. God will always meet us where we are, however, we might have to be open to being moved out of our comfort zones, and out into the world where we are needed most. The Good News is, that when we do, God will be there to meet us.