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Luke 7:18-30
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When I was a youth minister, I was leading a Bible study for a middle school youth group. I don't remember specifically what the Bible study covered, but I remember one of the handouts that went with it. On it were four line-drawings that each represented one way people tend to think about God. One picture was of a big hand that controlled some strings attached to drawings of little people. It was God as a puppeteer. Another drawing was of a Santa Claus-looking guy with a bag full of gifts overflowing onto the floor. Santa Claus God. There was a drawing of a man sitting amid clouds with a look of disapproval on his face and a lightning bolt coming from his hands: Judge-y/Smite-y God. And the last drawing was of a smiling king, surrounded by heavily armed soldiers. Conqueror-Protector God.

I asked the teens which image of God resonated with them. And if the answer was none of them, I invited them to draw their image of God on the back of the handout. The discussion to follow was fascinating. Overwhelmingly the young people favored Puppeteer God and Santa Claus God. They liked the idea of a god who directed and even controlled what was going on around them. And who doesn't like to think about a god who shows up and delivers what we've asked for? The teens even had examples of how they had experienced God in these ways.

I played devil's advocate a little and wondered out loud if they had ever asked God for something and not received it or if someone had ever done something that made it hard to believe God was in control. Suddenly, I had a room full of apologists, defending God's reasoning for not giving them what they wanted or for "allowing" bad things to happen. When I asked them why they felt the need to defend God, the general consensus was that if there aren't reasons behind God not giving them what they want or reasons why bad things happen, then people would stop believing in God at all. People, including the students in that room, would be disillusioned. According to Webster's Dictionary, disillusionment means losing one's ideals, illusions, or false ideas about someone or something. At some point, we all experience this. Disillusionment occurs when expectations are not met by reality. The weight loss plan doesn't produce the results we expected. The job is not as fulfilling as it once was. Deeply held religious beliefs conflict with life experience. People we look up to turn out to be deeply flawed. And perhaps the example we are most familiar with these days: politicians fail to fulfill their promises to constituents. From relationships to religion, disillusionment is part of life. Sometimes we become disillusioned because our expectations aren't realistic. Sometimes people just don't act right.

Today's story from the Gospel of Luke is about disillusionment, specifically John the Baptist's disillusionment with Jesus. Before I read it, it will be helpful to recall what

the author wrote about John the Baptist in relationship to Jesus prior to the story we will read today.

All the way back in chapter 1, the author established Jesus' superiority to John.

41 When Elizabeth heard Mary's greeting, the child leaped in her womb. And Elizabeth was filled with the Holy Spirit 42 and exclaimed with a loud cry, "Blessed are you among women, and blessed is the fruit of your womb...44 ...as soon as I heard the sound of your greeting, the child in my womb leaped for joy.

"Even when they [were] fetuses in utero, John acknowledged Jesus' superiority through his mother Elizabeth's proclamation." (Levine and Witherington)

And then, in chapter 3, "At [Jesus'] baptism, the cousins again demonstrated their relative rank," (Levine and Witherington)

When baptizing his followers, John said "I baptize you with water, but one who is more powerful than I is coming; I am not worthy to untie the strap of his sandals. He will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and fire." At the end of that chapter, the author informs the reader that Herod had imprisoned John.¹

And last, in chapter 5, the Pharisees, talking to Jesus, compared John's disciples to Jesus' disciples, "John's disciples, like the disciples of the Pharisees, frequently fast and pray, but your disciples eat and drink." After that, John disappears from the narrative until here in chapter 7. This is Luke 7:18-30.

18 The disciples of John reported all these things to him. So John summoned two of his disciples 19 and sent them to the Lord to ask, "Are you the one who is to come, or are we to expect someone else?" 20 When the men had come to him, they said, "John the Baptist has sent us to you to ask, 'Are you the one who is to come, or are we to expect someone else?' " 21 Jesus had just then cured many people of diseases, afflictions, and evil spirits and had given sight to many who were blind. 22 And he answered them, "Go and tell John what you have seen and heard: the blind receive their sight; the lame walk; those with a skin disease are cleansed; the deaf hear; the dead are raised; the poor have good news brought to them. 23 And blessed is anyone who takes no offense at me."

