

***THE HOLY WAY OF LOVE***

a sermon based on Isaiah 35:1-10

Matthew 11:2-11

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Today's Gospel lesson offers a wonderful insight into the mind of Jesus at the time he was beginning his ministry. The story is plain enough: John the Baptist sends some of his followers to talk to Jesus, to ask him if he is "the one who is to come or should we look for another? Jesus does not say he is or he isn't. He simply tells them to look around at what they see going on and decide for themselves. The blind can see, people who haven't walked in years are practically dancing in the street, formerly untouchable lepers are able to hug their families once again, the deaf can hear, and the poor are hearing the Good News that God loves them. Then he adds, "Blessed is anyone who takes no offense in me."

Blessed is anyone who takes no offense in me. An interesting conclusion to his answer to John's disciples who asked if he were the one who is to come. "Blessed is anyone who takes no offense in me."

He didn't say, "Go and tell John that I am the one who is to come. He didn't say, "I am the messiah." He didn't say, "I am the Son of God." He simply said, "Blessed is anyone who takes no offense in me."

So, we wonder, what about Jesus would offend us? Healing people? Nope. Helping people lead fuller, richer lives? Not likely. Giving encouragement and hope to the poor. Absolutely not! In our day, they give people who help the poor the Nobel Peace Prize! So, what was the real answer that Jesus gave John?

Before we try to answer that, let's go back to the question of why John would send his followers to ask Jesus who he was? It had been just a few months ago that the two of them had met at the River Jordan. You will remember that John was Jesus' cousin. We don't know if they knew each other growing up but when Jesus came up to him that day, John had an epiphany. He was overwhelmed with emotion. "Look over there!" he said. "This is the one who is to take away the sin of the world." He told Jesus that he shouldn't be the one to baptize Jesus. He said it should be the other way around. But Jesus told him it was necessary that he be

baptized and John was the one to do it. So, why is it that, when he is in prison, he feels compelled to send his own disciples to ask Jesus, “Are you the one who is to come?” Wasn't he clear about that when he baptized him?

Remember, John was in prison when he sent his disciples to Jesus. He had been arrested by King Herod for demanding that Herod repent of his illicit relationship with his brother's wife. John knew that Herod had the power of life and death over him but he was not afraid of anybody. He feared only God. Herod, on the other hand, did not fear God but he went through the rituals that made him appear to be a faithful Jew. That's why he was outraged that John would expose his hypocrisy. I have a story.

Clarence Jordan, the founder of the world renowned KOINONIA is said to have come to faith through an experience with the hymn “*Love Lifted Me.*” He lived in a small Georgia town. He was deeply moved as a man a few rows ahead of him in church one Sunday sang “*Love Lifted Me.*” That night he couldn't sleep. He wanted faith like that man's. Then he heard an awful sound coming from the small jail down the street in the town. He went outside. The same man who had sung with vigor and depth was beating a prisoner in the jail. The singer was white; the prisoner was black. Jordan's life changed that day: he joined Isaiah and Jeremiah and the many prophets who said you just can't do one thing on Sunday and something else on Monday. When we speak of all things becoming new, we aren't talking about the appearance of all things becoming new. We're not talking about a better look for my house or image. We're talking about justice, truth, love, peace, and hope. We're talking about being fair, like Christians ought to be. These are the things that have meaning and value in the end. That's the point.

The Jordans were dismembered (a Baptist word) from their small Baptist Congregation for speaking out about the beating going on in the local jail. When the meeting happened to remove them, and they knew what the vote was going to be, Mrs. Jordan was ready. She seconded the motion. She told her “*former friends*” and.... betrayers.... that she didn't want to be a part of a church that only acted like a church but didn't live their faith out in their daily lives.

John the Baptist may have wanted reassurance that Jesus was who John hoped he would be. John could see the hand-writing on the wall. He probably sensed he wouldn't get out of prison alive. He wanted to know that Jesus was the anointed one of God who show the people the pathway that would lead them back to God.

Isaiah prophesied that when God came to establish His kingdom on earth, “A highway shall be there, and it shall be called **the Holy Way.**” The highway, the *Holy Way*, is not just professing one's faith in God, but living it out on a daily basis.

Faith is a verb. Faith is doing what you believe. Faith is living what you believe. Faith is being what you believe.

The *Holy Way* leads us to God. And that way is **LOVE**. Everything Jesus thought, said and did was out of his love for God and his love for his fellow human beings. Like John the Baptist, Jesus feared no one, neither the high priest nor Pontius Pilate, the representative of mighty Caesar in Judea. But Jesus did love all people, **including** the high priest and Pontius Pilate, as children of God. We know this from his teaching, “Love your enemy, for what good does it do to love those who love you and hate those who hate you. Even those who don’t believe in God do that. No, I tell you, love your enemy, do not hate him.”

Jesus knew that love is more powerful than all the power in the world. Love is more powerful than even **WE** are willing to believe. I have a story.

Like any good mother, when Karen found out that another baby was on the way, she did what she could to help her 3-year-old son, Michael, prepare for a new sibling.

They found out that the new baby was going to be a girl, and day after day, night after night, Michael sang to his sister in mommy’s tummy. He was building a bond of love with his little sister before he even met her.

The pregnancy progressed normally for Karen, an active member of the Panther Creek Community Church in Morristown, Tennessee. In time, the labor pains came. Soon it was every five minutes, every three, every minute. But serious complications arose during delivery and Karen was going through too many hours of labor. The longer she was in labor, the more the baby was in danger. They considered doing a C-section.

Finally, after a long struggle, Michael’s little sister was born. But she was in very serious condition. With a siren howling in the night, the ambulance rushed the infant to the neonatal intensive care unit at St. Mary’s Hospital in Knoxville, Tennessee.

The days inched by. The little girl got worse. The pediatrician had to tell the parents that there was very little hope of her survival and they should be prepared for the worst. Karen and her husband contacted a local cemetery about a burial plot. They had fixed up a special room in their house for their new baby but now they found themselves having to plan for a funeral. Meanwhile, Michael begged his parents to be allowed to see his baby sister. “I want to sing to her,” he kept saying.

Week two in intensive care and she showed no signs of rallying. Michael kept asking to sing to his sister, but children were absolutely not allowed in neonatal

intensive care. Karen decided that, rules or no rules, Michael was going to see his little sister while she was still alive. She dressed him in an oversized scrub suit and marched him into ICU.

He looked like a walking laundry basket, with the scrub suit legs rolled up and his sleeves hanging down to the floor. The head nurse recognized him as a child and yelled, "Get that kid out of here, now! **NO children** are allowed in ICU!" The mother tiger rose up in Karen and the usually mild-mannered lady glared steely-eyed right into the head nurse's face and said, "He is not leaving until he sings to his sister." Then she led Michael to his baby sister's bassinet. He gazed at the tiny infant losing her battle to live.

Then he began to sing. In the pure-hearted voice of a 3-year-old, Michael sang, "*You are my sunshine, my only sunshine, you make me happy when skies are gray.*"

Somehow, the baby seemed to respond. The pulse rate began to drop toward normal and stabilize. "Keep singing, Michael," encouraged Karen with tears in her eyes. He continued, "*You never know, dear, how much I love you. Please don't take my sunshine away.*"

The next day....the **very** next day.... the little girl was well enough to go.....home. Woman's Day Magazine called it, "the Miracle of a Brother's Song." The medical staff just called it an amazing phenomenon. Karen called it a miracle of God's love.

The highway of God, the *Holy Way* of God is the way of love. Jesus understood this better than anyone else. Love is much more powerful than we could possibly imagine.

And let the people say, "Amen."