

Sunday July 9th, 2023
4th Sunday after Pentecost

Matthew 11:16-19, 25-30
“Results Matter”

I know you love our children’s time during the service as much as I do; partly because we just never know what one of the kids might say. Every week, I get to be like Art Linkletter, and host our own version of “Kids Say the Darndest Things” during our children’s time. To prove kids will say anything, I ran across a story about a little girl who went up to the front of the church to listen to the pastor’s children’s sermon. The pastor gathered the children around and immediately noticed the beautiful new dress on this little girl.

The pastor complimented the girl for her pretty dress, and asked if it was new. The little girl leaned toward the pastor and spoke directly into his lapel microphone: “Yes, pastor, this is my brand new dress. And mommy says it’s even harder to iron this dress than listen to one of your sermons.” “Out of the mouths of babes” we can say. I would have loved to have seen that mother’s face after that explanation by the little girl.

“Everyone is a critic!” we like to say, and that observation is so true. No matter how proficient or skilled someone is at a particular endeavor, there is someone, somewhere, who will find fault. In today’s gospel lesson, we catch a glimpse of just how dark, and how persistent, the criticism of Jesus and John the Baptist was. No matter how wonderful, truthful, or clearly expressed their preaching and activities were, some people, namely religious types, took offence.

We can just imagine some of the conversations that took place after John preached in the wilderness. Someone would say, “Wasn’t that powerful. God is really speaking to us through John the baptizer.” To which another person would say, “Perhaps he is a prophet, but did you see what he was wearing, camel hair, and did you hear what he eats? Wild honey and locusts, surely it is a demon running this ministry.” For every positive response to John, there were likely one or more critics.

Then there was Jesus. If John was austere in his religious and spiritual life, Jesus was the opposite. If John was the funeral, Jesus was the wedding. Jesus enjoyed: people, parties, and the happy moments of life. He especially loved dinner parties, and even more so; dinner parties with tax-collectors and other notorious sinners. Jesus loved life and loved to share himself with others.

The bible is full of examples of many people who responded positively to Jesus’ offer of acceptance and grace. We know about Zacchaeus and Bartimaeus, the woman at the well and the woman who came and broke the jar of nard over Jesus and wiped his feet with her tears and her hair. Furthermore, I am sure, there were hundreds more we never got to hear about in the bible. But for every grateful heart, there was a critic, who labeled Jesus a glutton and a drunkard.

Jesus makes the point that two presentations of the Kingdom of God were made to people; one was John’s call to repentance and to turn from our sin.

Sunday July 9th, 2023
4th Sunday after Pentecost

Jesus describes this as a funeral or sad music. Then Jesus comes along and offers the good news of salvation and hope; or as he terms it, the wedding music. The critics, however, just couldn't be pleased. Out in the wilderness with John, along the Jordan River, and following the multitudes that chased Jesus everywhere he went, the critics were there. They haunted the outer circle of people, watching and listening to John, and Jesus, and they grumbled.

“That’s not how we do things in God’s service”, they complained. It’s a common situation, among God’s people, that no matter how effective or wonderful a ministry is, there is someone who will find fault. I must say, however, that sometimes criticism is warranted, even in the church. There are times when something or some situation needs rational people to point out flaws, but sometimes the criticism is unwarranted.

The question becomes, “How do we decide the value of any endeavor?” How do we know John, or Jesus, or even First Baptist church, St. James or Colborne Community, are doing things right? I doubt you have too many questions about John or Jesus, but perhaps you’ve entertained questions about the ministry here at First Baptist or Colborne Community or St. James. How do we know we are getting it right? Do we even know what “it” is; to borrow from Craig Groeshel’s book called *It*?

The best answer to this dilemma I have ever heard, or read, comes in our Gospel lesson today, from the mouth of Jesus. In wondering about the value of any: Christian initiative, ministry, preaching or whatever; we need but to remember the last phrase of Matthew 11:19. Let us remember that this moment comes at a point, when John the Baptist is in prison, and Jesus is facing tremendous criticism.