24 When John's messengers had gone, Jesus began to speak to the crowds about John: "What did you go out into the wilderness to look at? A reed shaken by the wind? 25 What, then, did you go out to see? Someone dressed in soft robes? Look, those who put on fine clothing and live in luxury are in royal palaces. 26 What, then, did you go out to see? A prophet? Yes, I tell you, and more than a prophet. 27 This is the one about whom it is written,

'See, I am sending my messenger ahead of you,
who will prepare your way before you.'

¹ Levine, Amy-Jill and Ben Witherington III, *The Gospel of Luke*, (Cambridge University Press, New York, 2018), 204-5.

28 "I tell you, among those born of women no one is greater than John, yet the least in the kingdom of God is greater than he." 29 (And all the people who heard this, including the tax collectors, acknowledged the justice of God, having been baptized with John's baptism. 30 But the Pharisees and the experts in the law, not having been baptized by him, rejected God's purpose for themselves.)

This text begins by telling the reader that John's disciples "reported all these things to him." "...these things" were what they heard Jesus had been doing, and he had been busy. He taught, he healed, he performed miracles, and he gathered his first disciples. Jesus wasn't disappointing his followers who believed him when he told them what he had come to do:

- to bring good news to the poor
- to proclaim release to the captives
- to recover sight for the blind
- to set free those who are oppressed
- to proclaim the year of Jubilee

Throughout Luke's narrative, we've read about how Jesus did these things, right? John's reaction to this good news was to send two of his disciples to ask Jesus, "Are you really the one we have waited for? Or are we still waiting?"

Does it seem strange to you that John still had his own disciples? New Testament scholar, Amy-Jill Levine and her writing partner Ben Witherington III, consider this in a commentary on the Gospel of Luke. Levine writes, "...while Jesus was going throughout Galilee and Judea, teaching and healing, the imprisoned John retained his own disciples. Had John believed Jesus to be the messiah, why keep his own followers?" Witherington, though, doesn't see a problem, writing, "...just because a master teacher shows up doesn't mean other teachers should stop having students and send them off to the superior one." Levine responds and says she would agree with that if, in the Gospel of Luke, Jesus was "only a master teacher." Regardless of what these scholars believe or any scholar believes, the question is, "What did John actually believe about Jesus?" Both scholars agree that based on John's questions to Jesus, it is clear that he had doubts.² John was disillusioned. But why?

If I had to guess, it was that "proclaim release to the captives," thing. John was sitting in prison while the person he believed was the Messiah wasn't Messiah-ing as far as he was concerned. I don't blame John.

"...it is clear that John and many other Jews expected a Jewish Messiah who would redeem Israel from Roman oppression and usher in a Messianic Era---the kingdom of

² Levine, Amy-Jill and Ben Witherington III, *The Gospel of Luke*, (Cambridge University Press, New York, 2018), 205.

God on earth. What Jesus had been doing was miraculous, but it wasn't enough."³ It wasn't Messiah caliber stuff. To be clear, Jesus wasn't the only one in the ancient world who reportedly healed people, even his disciples were sent out to heal. But perhaps most importantly, the world all around still looked very much like the kingdom of Herod, not the kingdom of God Jesus had talked about, and the prophets had written about. To John's disciples' question, Jesus responded with a list of his accomplishments, none of which was news to them. And Jesus ended his response with what may have been a special message to John himself, "And blessed is anyone who takes no offense at me."

After John's disciples left, Jesus talked to the crowd about John, telling them that John was more than a prophet, he was the one sent to proclaim the Messiah's coming. He said, "I tell you, among those born of women no one is greater than John, yet the least in the kingdom of God is greater than he." In other words, John was important to Jesus personally and to the Jesus movement, but he was not more important than the most vulnerable among them; he was not more important than the widow, the people who were sick, and everyone to whom Jesus was giving hope.

