

## “The Proof of the Pudding”

Sermon: Year A, Advent 3

Texts: Matthew 11:2–11, Isaiah 35:1–10, Psalm 146:5–10

Preached: December 15, 2019 at Immanuel Lutheran Church, Evanston, IL

O God, open the eyes of our blindness that we might see, unstop our deaf ears that we might hear. AMEN

I don't know about you, but there are some words and phrases that people misuse that just grate on my ears. It may be the former editor in me, but sometimes I want to say along with Inigo Montoya in *The Princess Bride*, “That word you just used. I do not think it means what you think it means.” Certain words and expressions are just bugaboos for me. One has to do with “proof” and “pudding.” Most people nowadays will say, “The proof is in the pudding.” But that's not the expression at all. The expression is, “The proof of the pudding is in the eating.” In other words, you can't really tell whether something is good or not until you experience it, until you taste it. You can form an opinion of someone or something, but the way you really know what they are is by directly experiencing what they do. “The proof of the pudding is in the eating.” Jesus formulates this a different way: “You shall know them by their fruit.”

In today's gospel reading, John the Baptizer, whom we saw last week out in the wilderness preaching and baptizing the crowds who came out to see him, has been thrown in prison for publicly criticizing the head of the government, King Herod, for the outrageous and scandalous things he was doing, including marrying his brother's wife. This will very soon end up costing John his head. As John waits there in a dark prison, he keeps getting reports of the amazing things his cousin Jesus is doing. John's disciples come to visit him in his cell, and he sends them back to Jesus to ask him a question: “Are you the One who is to come, or are we to wait for another?” John, like Moses, has been leading the people. They've gathered on the other side of the Jordan, just as the Children of Israel did, waiting to move into the Promised Land, but John realizes that he will not be crossing into this promised Kingdom of God with them. His ministry is coming to an end. Now it is time for a new leader, Joshua, to take over and lead them into this land flowing with milk and honey.

Is John doubting that Jesus (interesting sidelight, “Jesus/Yeshua” is the same name as “Joshua” in Hebrew) is the One who is to come and lead the people into this kingdom of wholeness and peace? Maybe so. Maybe the stress of being arrested and cast into prison has made John doubt himself, made him doubt his certainty about the coming Kingdom. Or maybe he's wanting his followers to hear it for themselves. Maybe by sending them to Jesus, he's wanting to point them toward Jesus, and not to himself. One way or the other, he sends them with that question to Jesus: “Are you the One who is to come, or are we to wait for another?”

Jesus' answer, like so many of Jesus' answers to questions, is not direct. Instead, he tells them to go back to John and to report to him what they have seen and heard Jesus doing: the blind receive their sight, the lame walk, the lepers are cleansed, the deaf hear, the dead are raised, and the poor have good news brought to them. In other words, the proof of the pudding is in the eating. If you want proof that the Kingdom of Heaven has drawn near, is breaking in, you have only to look at the things people are experiencing. That list, by the way, is picked straight from the Prophet Isaiah, who announces the signs of what this restored creation will be like. Isaiah has laid out the signs of what life will be like when the Messiah, the Anointed One, arrives. We've been hearing these things for weeks now: “Then the eyes of the blind shall be opened, and the ears of the deaf unstopped; then the lame shall leap like a deer, and the tongue of the speechless sing for joy.” So when Jesus recites this list of things that are going on because of his ministry, he's saying loud and clear to John, “Here's your proof that I'm the One who has been promised, because these things are happening before your eyes, in your hearing.” These are the things Jesus considers to be important. These are his metrics for measuring whether the Kingdom of Heaven is arriving among us. These are Jesus' “proofs of the pudding.”