In response to his critics, Jesus states, “But wisdom is shown to be right by what results from it.” In other words, does the activity or message achieve anything of lasting value? As in the old English proverb, we might say, “The proof of the pudding is in the tasting.” It sounds so logical, so wise, so what’s the problem you may ask? The problem is that we have long since ceased to apply this wisdom of Jesus, to our everyday lives.

The larger question before us today is this; what, if anything, is the point or positive result of our modern culture or wisdom? How does what I see, and give my time to, result in any lasting value? In a world that is driven by technology, what is the point of the quadrillion bites of information passed around the world every day? How do all these texts, tweets, twerps, mobile internet, or email, make any difference in our world?

I have mentioned, many times of late, that I am not anti-technology. What I am concerned about is what is the content and purpose of all this information. I wonder how many of you have heard of an amazing writer named Neil Postman. In 1985, Postman wrote a prophetic little book that has too easily been forgotten, and not given anywhere near the attention it deserves. It is called, *Amusing Ourselves to Death*.

In all my reading, I have found countless references to this little book, and finally decided that I had better read it, and see what all the fuss is.

Sunday July 9th, 2023
4th Sunday after Pentecost

It is an earth-shattering experience to say the least. In his book, Postman traces the watering down of society by the advent of new technology, particularly television. Postman claims that television has turned the value of information into absolute irrelevance. Take as an example, the CTV local news on June 19th 2011. Sitting down after supper, to watch the news, on Father's Day; the first story I encountered was a 4 minute, in depth coverage, of a young white tail deer that had wandered into a fenced parking lot.

Four minutes of interviews of concerned citizens, wildlife officials, and video about a lost deer; which upon my observation seemed quite healthy and happy? Incidentally, in that same newscast, the second story was an even lengthier spot about the Much Music Video Awards. And so, we got, endless interviews of people speculating on who may show up to the awards and what they might wear.

Watching these and countless other stories like them, I find myself saying, "So what!" I admit Postman has changed the way I look at media. Postman quotes Thoreau, who claimed that the telegraph began a slide into information irrelevance. The abundant flow of information, amplified by the internet and television, has nothing to do with the people it is addressed to.

News about someone in BC for example, may interest us, but only as a curiosity. We are still strangers, no matter how much superficial information we have about each other. Postman claims he can prove how far we have drifted with a simple question. *"How often, does it occur, that information provided you on morning radio or television, or in the morning newspaper, cause you to alter your plans for the day?"*

Or to take some action you would not otherwise have taken, or provides insight into some problem you are required to solve? For most of us, news of weather will sometimes have such consequences; for investors, news of the stock market; perhaps an occasional story about a crime will do it, if by chance the crime occurred near where you live or involved someone you know.

But most of our daily news is inert, consisting of information that gives us something to talk about but cannot lead to any meaningful action. (Amusing Ourselves to death, p.68) News programs are not about changing people or places. It is all about entertainment. A sixty second news item will affect no one in the long term, and the producers of the program have no goals in making social change.

Tying this in with our Gospel lesson, I think I would say that Jesus would see this irrelevant information deluge and conclude, "So what!" Are we, like his critics so long ago, who witness monumental events, and instead of being motivated to bring about change, sit back and offer our criticism? How are we motivated to do anything for the Kingdom of God by what we see and hear?

God expects what we experience in this world, to motivate us to seek Kingdom values and goals.

Sunday July 9th, 2023
4th Sunday after Pentecost

There is so much empty information, now flowing to us, that we are no longer motivated, beyond perhaps a sense of sympathy, or as the case the bus crash in Manitoba, maybe a donation.

The history of God's people is one punctuated, by people who saw, and heard, the anguish of the world, and acted on it. Do you remember the story of Nehemiah from the bible? I love this man's story, but mostly I admire his faith. Nehemiah was the cup bearer to the Persian king Artaxerxes. He was a Jewish man taken into captivity and living in exile. His experience is like that of Daniel and Ezekiel.