Jesus seems to say that John's expectations weren't realistic or they weren't in alignment with what God was trying to do through him. Jesus came to change the world, not to rescue his cousin. Jesus clearly wasn't interested in exercising his executive power of "messianic pardon." We can't blame John though. We've all been there. His own disappointment kept him from seeing the big picture. John was being held captive physically by the Romans. And his spirit was being held captive by his own disappointment and self-pity. If Jesus was the Messiah, he was not the kind of messiah he had expected.

I'm not trying to say that John shouldn't have been disappointed. Who wouldn't be? Whether you think Jesus was the Messiah or not, following Jesus was not and is not insurance against disillusionment. Each year during Holy Week we immerse ourselves in the deep disappointment of Jesus' earliest followers when he was arrested, tortured, and ultimately killed. They had expected victory over Empire and they got grief over the loss of their friend. The early Christians thought Jesus would return to the earth to finish the job in their lifetime. They all died either disillusioned or still hoping. And how many different end-time dates have been espoused by believers who have misinterpreted Revelation? A LOT.

John wasn't there with Jesus. He didn't see the tears in the widow's eyes as she walked through the streets with her dead son. And he didn't see her face light up when her son came alive. John didn't get to see the man who was paralyzed walk. He didn't see the man who had been isolated from the community because he had leprosy

³ Dinkler, Michal Beth, "More Than a Prophet," *Working Preacher Commentary on Luke 7:18-35*. (<https://www.workingpreacher.org/commentaries/narrative-lectionary/more-than-a-prophet/commentary-on-luke-718-35>)

embraced by his neighbors. And he didn't see the abundant fish in the nets of Jesus' first disciples. The world for all of these people had changed. All John could see was what was right in front of him and what he saw was injustice and misery.

What about us? In some ways, we are a lot like John. As his followers, we've trusted in the ways of Jesus and the world is still a mess. The rhetoric of our own president who claims to be a Christian, sounds very much like someone more interested in building an Empire than creating the kin-dom of God followers of Jesus are supposed to work toward. We live in a world in which wealth wins and power prevails. If we are truth-telling, I am disillusioned too.

I still refuse to believe that the vision Jesus cast for the world is unrealistic though. I will not believe Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King's dream of beloved community will always be only a dream. I fully expect that all of creation will experience wholeness one day. But like John, I think we see what's in front of us, and what's in front of us right now is chaos, suffering, fear, dread, and anger. In some ways, I think the news is holding us captive, almost paralyzing us.

Undoubtedly, some of us are questioning what we believe and whether we can trust what we've been taught about the ways of God. Maybe the ways of peace, love, and justice aren't up to the challenges we are facing today. Maybe we want to shift our image of God and latch onto the God of "Onward Christian Soldiers" instead of the God of "Amazing Grace."

Maybe we would rather follow Rambo Jesus than the Prince of Peace, if only for a little while...until things straighten out.

Lucky for us, we don't get to decide who God is and how God is. I recognize it is hard to be faithful to the God of Liberation when it seems like we are trapped in a dumpster fire. It is hard to be faithful to the ways of Love when it feels like we and the people we care about are under attack. But we cannot let the present circumstances change who we are. And we cannot allow the Holy to be remade in the image of dictators, oppressors, homophobes, xenophobes, and misogynists. God is not bound by the power structures we understand. God cannot be neatly sketched in a box on a handout. God is so much more than a hand pulling a string, a jolly man in a red suit, a judge we can pay off to smite someone, or a king sitting on a throne. God is Love and Love can't be put in a box.

The lesson for us in John's disillusionment is first, even people who were very close to Jesus questioned who he was. So, our questions and our doubts are very much in keeping with our tradition. And second, while it was important to the author of the Gospel of Luke for his first audience to believe that Jesus was the Messiah, the evidence is overwhelming that it wasn't that important to Jesus. Whether Jesus was the Messiah or not, and I don't believe he was, I believe his ways were life-changing and life-saving. I think that's why his stories have survived and endured. The story of a

man who cared more about helping other people than what people thought of him is compelling even today.

Wherever you are on your spiritual journey: disillusioned, disenchanted, disengaged, disbelief, or full-on disciple...know that you are loved. Know that how we treat each other is more important than any doctrine or belief system. And be sure the Love that loves you, loves all of creation. So, dear ones, let us be about seeking it and making it known. Amen.