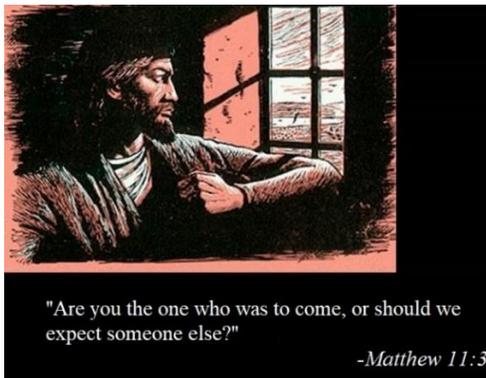


First Baptist Church of Fitchburg

1400 John Fitch Highway Fitchburg, MA 01420 Phone# 978-345-5622

June 28, 2020, 4th Sunday after Pentecost

Pastor: Rev. Meredith H. Christian



Welcome and Announcements:

Good morning Congregation. I pray that you have remained healthy, safe, and well provided for throughout this week. I was grateful to have had the opportunity to speak with some of you recently and look forward to seeing others of you later this morning at our 10am service.

You are also most welcome to share your concerns and celebrations with me or your deacons, who will forward them to myself directly if desired. My email is meredithhchristian@gmail.com and phone is (774) 276-0505.

Call to Worship:

Leader: Welcome this day to a time of rest.

People: We come, bearing burdens and cares.

Leader:: Place your lives in the loving hands of God

People: May God heal our spirits and strengthen us.

Leader:: Trust in God who is always with you.

All: Lord, this day we come to You in faith and trust for Your healing mercies, through Christ, Amen

Invocation:

Lord of love and mercy, we come to You this day, at the beginning of the summer season. This should be a time of relaxation and restoration, but our spirits still carry the burdens of the year. Please give to us Your healing love. Strengthen us. We offer our cares and our prayers to You in Jesus' Name. Amen.

Gloria Patri:

*Glory be to the Father, and to the Son and to the Holy Ghost
as it was in the beginning, is now, and ever shall be
world without end. Amen, Amen.*

Hymn: "Turn Your Eyes Upon Jesus" # (Click on link->) https://youtu.be/nO4uIyz_d90

First Reading: *Malachi 4:4-6*

"Remember the law of my servant Moses, the decrees and laws I gave him at Horeb for all Israel. "See, I will send the prophet Elijah to you before that great and dreadful day of the LORD comes. He will turn the hearts of the parents to their children, and the hearts of the children to their parents; or else I will come and strike the land with total destruction."

Celebrations and Concerns:

Prayers for Caitlin as she prepares for camp, for each of our church members who have been separated from us, their church family, and for those separated from family members worldwide.

Prayers for those in leadership during this time of civil unrest in this country, and in others around the world, and prayers for total healing from this Corona virus.

Silent Prayer: Let us take our silent petitions before the Lord.

Pastoral Prayer:

Lord of the seasons and of all life, we come to you this day with so many cares and concerns on our lives. We have planned for the summer months as times of relaxation and refreshment. We used to use this as a needed time to stop the frantic running around, to focus on your healing love, to let go of all those demands that weigh us down. Now, after so many sedentary weeks, we thank you for the opportunity to move about Your created world again, reminded that all things move and are sustained by You, and not ourselves.

Heal and restore us, O Lord. Help us be the church in times of leisure as well as in times of work and stress. As we have brought our cares to you in our prayers, let us bring our lives to your healing mercies. Strengthen and heal us, Lord. Get us gently ready for all the joyful opportunities that stretch before us. We ask these things, as we pray the prayer Your Son Jesus, taught us to pray;

Our Father, who art in heaven, hallowed be Thy name. Thy kingdom come, Thy will be done, on earth as it is in heaven. Give us this day our daily bread, and forgive us our debts, as we forgive our debtors. And lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from evil, for Thine is the kingdom, and the power and the glory forever. Amen.

