



December 11, 2022

Third Sunday of Advent

"Are you the one who is to come, or should we look for another?"
Matthew 11:3



Dear Friends,

For several years there has been a Macy's holiday advertising campaign. It has a secular religious sentiment. It is contained in the word "believe." The ads are cleverly vague so you can fill in the blank on what it is that you believe—Macy's, shopping, Christmas, Hannukah, Kwanza, or the idea that possessions buy happiness.

We all have beliefs they are necessary, can be interesting, they are things that we prioritize, and we use them as guides. But *belief*, that is the act of holding on to a system of beliefs or ideas, is not the same thing as *faith*. We often casually interchange belief and faith. But they are different.

Mature faith is born when we come to doubt our beliefs. This is what happens to John the Baptist in our passage from the Gospel of Matthew. In the time of John and Jesus, there was no clear or uniform expectation about a "Messiah." There was not even a uniform idea of what it meant to be a Jew. Scholars tell us that in this time there were many "Judaisms" and "Messiahs." Everyone was vying to have their beliefs be dominant.

John the Baptist has his own strongly held beliefs. He believed that the coming Messiah would arrive in blazing wrath to consume evil doers. In order to prepare for the Day of the Lord, all must repent and strictly adhere to the Law without exception. The corrupt elites must reform and fulfill their covenant duties to the poor and disenfranchised. The Law will be enforced with unbending force. It was this attitude that got John imprisoned. John was condemning Herod for violating marriage laws, Herod took his brother's wife for his own.

John's imprisonment was a low point in his ministry. This was a point where he begins to question his tenaciously held beliefs. From his prison cell John hears his cousin Jesus has embarked on his own ministry. John had an intuition that Jesus may be the one for whom he had been waiting. But Jesus is not the blazing wrath of God that John had expected. So, John sends his disciples with his doubts and questions for Jesus.

At the time Jesus is working all kinds of healings. He seemed to embody a passage from the Prophet Isaiah—the blind see, the lame walk, lepers are cleansed, the deaf hear, the dead are raised, the poor have good news proclaimed to them. John believed in the wrath of God. But the Spirit at work in Jesus reveals NOT the wrath of God, BUT the mercy of God. Jesus knew how challenging this would be for John. Jesus tells John's disciples to tell John "And blessed is the one who is not tripped up by me." Jesus invites not belief in him, but faith in him.

Today belief has come to mean almost the opposite of faith. Belief means we insist that the truth is what we want it to be. A believer will only open their mind on the condition that it fits with their preconceived ideas and wishes. Isn't this the source of all the discord we experience today? Faith on the other hand is the opening of the mind to the truth whatever it may turn out to be. Faith has no preconceptions. Faith is an invitation to trust in "the other" as we plunge into the unknown. Belief clings on to the ego's needs, but faith lets go of any idea that we have all the answers. Faith comes from a place of humility. Like John in all our confusion and doubt we must reach beyond ourselves. In love we ask, "Are you the one?"

Peace,

Fr Ron

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