

“Is This It?”
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July 9, 2017

It starts with a question.

John, the man who before he baptized Jesus claimed, “I have need to be baptized by you,” the man who Jesus tells us is a prophet sent to proclaim the coming of the Messiah, the Savior of Israel, this John, imprisoned for his deeds of speaking truth to power, hears about “the works of Christ.”

Upon hearing about these “works,” John dispatches some of his disciples with one task, to ask Jesus a simultaneously simple and profound question:

“Are you the Expected One, or shall we look to someone else?”

Can you feel the weight of that question? This is not some question of clarification, “we heard from one source you healed 5 people on this day but we heard from another it was 7, can you give us a definite number?” Nor it is a question seeking theological precision, “you referenced a quote from the prophet Isaiah last week but the quote is actually from Nehemiah, what did you mean?”

No, John and his disciples are acutely aware of Jesus’ works. Their question here is an existential one, a question fraught with tension, a question that perhaps we know all too well.

“Is this it?”

“Is this the kingdom of God you keep saying is at hand?”

“Is this what I have spent my whole preparing the way for?”

“Is that what I have been imprisoned for?”

If anyone has a right to ask such a question, it is John. He and his disciples have devoted themselves to preparing the way for the Messiah, a Messiah who would bring about liberation from the Romans, freeing the Jewish people from their oppressors.

They did not hope in a merely abstract and spiritual kingdom of God. They longed for a physical, literal kingdom of God, a kingdom in which the Israelite people shed the shackles of bondage, finally escaping exile.

And can you blame them for asking Jesus this question? Remember, the first words of Jesus' ministry are, "Repent for the kingdom of heaven is at hand."

Can you imagine hearing that? Think of the pure joy that would bring to the Israelite people. They, the chosen people of God, will finally be free! Jesus is boldly proclaiming the end of the kingdom of Rome. Think of the hope they felt when they heard that, of the ways their imaginations raced, thinking about how things would be different, what it would mean to no longer be considered a weak and helpless people.

And then, after all of that, Jesus does not raise up an army and march upon the Romans. He does not amass great amounts of wealth and align himself with religious and political leaders.

Instead, he gives the sermon on the mount, he begins to call disciples, he heals the sick and the lame, casts out demons. And all of these things are great, don't get me wrong. But at some point, you begin to wonder, is this it? When are we going to move beyond ministry to the real stuff, the practical change? Because all of these things are great, but surely the inauguration of God's kingdom is going to come through something more than acts of ministry?

And perhaps John and his disciples are not alone in asking such a question. Perhaps we also wonder if this is it? In the midst of such suffering and pain in the world, in the midst of such a need for practical systemic change, do we also not sometimes wonder if what we do in this space, in our worship and in our community outreach is enough?

Is there not more we can do, more stances to take?

Is clothing the needy, sending food to the hungry, visiting the sick and elderly, worshipping in this space each week, going on retreats and service projects, it? Are we really making a difference? Amid declining church attendance across our country, are we really accomplishing anything or just delaying the inevitable?

Have we put our faith in the wrong messiah?

Do you feel the heaviness of that question, how the pregnant silence begins to sneak up on you and overwhelm you? I imagine that same silence hung in the air when Jesus was asked if He is the expected one or if they should look to someone else.

Maybe Jesus let the silence linger even longer than I did, truly feeling all the emotions bound up within that question.

And when he does finally break the silence he does not do so with a condemnation, he does not bemoan a lack of faith, as if bringing legitimate questions to God borne out of the trials and difficulties of our lives is a sin. No, he offers a simple answer.

“Go and report to John what you hear and see: the blind receive sight and the lame walk, the lepers are cleansed and the deaf hear, the dead are raised up, and the poor have the gospel preached to them.”

What kind of answer is this? Where is the game plan? The assurance that Jesus has a trick up his sleeve to achieve a political revolution and overthrow the Romans? Surely these acts of ministry cannot be it?

But what if they are?

What if the kingdom of heaven is being brought into existence through ministerial acts?

What if our expectations and preconceived notions for the kingdom of heaven are different from God's? Are we willing to lay those parts of ourselves down, no matter how tightly they may be woven into our personal identities?

We would not be the first to do so. Think, for a moment, about the disciples.

Matthew 10 tells us that Jesus summoned his 12 disciples and gave them authority over unclean spirits, to cast them out, and to heal every kind of disease and sickness. To go and preach, saying the kingdom of heaven is at hand. Healing the sick, raising the dead, cleansing lepers.

He sends them to perform acts of ministry.