Children's Message: (Offered by Debi Cross)

Church and Respect

Have you ever been to a King or Queen's palace? How would you act if you were invited there? Would you run around and talk loudly? Would you push your brother or sister and talk back to your parents? Would you ignore the Queen if she talked to you?

I'm sure you would be on your best behavior. You would listen to your parents, mind all your manners, say "please" and "thank-you", and be careful not to break anything.

One last question, why would you be on your best behavior at the Queen's palace? Is it because the Queen is important and she has lots of nice things, and you just know that you are supposed to be good in a fancy place like that?

This lesson is about how we should behave in God's house. Church is a special place where we learn more about God and worship him. God doesn't actually live there because God is everywhere but it's one of the special places we can go just to honor him without any distractions of the outside world.

Have you ever noticed that people dress up when they go to church. That's because people are trying to be respectful to God and to get ready to worship him. Have you ever wondered why people close their eyes and bow their heads when they pray? People do that so they can think about what they're praying to God and not looking and thinking about other things. We bow our heads because God is our King and he deserves respect like a King and so much more!

When you are respectful you listen to others and treat others the way you want to be treated. So how can you respect others at church? By treating church like God's house and listening to your teachers and parents, by walking instead of running and using your quiet voice instead of your loud voice.

Sometimes in church there are special times that we're allowed to run around (in the church gym or a during a special lesson in Sunday School) and that's okay if the teachers or parents give you permission but otherwise we need to learn and listen to what the leaders say.

Your teachers spend lots of time getting ready for a special Sunday School lesson just for you. They care a lot about each one of you and want you to learn important things that can help you. It makes them sad and disappointed if you don't listen and that makes God sad.

When we respect others we are also respecting God. So you may have guessed that we aren't just supposed to be good in church but everywhere! Respecting everyone we pass by. Since God is everywhere he can see how we treat others and if we are making them happy or sad.

There's a verse in the Bible (**Romans 12:10**) that says, love each other honestly and treat others better than you would treat yourself.

That means listening to your teachers at school, babysitters, parents, and grandparents. It also means respecting other people's things. So when someone has a toy or book that you want it's not right just to take it away from them. Ask them nicely and if they still don't want to share play with something else until they're finished. I know that can be tough but that's what God wants us to do.

Start to think about respect everywhere you go (the grocery store, other people's houses, even restaurants). Sometimes it's important to be on your very best behavior, but your parents understand you need play time and a time to be loud too.

So have lots of fun but just keep in mind that church is a special place to learn about God and we need to treat it just like a king's palace (because God is our king). Listen to your parents and teachers, they love you and want the best for you and that's how you can make God happy!

Blessing of the Tithes, Offerings and Gifts:

We each come to the Lord, where we find healing and rest in His presence. We are given love and peace by God and give freely of the abundance of the goodness He has bestowed upon us. Lord may you bless that which we give, our time, our talents, and our finances, that they may ease the burdens of others, for we ask this in Jesus' name. Amen.

(Tithes, offerings, and gifts are greatly appreciated as a means to continue to care for our facilities, the needs of each other, and our local and worldwide community. We thank you for your pledges at this time and ask that you [Please Pray over your gifts](#) and mail them to the church at [1400 John Fitch Hwy, Fitchburg MA 01420](#)).

Doxology:

*Praise God from whom all blessings flow
Praise Him all creatures here below
Praise Him above ye heavenly hosts
Praise Father Son and Holy Ghost.*

Sermon Text: *Matthew 11:2-15*

“When John, who was in prison, heard about the deeds of the Messiah, he sent his disciples to ask him, “Are you the one who is to come, or should we expect someone else?”

Jesus replied, “Go back and report to John what you hear and see: The blind receive sight, the lame walk, those who have leprosy are cleansed, the deaf hear, the dead are raised, and the good news is proclaimed to the poor. Blessed is anyone who does not stumble on account of me.”

