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The Worship of God • November 7, 2021



The Scripture
Matthew 11:11-19

Truly I tell you, among those born of women no one has arisen greater than John the Baptist; yet the least in the kingdom of heaven is greater than he. From the days of John the Baptist until now the kingdom of heaven has suffered violence, and the violent take it by force. For all the prophets and the law prophesied until John came; and if you are willing to accept it, he is Elijah who is to come. Let anyone with ears listen!

“But to what will I compare this generation? It is like children sitting in the marketplaces and calling to one another, ‘We played the flute for you, and you did not dance; we wailed, and you did not mourn.’ For John came neither eating nor drinking, and they say, ‘He has a demon’; the Son of Man came eating and drinking, and they say, ‘Look, a glutton and a drunkard, a friend of tax collectors and sinners!’ Yet wisdom is vindicated by her deeds.”

The Message
“Jesus, for Real: Imagine All the People”
Mark Briley

Imagine this was the first time you ever stepped foot in a church. What would you notice? What would you anticipate if you had zero expectations of an experience in a church like this? If this happens to be true of you this morning, that you have a completely blank slate when it comes to church, I'd love to hear after worship what this was like for you. I know I'll never get that chance. I've grown up in the church. I teethed

on the communion table. I have loved the Church through triumphs and setbacks. I've defended her and tried to be honest when she wasn't the best representative of Jesus to the world.

I think about the future a lot. What will the Church be like in five years? Ten years? Will my kids stick with it? Will they love it like I have? Will they have classic PK (*pastor's kid*) Rejection Syndrome? There are a few PKs in the house – it's a club you join not by choice but by default. Ask any PK, and you'll get a different answer about their experiences. Whatever your beef with the Church or with me, thank you for being kind to my family. That means so much to me.

I do wonder about the future; you know? Especially now, given the new world we've all stepped into without much say in the matter. Can you imagine the books that will be written about this time in our lives? I wrote in a past newsletter about a cartoon I had come across. The cartoon projected the future in this way: *"Ten years from now you'll put on a jacket and find a mask in the pocket. "Oh man, what a weird year that was," you'll chuckle to yourself. Then you'll pick up your machete and continue across the wasteland, keeping to the shadows to avoid the roving gangs of cannibal raiders."*

What?!? We're not really sure whether to laugh or cry. And we can get lost in the *"What ifs"* and the sorrows of bitterness that we rightfully earned in this COVID war. Or, we can imagine this new world and live into it with hope. We determine now what we carry with us and what we shed in order to live faithfully into the future. We definitely glean some new perspective when we face hard seasons.

Glenn Adsit served as a missionary in China for years after the Revolution. It was a bit of a hostile environment as you could imagine. Talk about PK Rejection Syndrome – his wife and kids were caught up in this struggle along with him. *"We're going where, Dad? To do what exactly?"* Eventually, Glenn was under house arrest by the government for his proclamation of faith. Out of the blue, however, some soldiers came to the door and said, *"You can return to America."* Glenn and his family started celebrating and the soldiers said, *"You can take 200 pounds with you."* Two hundred pounds? They'd been there for years now. How could they decide? They got out a scale and started weighing the important stuff. His wife brought over her favorite vase. Glenn grabbed his typewriter – it was new after all. Their two kids started lining up their belongings, too. What about my books? What about this and that? You can imagine the struggle – what would *you* take? So, they weighed stuff and debated and argued about what could go and what would have to stay. Finally, 200 pounds on the dot. The soldier said, *"Ready to go?" "Yes. Ready." "Did you weigh everything?" "Yep." "You*

weighed the kids?” “*Uh... no, we didn't.*” “*Weigh the kids.*” And in an instant, the typewriter, the vase, the books... all the stuff became trash. Trash.¹

Every once in a while, whether you call it blessing, circumstance, or tragedy, we have a moment of clarity about what really matters in our lives. Sometimes it's the joy of a new baby in the family. Time stops – you can't believe this gift has arrived that now has you seeing everything through a new lens.