Nehemiah's life changes forever, when one day, his brother Hanani, came to Nehemiah and reported to him that some men had just come from Judah. No great earth-shattering event in itself, except in those days, before the internet, travelers always brought more than their luggage. These same men came, bearing a report, about how things were going, among the Jews who returned or had remained in Jerusalem, after the exile.

The report goes as follows, "Things are not going well for those who returned to the province of Judah. They are in great trouble and disgrace. The wall of Jerusalem has been torn down, and the gates have been burned." Nehemiah reports his response, "When I heard this, I sat down and wept. In fact, for days I mourned, fasted, and prayed to the God of heaven" (Nehemiah 1:3-4)

You, see? Nehemiah received news that was relevant to him. It concerned his home city and his own people. It was news impacting on family and friends and the institutions he valued. The news, in a word, wrecked him. He was distraught. Yet, more than this, the news motivated him to take a very daring action. He risked his life. The next spring, we read that Nehemiah was serving the king his wine.

Nothing too special about that, except Nehemiah reports that he appeared before the king with a sad face; also, not all that surprising given the news of Jerusalem, but risky. To appear before the king with a sad face was to risk death. A sad face before a cautious, and perhaps paranoid king, could mean you were plotting against the king. Maybe you even poisoned his cup. Cup bearers in a court were the most trusted of all servants.

Every day, they held the king's very life in their hands, because poison in the king's cup was an easy way to dispatch anyone. So, for Nehemiah, or anyone else, to even hint at treachery, perhaps by having a sad face, as if holding secret news, was a sure death sentence. God, however, was in control of the situation, and with Nehemiah. For when the king asked what why he had a sad face, Nehemiah simply told him about Jerusalem.

The king must have liked Nehemiah, or found his words persuasive, or saw the political value in a restored Jerusalem; we just don't know. Although, the scriptures do tell us one curious fact that cannot be irrelevant, because it is mentioned, and that is that the queen was sitting beside the king. Perhaps, because the queen was there, this was therefore a celebratory event, and the king was in a good mood.

Sunday July 9th, 2023
4th Sunday after Pentecost

Anyways, it could be that the queen took pity on Nehemiah and convinced the king to act. The result of all this drama, in the throne room, is that Artaxerxes sent Nehemiah, with written authority, to Jerusalem, to rebuild the city. Remember Jesus said, “But wisdom is shown to be right by what results from it.”

I am sure there would be many who would say Nehemiah’s sad face in the presence of the king, was hardly a wise endeavor, but what was the result? Nehemiah faced many critics and many enemies in trying to accomplish his task. His critics sought ways to discourage him and make him give up, but there was a greater prize to be obtained, and God was with Nehemiah.

In returning to our experience, it seems imperative that with so much empty information being thrown at us, we need to start filtering out the waste. We need to discern the Kingdom’s goals and call for our lives, and I am sure it likely will not come from the nightly news. Can we get in the healthy habit when we hear news, of asking, “So what”? Can we ask God to tune our ears to those things, in which we can make a difference?

“Render to Caesar what is Caesar’s and render to God what is God’s”. Let’s leave the world to its frivolous business, and let’s seek the work of God’s Kingdom. Let’s not worry about a deer caught in some parking lot, or the extra-marital affairs of some Hollywood star, or how our politicians are behaving.

Instead, let us look for ways to: show mercy, love the outcast, feed the hungry in our neighbourhood, befriend the lonely next door, welcome the newcomer to our neighbourhood and Christ’s church, and always look for wisdom that produces results. And let us not fear the challenge this represents because Jesus says,

“Come to me, all of you who are weary and carry heavy burdens, and I will give you rest. Take my yoke upon you. Let me teach you, because I am humble and gentle, and you will find rest for your souls. For my yoke fits perfectly, and the burden I give you is light.”

I hope by faith in Christ we can all lighten up.