

Proper 28 (33) 26th Sunday after Pentecost - Celebration / Consecration Sunday November 17, 2024

2 Kings 24:8–15; Psalm 79; Revelation 18:1–2, 4–8; Luke 7:11–23

“How to be a scandalous church”

1. This story is based on an actual event.
 - a. Years ago, a bishop in a sister denomination was visiting one of the churches in their region, one where the bishop had never been before.
 - b. Now, an official visit by a bishop is a very big deal, but this bishop was trying to come without announcing the visit ahead of time, wanting just to sneak in and worship with the faithful.
 - c. As it happens, the bishop was running very late, got lost going to the small town, and had to run into worship after it had already started.
 - d. The bishop snuck in a side door, got a bulletin but didn't look at it and sat in the very back pew.
 - e. The church was lively, but not too much.
 - f. Not quite standing-room-only, but it felt like there were the right number of people there, and they seemed happy to be there.
 - g. The choir was really something, and the preacher kept the bishop's attention with a moving sermon.
 - h. And it was at the moment of picking up the hymnal to sing after the sermon, that the bishop realized this wasn't one of their churches.
 - i. The bishop had gone into a congregation from another denomination but decided to stay through the end of worship. Maybe learn a thing or two.
2. In today's gospel lesson an underlying question being asked is whether we are where we're supposed to be
 - a. John the Baptizer (who had baptized Jesus, who was related to Jesus, who knew Jesus) for reasons I don't understand sent two of his own disciples to ask Jesus: hey are you the one we have been waiting for?
 - i. The second part of today's story shows up in a different way in the gospel of Matthew, because in that telling John is in jail and happens to hear what all Jesus was doing
 - ii. But whether in jail or not, it doesn't explain why he'd ask that question. Are you the one?
 - iii. There is a little detail that flies by unless you rewind. It's John's disciples who go and tell John the news about all the stuff Jesus was doing
 - iv. Our story focuses a lot on the many healing miracles Jesus was performing.
 - v. And I wonder: were John's disciples jealous? -- Why isn't our teacher doing cool stuff like that?
 - vi. And whether or not there was jealousy, why doesn't John just travel to see Jesus (make an appointment, dude, because Jesus is BUSY!) and ask the same question?
 - vii. What are supposed to be the metrics for being the Messiah? John wanted to know if Jesus was checking the right boxes.
 - b. The way Jesus deals with the messengers and his answer are unusual.

- i. First he seems to kind of ignore them, keeping on doing healing after healing, and then finally he answers them, though not directly.
 - ii. You just go and report what you see and hear: “the blind receive sight, the lame walk, those with diseased skin are made whole, the deaf hear, the dead are raised, the poor have good news brought to them.”
 - iii. Jesus doesn’t try to beef up his resume
 - 1. spotlight his net worth,
 - 2. or exaggerating the number of his supporters,
 - 3. or listing his influential and powerful friends.
 - iv. He names instead the intimate connection he has with the people who most passerby’s tried to ignore and walk past them as they begged for money on the city corners,
 - 1. people who were shushed as insignificant,
 - 2. people who were told they couldn’t live in the community because they didn’t have the right papers from the temple authorities saying they were ritually clean.
 - v. Tell John these are the people I’m in community with.
 - vi. And he adds: “And blessed is anyone who is not scandalized by me.”
 - c. It’s important to acknowledge that what Jesus was doing was indeed scandalous.
 - i. It was out of the norm.
 - ii. it’s not what nice people did.
 - iii. It’s not what the educated or wealthy or powerful did.
 - d. Go and tell John, Jesus says. Ask him to figure out if I meet his metrics.
 - e. I picture Jesus’s disciples witnessing this wide eyed, silent.
 - i. To many, especially those who had been healed, or welcomed from the margins, the decision to follow Jesus had felt right. Straight forward.
 - ii. I mean, look at his power! Look at his compassion!
 - iii. But I wonder if they thought to themselves: if he’s the ONE, are we THE ONES to follow? Do we have what it takes?
- 3. I’m no Public Relations genius, but banking on people not to be scandalized by your movement doesn’t seem like a winning strategy.
 - a. The bicentennial committee would have surely shot down my idea of making us t-shirts that read: The Scandalous Church!
 - b. And yet... I suggest there is something for us to think about there.
 - i. Consider what the Gospel is calling us to do that would seem positively scandalous
 - ii. Loving people who are marginalized because they have broken the law (even laws that are racist or unjust)
 - iii. Housing working people who are priced out of a decent place to live and chronically homeless people everyone else has given up on
 - iv. Investing in the self-sufficiency of people who will never be pictured in the town’s glossy brochures
 - v. Recognizing our transgender siblings as people and as worthy of medical care (I recently got some hate mail about that one just this week)

- c. This isn't about gimmicks or stunts. This is about a serious reading of the scriptures, in particular of the words of Jesus and his actions.
 - i. This is about not sugar coating Jesus and his actions.
 - ii. This is about not making it sound like he is the pet of the powerful.
 - d. Is he the one we've been waiting for?
 - e. Are we the right ones to try to follow?
 - 4. Look, this isn't a competition between the disciples of one or another.
 - a. This isn't an effort to make our church "better" than one down the road.
 - b. This is about being in the midst of the action Jesus would be leading today, consistent with what and how he taught.
 - c. And we can certainly recognize that there are different interpretations of the bible by different denominations and theological schools of thought.
 - d. I just want us to be so busy in doing Jesus work, that we end up spending less time explaining and more time doing.
 - e. Thoughtfully, faithfully, biblically, to be sure.
 - f. But doing the kinds of scandalous things Jesus was all about. Healing. Supporting. Praying. Embracing. Defending. Loving.
 - 5. On this our bicentennial year, we are asking ourselves as a church: are we the ones? And if so, where are we going with Jesus?
 - a. I hope you're investing the time to fill out the Congregational Assessment Tool, the CAT, for which you got a link via email.
 - b. Please complete it by next Sunday
 - c. That survey and upcoming conversations will help us shape plans for who we get to be as a church in the next few years,
 - i. leaning into our history and personality as a church,
 - ii. but always curious about new directions were God is leading.
 - 6. If Jesus is the one, are we the ones to follow? I hope you feel a renewal of the call to be THAT group together, a church whose work may scandalize some. But only if we do it right.