

Karen Hollis July 5, 2020 Matthew 11:16-19, 25-30

May the words of my mouth and the meditations of all our hearts be reflections of your word to us today, in Jesus' name we pray. Amen

We hear a lot of things about how to behave and make good choices these days, but what's the latest you've heard on the COVID-19 virus itself? How does it spread? What are the symptoms? How long does immunity last? Are you one who finds yourself keeping up with it? If you're like me, part of COVID fatigue is the inability to keep up with the research on the virus itself. Early on, it was very important to understand the virus so that we could keep ourselves safe. Now it feels a bit less important because regardless of what they find, I know what my job is: stay home, etc. Still, I have my own little constellation of COVID research that has installed itself in my brain. Regardless of whether it stands the test of time, it's in there.

We're most teachable, it seems when something is new and fresh. Kids would be the most concrete example – kids are like sponges for information about the world because everything is new to them. They want to know what you think and what that person knows; they want to have their own experiences and integrate what they're learning to make sense of the world around them. You see this in the kids you know, right?

So, why am I talking about this? Let's catch ourselves up in the story of Jesus' ministry here. When he is done giving the disciples instructions and send them on their way to preach good news, Jesus also goes on a preaching tour. John the Baptist hears about Jesus and sends his disciples to ask Jesus if he is the one – after Jesus talks with JB's disciples, Jesus addresses the crowd in front of him . . . which is where this morning's text begins.

Jesus says, while we're on the subject of John the Baptist, people have been really awful to both of us. John ate weird food and people wondered what got into him; I eat with people on the margins and they call me a rebellious son. [You know what Israelites are supposed to do with rebellious sons? Stone them to death, lest they lead Israel astray.] I may look rebellious to you, but I am deeply connected to God who is a different kind of Father . . . one who offers grounding and protection, freedom and life. This relationship is available to you, too. Come and follow me and I will teach you.

Jesus is speaking to a crowd of people, but he clarifies in his prayer to God that he is speaking with people who are teachable, referring to them as infants. Jesus literally thanks God that he has not been asked to share this message with the "wise and intelligent," those are the ones who want to stone him.

Rather, thanks be to God, Jesus is sent to those who are able to be like children, infants even – he even tells his disciples later in Matthew (ch 18): "Truly I tell you, unless you change and become like little children, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven." Because when we are like children, when we are free, curious, open, courageous enough to set aside what we thought we knew, Jesus promises a very special blessing: Come to me, he says – I'll give you rest! "Rest you need, and rest you shall have. My yoke is easy to wear, my load is easy to bear."^[1]

Another way of naming what he is offering is a way of breaking free from the power systems of oppression exert over us to keep us from evolving, as well as our personal beliefs that hold us back. It's easy to go around thinking we understand ourselves and the world, but Jesus is inviting people into a lifestyle of learning and growing. Someone said to me the other day, 'at my age, I'm learning something new about myself.' To which I responded, well you're still living, right? I hope you're still learning about yourself!

The 20th Century Jewish theologian Abraham Heschel also wrote on this topic. His language is a little sharper, but he makes Jesus' point . . . "Most people think only once in their lives, usually when they are at college.

After that, their minds are made up, and their decisions, utterances are endless repetition of views that have in the meantime become obsolete, outworn, unsound. This applies to politics, scholarship, the arts as well as social service. Views, just as leaves, are bound to wither because the world is in flux. But so many of us would rather be faithful to outworn views than to undergo the strain of re-

examination and revision. Indeed, intellectual senility sets in long before physical infirmity. A human being must be valued by how many times (they are) able to see the world from a new perspective.” (Abraham Heschel in *Moral Grandeur and Spiritual Audacity*) I mean . . . yeah, he’s right; it’s certainly true for me. I like how he says that, “the strain of re-examination and revision.” It’s a big piece of work, flexing our beliefs and understandings to make room for shifts.

One might ask, is now really the best time for that work? I would say COVID has already taken us there . . . it has gifted us with the ability to see our world and some of our beliefs with it from outside our normal view. Theologian Sally McFague calls this Wild Space, the ability to gain perspective on something by being just outside of it . . . like sports coaches – they’re not playing in the game, but from the vantage point of the sidelines, they can offer perspective to the players. COVID offers us a Wild Space, just askew from our normal lives, where new perspectives are available to us.

What perspective is this Wild Space offering you? What are you noticing? In this COVID time are there spaces where you can remember what it was like to be a child? Perhaps grandchildren are good teachers? Or a particular activity? When I peek into tide pools I see visions of my sister and me giggling at the feeling of tiny crabs running across our hands.

What if after spending time with that child of yours, they helped you find a belief that was no longer serving you, but to which you were still giving power in your life . . . what if that child helped you find the courage to offer the belief to Jesus in prayer? What if offering the belief gave us rest we’re longing for? May we all find the rest we are seeking . . . thanks be to God.

[1] NT Wright. *Matthew for Everyone*. p. 134.