As John's disciples were leaving, Jesus began to speak to the crowd about John: “What did you go out into the wilderness to see? A reed swayed by the wind? If not, what did you go out to see? A man dressed in fine clothes? No, those who wear fine clothes are in kings' palaces. Then what did you go out to see? A prophet? Yes, I tell you, and more than a prophet. This is the one about whom it is written:

*“I will send my messenger ahead of you,
who will prepare your way before you.”*

Truly I tell you, among those born of women there has not risen anyone greater than John the Baptist; yet whoever is least in the kingdom of heaven is greater than he. From the days of John the Baptist until now, the kingdom of heaven has been subjected to violence, and violent people have been raiding it. For all the Prophets and the Law prophesied until John. And if you are willing to accept it, he is the Elijah who was to come. Whoever has ears, let them hear.”

“John’s Bequest”

This week I have had an opportunity to think about what a person leaves behind. The Bible tells us that those who follow Christ are to, “flee from youthful lusts and pursue righteousness, faith, love and peace, with those who call on the Lord from a pure heart” (2 Timothy 2:22), as a mark of maturity. It is a calling that takes a lifetime to manifest, and none exemplified what it was like to leave all that they had inherited and been “entitled to” more than John the Baptist. He was born of the high priest Zechariah (Luke 1:12-17), and as such, given a birthright of station and status among his people, yet he chose to leave that all behind for the sake of God’s calling on his life. And here at the end of his days, while being imprisoned for his faith, his last act of submission was to give all that he had left to Jesus.

The first thing that jumps off this page on my Bible is that John the Baptist was in jail. He was the one claimed to be the lone, “voice of one calling in the wilderness, ‘Make straight the way for the Lord’” (Isaiah 40:3, Mark 1:3, John 1:23), and by this time, not too long after having baptized the Messiah, while calling people to repent from their sins, John was in jail, locked up for calling out the leadership in the region, Herod for his blatant act of taking his still living brother’s ex-wife for his own, which simply was not done.

Apparently even back then there was a bro-code, and Herod had crossed the line. He inherited a legacy of sin that went back generations. It may be helpful hear to point out that there were a total of six Herods mentioned in the Bible. Here is a short list for the sake of clarification.

The first Herod mentioned in the New Testament was **Herod the Great**. He was the Herod of the Christmas story, who tried to deceive the wise men into directing him to the prophesied Messiah, He ordered all the male infants of the Hebrews in Bethlehem murdered after the time of Jesus birth. This Herod had 4 sons, three taking the name Herod as their first name. He left his sons a legacy of treachery, mistrust, divorces and marriages for gain and profit, and was judged for his wickedness by suffering in death by worm infested gangrene.

His son, **Herod Archelaus** then took over rule in his father’s stead. He married his own brother Alexander’s wife Glaphyra, and was considered more ruthless than his father, having been himself responsible for the massacre of over 3000 Pharisees on the steps of the Holy Temple. Archelaus disposed 3 high priests for the sake of profit. Joseph took his wife Mary, and the Child and went to sojourn in Egypt to avoid this Herod and did not return to Israel until after Archelaus was deposed by Rome for his brutality toward the Jews and died in disgrace (Matthew 2:15).

That is when the second son of Herod, **Herod Antipas** took over the rule of the kingdom. This Herod held John in prison for having spoken out against his union with Herodotus, his brother Philip’s wife (Matthew 14:3-12). Antipas was considered “religious”, and careful not to push idolatry on the Jews people. He spent time John, asking questions of him. He eventually ordered John’s death after being tricked by that same wife who was the cause of the controversy.

Soon after, he suffered a great military loss and the destruction of his army in a battle against Aretas following John’s death due to the treasonous acts of yes, again Herodotus. Many considered Antipas’ defeat a judgement from God for having taken John’s life. He is also the one whom Jesus called “The Fox” (Luke 13:32). He once met with Jesus (Luke 23:12). His own nephew Agrippa I later accused him of treason, after which he was deposed and he and his wife were both exiled in disgrace for the rest of their lives.

