

iPod Gospel

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Olentangy Christian Reformed Church
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Matthew 11:2-19

When John, in prison, heard what the Messiah had been doing, he sent a message to him through his disciples: “Are you the one who is coming, or are we waiting for someone else?” Jesus gave them this answer: “Go and tell John what you hear and see. The blind are regaining their sight, and the lame are walking; lepers are being cleansed, and the deaf are hearing, and the dead are being raised, and the poor are receiving good news. How fortunate is the one who doesn’t stumble because of me!”

When they left, Jesus began to talk to the crowds about John. “What did you go out into the wilderness to look at? A reed swaying in the wind? But what did you go out to see? A person wearing delicate clothing? Akh! People who wear delicate clothing are in royal houses. But what did you go out to see? A prophet? Yes, I say. Actually, someone much more than a prophet. This is the one about whom the Scriptures say, *See, I am sending my messenger before you come, who will prepare the way ahead of you.* I tell you the truth, among those born of women, no one has arisen who is greater than John the Baptist. Yet the least person in the kingdom of heaven is greater than he is.

“Ever since John the Baptist came, the kingdom of heaven is being forced, and forceful people are grabbing hold of it. Because all the prophets and the law prophesied until John, and if you are willing to accept it, he is Elijah, the one who is to come. Listen, if you have ears!

“What will I compare this generation to? It’s like children sitting in the marketplaces, calling out to the others: ‘We played the flute for you, and you didn’t dance; we sang a dirge, and you didn’t mourn.’ Because John came, not eating, not drinking, and they say, ‘He has a demon.’ The son of man came, eating and drinking, and they say, ‘Look, a glutton, a drunk, a friend of tax collectors and sinners!’ Yet wisdom will be proved right by what she does.”

Children’s Story

Do you know why kids play softball? Do you know why they play football? Or why they play soccer? I do. They “just do it” to have fun.

Now each of those games has its own set of rules. You play softball one way, football another way, and soccer still another way. And you have to play by the rules.

If you don’t play by the rules of softball, you’re not playing softball, you’re playing something else. And if you don’t play by the rules of soccer, you’re not playing soccer, you’re playing something else.

What do you suppose would happen, though, if someone made up a completely new game – let’s call it “calvinball” – a game with rules that change all the time, rules that change even in the middle of a game, a game that you can never play the same way twice?

What if someone made up a game like that? Would it be a bad thing? Maybe. Maybe not. What if everyone playing calvinball had fun? Wouldn’t that make calvinball a good game, even with its mixed-up rules?

I don’t think it really matters if a game has strict rules or if it has rules that twist and bend all over the place, as long as the game is fun. Because that is why kids play games, to have fun.

Sermon

Apple's ipod is a cultural phenomenon. Look carefully, and you'll see the white ear-buds everywhere. Imagine: a personalized music library! hundreds, thousands of songs at your fingertips! With the ipod, you choose what's in your music library. You choose what's on your playlist for today. You create a unique soundtrack for your one-of-a-kind life. Or you can let the device do the deciding, if you want. A random assortment of songs played in random order, a perfect counterpoint to the randomness of life. And if, at any time, your ear-buds sing an unwelcome melody, a simple click or tap neuters that inconvenience. And once again, you are lord of your musical life.

But what if you didn't get to choose the playlist? What if the music was from someone else's library? What if you couldn't turn the music off? What if the soundtrack you were hearing didn't fit your life?

In Matthew 11, Jesus connects the kingdom of God and music. "It's like children sitting in the marketplaces, calling out to the others: 'We played the flute for you, and you didn't dance; we sang a dirge, and you didn't mourn'" (vv.16b-17).

A group of children are playing. A few of those children are, obviously, in charge. They decide what games to play and when. This time the games are musical. But also this time the other children aren't cooperating. They won't dance to the happy tunes. They won't cry to the funeral music. And this isn't accidental.

It takes a certain amount of willpower, a certain amount of stubbornness, to resist some kinds of music. When the music starts at a wedding reception, people get up to dance. It helps if the music has a good beat and if it's loud enough. It also helps if there's an open bar. But that kind of music can be hard to resist. The same thing is true of a funeral dirge, believe it or not.

At the beginning of my father's funeral, the priest from the Armenian church entered the room carrying a small Sony cassette player. He placed it on the lectern and pushed a button. I wondered if he was going to record the funeral service for some reason. Then I heard music. It was scratchy-sounding, like someone had used the tape recorder to capture the sound of an old vinyl record. The music itself was mournful. Then the singing started. It was a woman singing a melancholy melody, a funeral dirge. I didn't understand what she was singing. It was in Armenian, and I only know a few words. Little Martha didn't understand the words either. She was not quite three years old. I was holding her in my arms. And when she heard that music and that voice and that melody, tears started rolling down her cheeks. She couldn't help but cry. A dirge, even of poor aesthetic quality, can be hard to resist.

But the children in Jesus' story know how to resist. They're stubborn. This is not what they want to play, and they go on strike. They'll have none of it!

Apparently Jesus and John the Baptist faced the same sort of reaction from people. It was a question of overall mood, I think, with both Jesus and John the Baptist.