Sometimes its chaos or trauma, accident, or illness. A relationship ends unexpectedly, and you're stunned into new perspective. What now? I sat in the company of a few friends last weekend and in the purity of such authentic company time stood still. My friend, as if scanning the room to take it all in says, “*This. This is what's missing from so many lives.*”

This pandemic? A slow burn, right? There were some instantaneous life-change moments but for the most part, we let the habitual realities of day-after-day living under new societal rules eat away at our 200 pounds of treasured valuables until we landed in this moment near pandemic's end when we're saying with our hearts, our words, our feet, “*This is what's important to me now.*”

The traumatic imposition of a pandemic during Broadway's visioning process was challenging *and yet* the silver lining was the chance to wonder, “*Who is Jesus, for real, in a time such as this, and who is the Church to be on the other side of this deal that is responsive to a new world, a society with new perspectives, new priorities, and with many tired of the same old work, same old religion, and same old rhetoric as it was in the before times?*”

It's why the final Action Team, Action Team #6, was charged with the work of helping our church be a constant, forward-looking church, responsive to the ways the Spirit is leading us in love to engage an ever-changing society with the Good News of Jesus Christ. As has long been the case, the message remains, but the method shifts. While this has always been true – just like when the organ was first introduced into worship services, and people were appalled that such a rousing instrument would be brought into such sacred space. Now we call that musical gift “*traditiona*” as if it's always been.

Worship is just one example, but this is true of all aspects of our ministry. And we don't know what we don't know, right? It's one thing for us to project onto those who are not part of our church what we think they need when it comes to engaging faith, and it's another thing all together for us to have ears to hear what those needs truly are. So today, we wrap this “*Jesus, for Real*” series, with a deep dive into our recently

¹ Fred Craddock, *Craddock Stories*. Mike Graves and Richard F. Ward, eds. [St. Louis: Chalice, 2001], 22-23.

approved Priority Action Plan with the charge of Action Team 6: “*Create an Imaginarium.*” Everyone say, “*Imaginarium.*”

That’s fun to say. But what is it? Simply stated, an imaginarium is a place devoted to the imagination. To follow Jesus when he walked the earth, having access to your imagination was required, or you wouldn’t make it more than a day with Jesus. His teaching was all wonder, a new way to think, feel, move, and be – all designed to imagine, to create a new world. And as those created in God’s image – image being the root word of imagination – as those created in God’s imagination with a piece of God’s imagination, our faithful charge is to live out of wonder, too.

In our focal text from Matthew today, we find Jesus in sort of a funk. His human side of his being is wiped out, exhausted from all the ministry pressing in on him from every side. People want his healing, but they also want to criticize him for the way he heals. Can’t win, right?

Beyond that, John the Baptizer – who Jesus called “*J-Cuz,*” his cousin as it were, is in prison and that ain’t good for John. If you know JtB, you know he’s an outdoorsy type – wide open spaces, living on what the wild provides. Small, confined spaces, handcuffed to a guard is not a good physical or mental space for John. And to be honest, it kind of sends John on a head trip. He’s wondering about his call, about his work, about putting himself out there for Jesus as he did. He’s trippin’ to the point that he sends his own insider group of disciples to Jesus to ask him, “*Hey, cuz, are you really the one we’ve been waiting for or are we still waitin’.*” Waiting is what you do most of the time in prison, you know?

And after a big exhale, Jesus says to the guys sent his way, “*Go back and tell John what’s going on. Tell him that people who couldn’t see, can now see. People who couldn’t walk, now walk. People who didn’t used to listen worth a darn, are now all ears. Those stuck in dead-end lives are now alive like never before and spreading that influence in wide-open spaces. Those who thought they were washed up are now washed clean and are finding their purpose. Go tell cuz that.*”

Jesus, tired for always having to defend his passion or explain his ways, then turns to the crowd and says, “*John is as good a prophet as you’ll encounter – no weekend camper, that guy. No silk pajamas – just raw and real. He paved the way for the kingdom like he was created to do. But I tell you, even the least in this new kingdom world we’re building surpasses such greatness. Are you picking up what I’m layin’ down? Do you have ears to hear?*”