Herod Philip, the first Herod’s third living son ruled area north and east of Galilee. He was the brother of Herod Agrippa, whose first wife was Herodias (Jos. Ant. XVIII:5:2, 581), who proved to be a most troublesome woman. Herod Philip also inherited the sins of his father and ended up marrying his niece, Salome, the daughter of Herodias, Herod Antipas’s wife-of-sin.

Herod Agrippa I was the grandson of Herod the Great by his second wife, Mariamne by way of their son Aristobulus. He was the Herod that had Antipas removed from power and later, after having taken power put Peter in prison (Acts 12:1-19), and was latter eaten by worms (Acts 12:20-23), just as his grandfather.

The last Herod, in the Bible, and of that family line was **Herod Agrippa II**, son of Agrippa I. He inherited the full measure of iniquity from his father, mother, and grandparents. Even so, he was given a chance at breaking with the curse of his family line when the Apostle Paul “almost persuaded” (*Acts 25-26*) him into faith at the trial of Paul in Caesarea.

Paul appeared before him that he might have a chance to turn from the curse of his lineage. Paul may have explained that God is, “merciful and gracious, slow to anger, and abounding in steadfast love and faithfulness, keeping steadfast love for thousands, forgiving iniquity and transgression and sin, but who will by no means clear the guilty, visiting the iniquity of the fathers on the children and the children’s children, to the third and the fourth generation.” (*Exodus 34:6-7*), but Agrippa II did not receive the truth when it was presented before him. In the end, Agrippa II was not fully persuaded to repent, and chose instead to fulfill a long line of sin and tyranny. He spent his later years living with his sister Berenice and died childless, ending the legacy of Herods.

A wise Proverb says that, “a good person leaves an inheritance for their children’s children, but a sinner’s wealth is stored up for the righteous.” (*Proverbs 13:22*), and that is just what happened. Following the death of the Herodian dynasty, Emperor Vespasian ruled the Roman Empire. It is said of Vespasian that he was not just a good ruler, he was, “excellent. After the excesses of Nero, who had destabilized the empire, and draining the treasury, Rome’s finances were in a parlous state. His ten years restored the financial health of the empire and put it on a good footing. He also successfully concluded the Jewish War and built the Colosseum. He was a practical, highly intelligent man” (*Scanlan*), who restored order to the region.

So, the Herod here in today’s account, who put John in prison for his honesty, was Herod Antipas. The point in walking around this Herodian family tree is to say that each man in that family inherited the curse of their father, and then added onto it as it passed from generation to generation, following the life, ministry, death and resurrection of Jesus, the Christ. John the Baptist, on the other hand, inherited a blessing from his parents, that even his prison bars would not prevent him from bequeathing to his cousin Jesus before his death.

To Inherit is different than to bequeath. To inherit is to receive something as an heir to a previous holder, as a legal means of continuing wealth and property, or even paying off the debts of the departed within that family line, but to bequeath something is to pass on something special, leaving it as a gift to someone else, typically, but not always a relative, or someone for whom the one leaving it has esteem or affection.

The prophet Elijah had bequeathed his mantle to Elisha before being taken up to heaven (*2 Kings 2:11-14*). John had fulfilled the role of Elijah, who had left a double portion to the one who followed him before he was taken up, in his lifetime. He had been faithful to call people to repentance, to do the will of God, to proclaim Jesus as the Lamb of God (*John 1:29*), and here it says that John, now locked up by one of the most ruthless of men was sending people to ask if Jesus was indeed the prophesied Savior, or should they look for someone else.

