

The Reverend Jessica Ault
St. Dunstan's, Bethesda
Proper 9(A), July 5, 2026
Zechariah 9:9-12
Psalm 145:8-15
Matthew 11:16-19, 25-30

An Invitation

One of the great things about parenting or spending time with a young child is the invitation to look at the world through fresh eyes. My son loves to stop and observe things. He shares what he's learned - along with some interesting opinions he's starting to form - and has begun to ask a bunch of questions.

It's been interesting to watch his personality gel as he's grown. He's much like the metaphorical children in today's gospel reading saying, "We played the flute for you and you did not dance; we wailed and you did not mourn."

He always wants attention and recognition for what he's done. He wants us to join us in his journey growing up.

At his young age, he has already decided that his way of doing things and what he believes are correct. End of story.

My hope is that he'll grow out of that. I'm doing and will continue to do my best to help him learn that other ways are okay too.

The more time I spend with him and other toddlers, the more I think we don't truly grow out of too much.

Don't we all still want to be seen and heard to some degree? Don't we all want at least some recognition for what we do? I worry too many of us in this world have grown into adults who refuse to see other sides - who draw deep lines in the sand that we are unwilling to cross - no matter what information we are presented with.

That is precisely what Jesus is lamenting in the gospel story today.

There's a whole section in between what we heard in the gospel readings last week and this morning that I think offers important context for what we hear today. In the intervening verses, Jesus is approached by messengers from his cousin, John the Baptist. John was questioning whether Jesus truly was the Messiah. It seems Jesus was defying even his expectations.

But Jesus hearkens back to the prophet Isaiah and basically says to them, "I'm doing exactly what Isaiah said I'd do."

Even though John has questioned Jesus, Jesus offers grace. He praises John and affirms him to the people. He says of John, "If you are willing to accept it, he is Elijah who is to come."

After that, we get the beginning of the story in today's lectionary: Jesus comparing the people of his generation to children.

Jesus and John were very different people - they practiced their faith and spirituality in different ways. They defied expectations in different ways.

As an Asceticist, John the Baptist practiced strict self-discipline. As Jesus describes it, "For John came neither eating nor drinking and they say, 'He has a demon'".

He continues on by describing himself and the reception he's received, "The Son of Man came eating and drinking, and they say, 'Look, a glutton and a drunkard, a friend of tax collectors and sinners!'"

Is nothing good enough?

As Archdeacon Steve Seely wrote in his recent reflection on this text in the EDOW newsletter:

*"God was speaking through John the Baptist. God was speaking through Jesus. But neither fit the expectations people had for how God **should** show up, so they missed what was right in front of them.*

"John comes serious. Disciplined. Focused. Calling people to repentance and change.

"Jesus comes relational. Sitting at a table. Eating and drinking. Engaging people where they are.

"Different approaches. Same response.

"Dismissal.

"If I am honest, I catch myself doing this sometimes.

"We often expect God to show up in certain ways, through certain people, or in certain moments. And when God does not fit our expectations, we can miss what is right in front of us."

We know that the Pharisees were law-abiding religious folk who clutched their pearls at most things Jesus said and did because they felt threatened by him. They were rigid in their views and unwilling to open their hearts and minds to the new ideas Jesus was introducing.

Jesus defied their expectations of what a Messiah should be. After all, he healed on the sabbath and engaged with tax collectors and sinners.

Now, I admit to judging the Pharisees pretty harshly in the past as self-righteous high and mighty folks. But recently I started putting myself in the shoes of the Pharisees as I read scripture. This helps me to remember that they were just human. Like all of us. They were seeking answers and security. They found it in the religious laws. They found peace in the structure and stricture.

Perhaps it makes sense that Jesus goes on to thank God that God has revealed the truth NOT to the “wise and intelligent” Pharisees. Rather, he has revealed the truth to “infants” - those who joined Jesus as disciples - fishermen, a zealot, a tax collector, and even a thief. People who knew they had something to learn - that they didn’t have all the answers.

Isn’t that the beauty of childhood? And the greatest thing we can learn from children? To take in the world with fresh eyes and ears. To ask questions and to open ourselves up to learning? No matter how old we get and how much we study and learn, we never have all the answers. It’s one of the most frustrating things about being a grown up.

If we are able to accept that we don’t have all the answers, we open ourselves up to allowing Jesus to meet us where we are rather than striving to meet unrealistic expectations set upon us by ourselves and other humans.

After all, Jesus knows what it’s like to not meet people’s expectations. He knows what it’s like to be human.

Perhaps that’s why he offers grace to the Pharisees and others who put pressure on themselves to do everything right and to at least pretend to have all the answers.

He says, “Come to me, all you that are weary and are carrying heavy burdens, and I will give you rest. Take my yoke upon you, and learn from me; for I am gentle and humble in heart, and you will find rest for your souls. For my yoke is easy, and my burden is light.”

These words are incredibly comforting. I feel my shoulders relax when I read them.

In isolation, they are an invitation take all of our personal burdens to Jesus.

But in this context, Jesus is offering an invitation to abandon the burdens of artificial religion. He’s telling the people around him and us that we don’t have to doggedly follow rules that keep us from actually serving God’s people. Rather, we should engage in service as exemplified by Jesus. That’s what bearing his yoke means.

I think this is also an invitation to tend to the children in all of us. To remember what it was like to be a child. To stop and notice the beauties of God's creation – the flowers, the bugs, the trees, the dirt, and the animals. To stop and notice people around us and be curious about them and their stories.

It's an invitation to learn and re-learn the lessons we try to teach our children: to share, to apologize when we do wrong, to regulate our emotions, to accept mistakes – our own and those of others - to play fair, seek justice, and to ask questions and accept and admit when we don't know something.

It is an invitation to rethink our expectations – of God, of other people, and even of ourselves. To refocus on how we can use our gifts to follow in Jesus' footsteps.

In short, we are invited to love our neighbors as ourselves.

As we seek to learn and grow as followers of Jesus, we should seek to show compassion, kindness, love, faithfulness, and mercy to all and lift people up. To tend to the children in ourselves and others. To see and hear people. To meet them where they are. To pay attention and look for signs from God that may defy our expectations.

Amen.