That’s the line that always gets me, and Jesus says it more than a few times in our Scriptures. “*Do I have ears to hear?*” Again, in Jesus’ ministry overload... in a stress-

filled season, he's tired of beating around the bush. It's almost like when you say to your kids, *"Look into my eyes. Listen to my voice. Do you understand what I am saying to you?"*

This listening request is very intentional. As one theologian put it, *"No one drifts into the kingdom."* Jesus is looking for some infiltrators... so passionate... so inquisitive... that they can't help but storm the kingdom with curious imagination. Let me in! Let me see! Jesus is saying, *"I'm putting it all out there. I'm putting it on the line. I can lead you to the water, but I can't make you drink."* It's a tough time. People are refusing the truth in front of them... apathetic at worst, passive at best... and Jesus says, *"Can you hear me now?"* God's revelation is always meaningful... but it is powerless without our response to it.

It's why we've created these Action Teams in response to the vision. We want to be a responsive people, a responsive church. We'll blunder our way through to the fulfillment of God's vision for Broadway at this time in our lives together, and that's okay. Jesus knows this, too. Here's what he says next: *"John did his thing – living in the desert, fasting, eating weird stuff when he decided to eat, isolated himself from people, and you said of him, "John is a mad man to cut himself off from society and comforts like that." Then Jesus contrasts his cousin's path to his own saying, "I came to mix it up with all kinds of people, share in their sorrows and their joys, keeping company with the outsiders, and you say of me, "Jesus is a socialite, a party animal, a moral-less rule breaker." "What am I to say of this generation?" he goes on. "Quick to anger. Quick to dismiss. Quick to find the flaw instead of the Spirit flow. So here we go now, holla if ya hear me though, come, and feel me flow."*

Jesus is saying... *"Look, John's effort. My effort. We're trying to clear the mechanism – bring people nearer to God, for real."*

And so are we, friends. We want to open ourselves to each other. I want us to listen to each other... tell and receive each other's stories, one to another... and do so intentionally so that we can imagine the kingdom forward. This starts as small as one on one.

I have a minister friend who was very passionate about matters of justice... particularly homelessness in his particular city. He was a loud voice on the scene and more than willing to go to the capital and plead on the behalf of his neighbors without homes for provision of dignity and shelter. We were in a room with 40 other ministers learning about self-awareness and spiritual disciplines, and the guide that day looked at my friend in his passionate plea to eradicate homelessness and she said, *"You need to befriend one homeless person."* *"What?!"* my friend said. *"I'm trying to make massive change; policy change; city transformation."* And the guide says back, *"I know. Keep it*

up. But for your spiritual growth – you need to befriend one homeless person. Not to be used as an example. Not to put on a poster. For your own spirit to grow.”

And the look on my colleague’s face. Sometimes in our efforts to press, press, press; push, and push, and push some agenda, we forget to have ears to hear – a listening ear that isn’t closed off to the growth that comes from creating space to imagine with another. A Broadway Imaginarium will remind us of this regularly; keeping us on the forefront of the city as Jesus, for real, looks at us and says, “*Do you have ears to hear, Broadway?*”

I started one day this week with a beloved saint of our congregation. She’ll be 95 this week and, would you believe it, a unicorn is traveling in from St. Louis to give rides to her wide-eyed great-grandkids. I always knew Unicorns came from the Lou. She told me about her life and the amazement of this event and that moment and the intersection with that particular person that all together, created 95 years of life beyond her imagination. She said, “*I’ve had a marvelous life,*” and she pressed me to keep the church dreaming forward. I left for another meeting with a PIM – partner in ministry – and a young man who found his way through a floundering teenage season as a mentor said, “*You’ve got something in you to express that needs to get out of you.*”

It opened the world of slam poetry, of future soul, or art in its many forms, and it changed his life. He’s now invested, offering that same mentor’s heart to young people who need to hear what he did when he was in that space. I left there to meet another long Broadway beloved, who has been trying to get me to imagine with him about some things for a long while now. He said, “*Meet me at the CLC*” which is a large space for a one-on-one conversation but COVID and all, I’ve met in the weirdest places and the weirdest ways with people for months now. He was a walking parable. He came in without saying much of anything at first, but his hands were full of bound up equipment, and he got right to work telling me about God’s voice and authority and listening to voices of those who were thought dead but still very alive. As I’m soaking it in, he puts in my hand all that he’s been assembling during this talk – and he kept one in his own hand. And before I knew it, we were fly fishing in the gym down the hall from here. Just flying the line out in front of us again and again; “*Flip the wrist to noon and then to 10.*” Over and over.