"John came, not eating, not drinking" (v. 18a). John was an ascetic. He was all about self-denial. His food was anything but fancy. His clothes were rough. I'm sure his beard was untrimmed. And he never touched a drop of beer or wine. John also had stern points of view regarding right and wrong behavior. He put soldiers on notice. He put tax collectors in their place. He even scolded Herod. (That's how he wound up in prison!) But – and this is what put people off – John also leveled withering criticisms at upstanding members of the faith community. No one was safe from John's sharp attack. John was a funeral dirge. But some people refused to cry. Not only that, they also rejected his right to make any kind of music at all. "He has a demon," they said (v. 18b).

Jesus, on the other hand, was a wedding song. Jesus had a reputation, with some people anyway, as a party animal of sorts. Unlike John, Jesus came “eating and drinking” (v. 19a). Those are his own words. But it wasn’t just that. Jesus did like parties and apparently was fond of good food and wine. But he also spent time with people who knew how to party. “Tax collectors” had the money to throw good parties. “Sinners” knew how to enjoy themselves at parties. And there was Jesus, mixing it up with them.

This was too much for some folks. This was too much for the proper types who knew where to draw lines. John the Baptist was a prophet – even if he did go too far. But Jesus? He talked about the kingdom of God. And all around him kingdom-like things were happening – with the blind and the lame and the deaf and the poor and so on. But some people couldn’t help but stumble over Jesus himself. He was behaving, as far as they were concerned, in a very un-kingdom-like manner: “a glutton, a drunk, a friend of tax collectors and sinners!” (v. 19b). No, they were not going to get up and dance to any music that Jesus played.

In fact, if the soundtrack album of the kingdom of God was John the Baptist (“He has a demon!”) or Jesus (“A glutton, a drunk!”) – if that was the soundtrack album of the kingdom of God, they wouldn’t be buying it. Instead they would pop in their ear-bids and listen to their own playlist.

So, what do we do with the soundtrack of the kingdom of God? It’s one album, that soundtrack, one album with its own concepts and with its own song order. It can move from Barber’s “Adagio for Strings” to “The Chicken Dance.” It can move from blues to bluegrass, from the Hit Parade to hip-hop, from lite jazz to heavy metal. It contains both kinds of music, country and western. And I haven’t even mentioned the *world music* tracks.

What will we do with all this music? Will we sit rigid, with our fists clenched and our ears clenched, when the song is not our style, when the song doesn’t fit our mood? Will we refuse to tap a foot? Will we refuse to sing a harmony? Will we only embrace familiar music that makes no demands of us?

Of course, it’s not about music, is it? That’s a metaphor. At issue is the question of welcoming the kingdom of God no matter what it looks like. Welcoming the kingdom of God no matter what it smells like, no matter what it sounds like, no matter what it tastes like. It’s about welcoming the kingdom at a moment when it sounds harsh and narrow, then welcoming the same kingdom at another moment when it sounds too much like the “broad and easy way.”

I see this question playing out on the denominational level. The Christian Reformed Church as a denomination has, in recent years, been rejected by some of our stricter Reformed and Presbyterian relatives, especially over the role of women in the church. Some of us in the CRC rejoice over our banishment, seeing it as a badge of honor. But I wonder.

At the same time (and it seems like this never changes), the CRC continues to keep the Reformed church in the Netherlands, our mother church, at arm’s length. Some of us, many of us, fear having too close a tie with that church, a church that is soft on homosexuality, a church that is blind to the truth we see so clearly. So we keep that church at arm’s length. I wonder about that, too.

My hunch is that the kingdom of God is present, that the kingdom of God is going forth, both in those traditional Reformed and Presbyterian churches and in the so-called liberal church in the Netherlands, that we would do well to learn how to dance with the one and to cry with the other, and that we would do well not to insist on calling all the tunes ourselves.

On the local level – and this is the level that concerns new elders and deacons, as well as all the rest of us – on the local level, I wonder where and how the kingdom is present all around us. I wonder how God might be calling us to work for that kingdom. I wonder what actions God might dare us to take, what prayers God might dare us to say, what people God might dare us to join with.

And I wonder what new kingdom music God might dare us to sing. That's the thing with the soundtrack of the kingdom of God; we don't just listen to that music, we help to make that music!

Jesus concludes his remarks by saying that "wisdom will be proved right by what she does" (v. 19c). It wasn't about John's funeral music and Jesus' wedding music. It was about the kingdom, and whether the kingdom was being served. John served the kingdom by preparing the way, Elijah-like, for Jesus. He summoned people to be ready for God to come. And his message was hard.

If John served the kingdom by preparing the way, then Jesus served the kingdom by being the way, the way of light and seeing, the way of sound and hearing, the way of life and healing. And, as Jesus goes on to say in this chapter of the gospel, his yoke is easy and his burden is light (v. 30).

Jesus and John, as different as they were, were both proved right by their service to God's kingdom, of which Jesus is king! We, and others with us, will be proved right by our service of King Jesus. By bringing praise to the King. By bringing beauty to the world. By bringing justice to the poor. By turns crying and dancing and singing, according to the music God gives us ears to hear.