It seems a strange, and doubt filled question. One of the early Christian scholars named Origen, “sought to explain this by saying that John himself knew the truth but sent his disciples in order that they might know” (*Abington: Matt xi:1-6*, pg. 973), Jesus as the foretold Messiah for themselves, thereby offering to those who had remained faithful to him, a chance to know the living God. Perhaps, but it seems there is more here.

John sent his followers to seek out Jesus, bequeathing any vestiges of his ministry over to the One for whom it was designed. Once again, he was pointing to Jesus, who was the full portion of all God’s glory and mercy on heaven and earth. Jesus then proclaimed to those who were sent that they were to report back to John that people were being healed, the dead were being raised and the poor were given hope, and then made a comment that those who did not stumble or take offence on account of Him were blessed, which is, “perhaps not this special reference to John, but rather to his disciples and others who do not recognize Jesus’ messianic claim and who thereby stumble and fall off the way of righteousness which John had paved” (*Peake’s*, 783).

John’s question seems to also be an estimate of himself. John had much time to think while he was being held captive. He may have been looking back on his ministry, and perhaps wondering “did I make a difference? Was

I a good shepherd? Have I done my part?”, like so many people who come to the end of a chapter in their lives and look back over the sacrifices they have made for the sake of their work and wonder, “Was I a good boss?”

Did I treat my employees fairly? Have the children that I taught over the years been prepared for the road ahead. Will they remember me or the lessons that I tried to instill in them based on my own struggles and failures? After being a nurse for so many years, did I do all that I could to care for and preserve the lives of as many people as I could? And so the questions ramble in the mind of the one looking back with hope, and perhaps a bit of apprehension, in questioning whether or not, at the end of their time, had they done their full measure. I can relate to that.

It seems as though Jesus was addressing those type of questions and doubts when He responded in answer to the accusation of the prophet Ezekiel, who once charged the people, “The weak you have not strengthened, the sick you have not healed, the injured you have not bound up, the strayed you have not brought back, the lost you have not sought, and with force and harshness you have ruled them. So they were scattered, because there was no shepherd, and they became food for all the wild beasts. My sheep were scattered’ (*Ezekiel 34:4-5*).

If John was wondering what would become of his flock, Jesus made it clear that they were being left in the hands of the Good Shepherd when He, “replied, “Go back and report to John what you hear and see: The blind receive sight, the lame walk, those who have leprosy are cleansed, the deaf hear, the dead are raised, and the good news is proclaimed to the poor. Blessed is anyone who does not stumble on account of me.” (v. 4-5).

What there another reason for John to now question whether Christ was the promised Messiah? “Some suggest that John was hoping Christ would help release him from prison. However, Jesus had no plans to do this and told John not to let this decision offend him (v.6). At times, we expect God to answer a prayer a certain way and that does not happen. We must not become offended at what seems to be God’s silence or a different answer than expected, but must be at peace knowing He is fully in charge.” (*Stone, 22*). Jesus knew the state of his cousin. His mission was not prison reform. Jesus spoke of setting the captives free (*Luke 4:18*), from their bondage to sin, hell, and the grave, but in this life, in this broken world, people suffer unjustly. They just do.

I think that the prophet Grant Jeffrey had insight into the situation in these verses when he wrote that,

“John’s words here do not question Jesus’ role as Messiah, a fact that John clearly acknowledged. John was more concerned about Jesus’ methods. The OT (*Old Testament*) prophecies about the Messiah described a compassionate servant, a just judge, a powerful king, and a mighty warrior. The reports John heard while he languished in prison indicated that while Jesus was compassionate, He was not behaving like a warrior or a judge or a king. Jesus response to John linked His mission to the prophetic words of Isaiah given seven centuries earlier: The Messiah would open blind eyes, deaf ears and preach good tidings to the poor. (*Isaiah 35:5, 61:1*). In this way Jesus told John to trust His mission even if His methods were not completely comprehensible” (*Jeffrey, 1097*).