He spoke of balance and listening, and he weaved stories of his past and hopes for the future. “*You dream it, and I’ll help,*” he said. And as fast as he unpacked it all, he packed it all back up, and as he left, he smiled and said, “*Now you’ve heard what I wanted to say.*” He Miyagi’d me. I didn’t know he was going to Miyagi me. (*Karate Kid* reference 😊).

After another meeting with some of our staff teammates and attempts to work on this sermon and schedule other meetings and respond to emails, I gathered with another of our Action Teams who spanned the gamut of age, race, background, and passion, and we imagined a growing church that looked like this beautifully-diverse group on a growing, kingdom scale.

By the time I finally got home, worked on some lingering homework with the kids, pet the dog, and grabbed a few mini-Snickers from the kids trick-or-treat stash – “*This is my confession, kids*” – I sat in the quiet of the dark and prayed, “*God – give me ears to hear. Give me a soul that dreams. Give me a heart that holds these stories entrusted to me today, and give me stamina to carry forward what you long for our church family.*”

We need each other in this effort. It’s been a hard run these past two years. I’m not sure how it all shakes out quite yet, and maybe your heart is still making some choices about the future – what to keep; what to let loose. It’s hard. I felt like the person who posted, “*I may look fine, but deep down I don’t remember any of my passwords.*” Do you feel me? We’re all working through the complexities of our lives on our way to the dream.

As we wrap this *Jesus, for Real* series, the real work actually presses on. I don’t want to be an advertisement for Jesus; I’d rather be proof. If you would, have ears to hear this final encouragement... words from Jaime Tworkowski, founder of *To Write Love on Her Arms*, a non-profit movement dedicated to presenting hope and finding help for people struggling with depression, addiction, and self-injury. He speaks of having ears to hear and a heart that imagines hope: “*In the process [of hearing and being with others in their stories], I am more and more aware of my own story. I’m facing my own questions and struggles, wrestling with my dreams. My hope for both of us, for you and me alike, is that we won’t settle; we won’t walk away from what we love because it’s too hard or because people are mean, or they don’t see what we see. Whether its songs or sales, whether you want to be a doctor or a teacher, in life and work alike, I hope you get to do thing things you love. It’s easy to be a critic, easy to tear things down, easy to be blind. It’s a braver thing to build, to create, to surprise [and to imagine].*”²

May it be so...

² “If You Feel Too Much.” Jamie Tworkowski. Random House Publishing. New York. 2015. Pg. 76.

Song of Focus
“Let God’s Vision Guide”
(Isaiah 43:19)

WORDS AND MUSIC BY ED VARNUM

Refrain:

Behold, my people, says the Lord your God;
look and listen, I am doing something new!
Don’t keep looking back, new things are ahead.
Do not miss all I’m about to do.

1. Every tribe, all peoples, and nations
united, rejoicing in faith, hope and love:
it’s more than a dream! God gives us this vision.
Let it guide us in every decision.

Refrain:

Behold, my people, says the Lord your God;
look and listen, I am doing something new!
Don’t keep looking back, new things are ahead.
Do not miss all I’m about to do.

2. Behold, O church, listen and see!
Imagine the church living this vision:
disciples of Jesus all led by God’s love.
Let this vision guide every decision.

Refrain:

Behold, my people, says the Lord your God;
look and listen, I am doing something new!
Don’t keep looking back, new things are ahead.
Do not miss all I’m about to do.

BROAD HEARTS BROAD MINDS BROAD REACH