In the church today, we have become obsessed with proving our relevance to the world, but we use a different metric, one that some have called “nickels and noses.” In other words, for many, counting how many members we have and how much money we are collecting each year has become the indicator of whether a congregation is “successful” or not, and indeed, of whether the church at large is “successful.” We fret that membership is down across the wider church. We worry that we won't be able to make our budgets. But it would seem that Jesus has a different metric for measuring “success.” When Jesus is asked for proof of his validity, he points not to how many followers he has, but instead he points to the outcomes. He points to how people's lives are being affected by the Good News he is both announcing and doing. He tells them, “Go tell John what you see.” The proof of the pudding is in the eating.

So, what if I were to say to you today, “Go tell your friends what you see going on here in this ministry we call Immanuel Lutheran Church”? What would you say? When you say to your friends, “Come and see...,” what is it that you will point to? We’re coming up on an Annual Congregational Meeting next month. We’ll report attendance figures for the year, how many people joined or left, how many were baptized, how many died. We’ll report how much money we have given to support the work of the ministry we have. But it seems to me that we’re reporting the wrong things. A pastor said to one of our bishops, “What if, instead of reporting attendance and giving (noses and nickels) we reported outcomes: hungry fed, naked clothed, homeless housed, strangers welcomed, sick cared for, prisoners visited?” Put another way, “What Good News are we announcing to the poor?” The proof of the pudding is in the eating.

There’s a group of leaders in this assembly who have been assigned the task of refining a statement that sums up who and what Immanuel is as a body of believers as we look toward what the mission is that God is calling us to. We have been asked to state what it is we value as an assembly, and how it is that we act in response to those values. As we’ve wrestled with those questions, we’ve laid out a lot of things that we value, and a number of things that are the concrete ways we act in keeping with those values. As we look at who we are and what we value, I think we need to keep looking at the metric Jesus set. That metric has nothing to do with buildings, or stained-glass windows, or numbers of members, or amounts of money. It has everything to do with the question Jesus asks: Are we doing things that bear the fruits of justice and righteousness and peace? Are we announcing Good News to the poor? Are the blind seeing, the deaf hearing Good News for them? Are we working to restore the goodness of Creation? Are we being faithful to the mission Jesus himself announced? Are we bearing good fruit? That is the measure set for us. And as we choose leaders to take us into the future God is calling us into, we need to ask ourselves, who are the people who have caught, or who can catch, this vision of the world as it shall be? Who has this understanding of Jesus’ values and can keep guiding us to live them out? The proof of the pudding is in the eating.

And you, dear sister or brother, are you bearing fruit? The Kingdom of Heaven is not a spectator sport. It’s not an intellectual or spiritual exercise to be done while sitting still. The Kingdom of Heaven is an active engagement with the world, an active living out of the things God values, this God who gives justice to those who are oppressed, who gives food to those who hunger, who sets the captive free, who opens the eyes of the blind, who lifts up those who are bowed down, who cares for the immigrant and the stranger, who sustains the orphan and the widow, who stands in the way of those who would do evil. What is the role that God is calling you to play in both announcing and doing Good News in the world, here in this place and in the spheres that you journey in in the course of your daily life? How will you live out the things God values?

Sometimes we stop and wonder, is this Kingdom of Heaven for real? Is God really working to restore and renew all that has been made? Those are the moments that we need to be pointed back to the signs, back to those things happening around us that are the indicators that the Kingdom of Heaven is breaking in. And that is the moment for us to recommit to bearing fruit in the world, and to becoming part of God’s remaking and mending of all that is broken. The proof of the reality of God’s values in your life will be in the ways in which you act to help bring those things to being in a world that so desperately needs to hear and see Good News. As others look at this assembly, and at your life, may they see the Kingdom of Heaven being realized in us. May they know by our loving actions that what we proclaim is real. The proof of the pudding, dear sisters and brothers, will be in the eating.

Pray with me. O God, you who lift up those who are bowed down and cast the mighty from their thrones, you who feed the hungry and send the rich away empty, give us hearts that burn with passion for your values. And give us the power of your Spirit that we might daily be transformed, so that we might bear good fruit, fruit that will last, the fruit of your Kingdom of justice and peace. AMEN