John could gage whether or not he had accurately discerned the times and done the will of God in calling people to repentance, not by the suffering he was now enduring for the sake of the truth, but by the actions of the One he had been pointing to as the Christ, for Jesus had indeed physically opened the eyes of the blind and physically healed their eyes for the first time in history, fulfilling the prophecies of the coming Messiah spoken of in *Psalms 146:8 and Isaiah 29:18, 42:7*.

Then, having given an answer to John’s questions about himself, Jesus then made an estimate of John and his life’s work to the crowd. Jesus recognized John as the prophet that would be a forerunner of the Kingdom foretold of 400 years earlier by Malachi the prophet (*Malachi 4:3*). John had done well in his role. Jesus made it known that the days of the Law and Prophets were completed, and the time of the Kingdom of Heaven had now begun. John had followed the Lord, no matter the consequences and now could leave the gift of his life and ministry at the feet of Jesus with a clear conscience.

The Baptist had not held back from calling sin wicked, no matter where it was found. He was persecuted for refusing to remain silent for the sake of personal safety or comfort. He embodied love while emboldened to speak the truth with that love. He was not proud or vain. He did not boast of himself as he sought to protect the

righteousness of his people by calling them to seek the truth of God's will for their lives, hopeful for them that they would preserve their eternal souls by repenting and receiving Jesus as their Savior, even before Jesus had fulfilled His role as the Lamb of God at the cross.

John left for future generations, for us and image of what it looks like to give all that we have in pursuit of the Kingdom of God. Did John find peace in having fulfilled his purpose? Was he able to move past his own ministry, having lived a life of repentance, served as a watchmen who was able to announce to the world that the King and His kingdom had come? Was he then able to bridge the gap between being the one who heralds and a person who having heard the good news of the coming of Christ, was able to receive the ministry Jesus offered and find peace in being a participant in that newly arrived kingdom? Heaven knows. I do hope he did, and the Bible seems to indicate that John was blessed for his submission to the will of God for his life.

Jesus was clear in answering that yes, John was the very person foretold as the coming Elijah. He arrived on the ministry seen wearing hair for cloths, a belt around his waist, and living off the desert (2 Kings 1:8, Matthew 3:4), not just because of his choice in clothing or lifestyle, but as one who went before leaders with strong words of correction in the name of the Lord. There message was the same, "Repent", and there sufferings were great in their personal pursuits of righteousness. Jesus said John was Elijah. The question has been resolved. Then Jesus made another comment. He said in verse 12 that, "the Kingdom of Heaven manifests itself violently (or powerfully) and keen and daring men take hold of it" (Peake's, 784).

When viewed this way, this sounds encouraging, like a charge to hold fast to the faith and truth of Jesus Christ, which we should, surely. Even so, only some had an ear to hear the truth of what Jesus was speaking as He also indicated with his comment that the, "Jews knew the Torah and the prophets, but now as the Kingdom message is preached and miracles are witnessed, aggressive believers would force their way into it." (Stone, 22).

Will you bequeath the ones you love the gift of the saving knowledge of Jesus, or will you choice to leave them an inheritance of an example of shame, guilt, and suffering? Those who follow after you will remember the things that you pointed them to in your life. Have you left them in the hands of a Good Shephard, who can steer them in the ways of righteousness, or have you left them to the wolves to fend for themselves? We all have an Elijah role to play in calling others to repent and recognize that the Kingdom of God is now at hand. It is time for us to embrace Kingdom standards and call on others to live by these higher principles. Only then will we find peace within our situation, peace with God, peace with others and peace within ourselves. May you bequeath peace unto the next generation, and their children, and there children, until Christ returns. Amen.

Hymn: "Open My Eyes That I May See" # (Click on link & Skip ad->) <https://youtu.be/jtFg12sKzpw>

Benediction:

May God, who has given you rest and peace, go with you as you leave this place. May you feel the healing love of God in your life, and may each of us bring the good news of God's love to all whom we meet. Go in peace.

May the Lord bless and keep you all.



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