

Lucia Lloyd's sermon
December 12, 2010
Matthew 11:2-11

Advent 3, Year A

Today seems like a good day for a sermon that's short and sweet.

I happen to love theological language, and even academic language a lot of the time. Still, I think C.S. Lewis is right on target when he says this: "Any fool can write learned language. The vernacular is the real test. If you can't turn your faith into it, then either you don't understand it or you don't believe it." That's the challenge. If you can't put your faith into the vernacular, it's time to think it through more, so that you can.

One of the things that appeals to me most about Jesus is that he does put faith into the vernacular. When people ask him complex theological questions, he answers them by talking about things as ordinary as grapes or unpaid debts or brothers who get into arguments. Sometimes Jesus is even more direct. In today's gospel reading, John the Baptist sends a message to Jesus: "Are you the one who is to come, or are we to wait for another?" This is not just idle curiosity on John's part. John the Baptist is sending this message from prison, he's risked his life based on his sense that the messiah is coming, and he wants to know if this Jesus of Nazareth is the One. So he asks, "Are you the one who is to come, or are we to wait for another?" Jesus could give a fancy theological explanation for his role in the cosmos at this point. Instead, he says, "Go and tell John what you hear and see: the blind receive their sight, the lame walk, the lepers are cleansed, the deaf hear, the dead are raised, and the poor have good news brought to them. And blessed is anyone who takes no offense at me." Well, there you go. Jesus himself is speaking about faith by using the vernacular. He is drawing our attention to what he does: he enables the lame to walk, the blind to see, the lepers to become clean, the deaf to hear, the dead to rise, and the poor to have good news.

Randy Pausch passes along this advice to teenage girls learning how to navigate relationships with males, and figure out which ones are the good ones and which ones to kick to the curb. He says, "Take what guys say with a grain of salt, and pay attention to what guys do." It's sound advice, not just for girls, but for all of us. "Take what people say with a grain of salt, and pay attention to what they do."

If we pay attention to what Jesus does, this is what we find: the blind receive their sight, the lame walk, the lepers are cleansed, the deaf hear, the dead are raised, and the poor have good news brought to them. And blessed is anyone who takes no offense at Jesus. We get a question about who Jesus is, and the answer is: look, God's at work in this guy doing holy and miraculous things. Don't take offense at that; follow it.

Over the weekend I went to two gatherings: one was the Christmas fundraiser for the library that was held at Burnt Chimneys, and the other was the ordination of six new priests in our diocese. People at these events asked me how I ended up in the priesthood and how I ended up at St. Stephen's. And I realized that part of the answer to both of those questions is, "I wanted to be where holy and miraculous things are happening, and I wanted to be with people who are doing holy and miraculous things." Or to put it in more vernacular language, I wanted to be where good and exciting things are happening, and I wanted to be with people who are doing good and exciting things. So here I am with you, and happy to be here.

I know some people put a lot of effort into determining which parts of life they are going to consider to be miracles, and which parts of life they are going to consider to be ordinary and natural. I do less and less of that kind of sorting. I figure if something good happens, it's a gift from God. So I say thank you to God. I don't try to differentiate between miraculous healing and regular healing. I figure if there is healing happening that's a gift from God. And our mothers taught us well: if you get a nice gift, say thank you. My approach to prayer is, "If you want something, ask and say please." Mom was right again. And if you've done a bad thing, say, "I'm sorry." And when you love people say, "I love you." It might actually be a fun exercise to see how many of the parts of our Sunday worship service fall into the four categories of saying to God: "Thank you," "please," "I'm sorry," or "I love you."

So if you don't feel particularly fluent in theological language, that's okay. What matters is the ability to recognize a good thing when you see it. Is there some healing happening? Are things coming to life? Is good news being preached? If so, we can respond to God: "Thank you. Please. I'm sorry. I love you." And God says, "You're welcome. You're cared for. You're forgiven. I love you too."