Can you think of a more ragtag group of people? You've got a religious zealot who wants to completely overthrow the Romans through violence, a tax collector who

serves as a reminder of Roman imperial power, some rural fishermen, and even two brothers whose brash personalities earned them the title “sons of thunder.”

This is who Jesus chooses to perform his ministry and works? These are the people Jesus sends to announce and bring about the kingdom of heaven? This doesn't make any sense. This group, for all intents and purposes, should not be able to get along, much less succeed in the ministry to which Jesus calls them.

Yet somehow, they do. They find a way to overcome their differences by finding their identity in Christ, not in whatever ideology previously gave their life meaning. Are they always successful? Absolutely not. Do they struggle, face inner turmoil and conflicts, occasionally frustrating Jesus and each other? Of course they do.

Yet, in the face of untold adversity, even betrayal by one of their own, they somehow manage to stick together, continuing the work of Jesus by changing the world one ministerial act at a time.

The same could be said for us here at FBC. In the midst of our increasingly polarized world, where we are told to isolate ourselves among those who think, look, and act like us, in a world where it seems like there is so much negativity and we have lost the ability to speak to those who think differently than us, we choose to come here and worship and minister together in this place, realizing that our community is not founded on uniformity, but diversity, each of us and our perspectives and experiences blending together to form a beautiful mosaic of God's love.

Do we struggle? Definitely. Could we do better at certain things? Absolutely. But the beauty of FBC is not that we have everything figured out, but that in the midst of trials and struggles we choose to continue coming together, being willing to listen, to work together, to acknowledge that each of us are capable of performing ministerial acts, acts that are integral to the identity and ministry of FBC.

Perhaps this is what Jesus means in verses 25-27, when he says that “these things,” the power of ministerial acts, are hidden from the wise. For if you think about, it is foolish to follow Jesus. It does not make sense.

Why would we embrace the vulnerability and uncertainty that comes with following Jesus when we could seek a secure and comfortable existence? Why would we be willing, like the disciples before us, to sacrifice aspects of ourselves that we hold most dear, placing them at the feet of Christ?

I honestly don't know. Maybe it is this foolish, baffling work that Jesus refers to when he calls us to take up his yoke and learn from him. For in doing so, we continue the ministry which Jesus spoke of in his response to John's disciples.

We heal the blind, when we clothe those within our community, empowering them to see themselves as bearers of God's Image when no one else would.

We help the lame walk, when we provide toys to families during Toy Joy, removing the crippling stress and anxiety they feel when they worry they won't be able to provide for their children at Christmas.

We cleanse the lepers, when we reach out and embrace those who come to us for help, telling them that their bodies are not ugly and worthless, but beautiful bearers of God's glorious image.

We help the deaf here, when we gather together and encourage each other in bible studies, vespers services, and church-wide retreats, telling each other that we are seen and loved by God, drowning out the deafening noise of the voices who tell us we are not good enough, not pretty enough, not worthy of love.

We even help raise the dead, when we go on trips to Honduras, Alabama, Arkansas, New York, Charlotte, or Weaverville, entering spaces that have been declared dead and desolate, preaching and modeling a gospel of life and hope.

And maybe, by doing these things, we begin to get a picture of what Jesus means when he says, "Come to me all who are weary and heavy-laden, and I will give you rest."

For Jesus is not speaking of rest in the sense of a vacation, an escape from the troubles of those around us. No, Jesus is giving us rest from bondage to the forces of the world that seek to divide us. As Paul says, the things that divide us, Jew/Gentile, Male/Female, Slave/Free, and in our age we might add division based on race, gender, class, age, sexuality, or ability, they all lose their divisive power for we have been made one in Christ.

Jesus also frees us from captivity to the voices that whisper in our ears and tell us we are not good enough trying to trap us in cycles of guilt, shame, and insecurity, telling us that only once we change ourselves, the flawed parts of our bodies and personalities will we be worthy of love and acceptance.

Perhaps, at its most basic level, the rest that Jesus provides us with is the rest that comes with the affirmation that we are seen, that we are heard, that we matter to God, despite all of the ways in which we feel ignored and forgotten in this world.

And this is a revolutionary thing, for it says that this space, our place of worship and the acts of ministry that we perform here, is a place for all, for every single person to be heard and seen, affirmed and encouraged.

But it is also a radical invitation for us to become bearers of this revolutionary rest, to take Christ's yoke upon us and continue performing his works in our communities.

Let me be clear, this yoke is not something Christ forces upon us. It is something we choose, freely, both individually and communally, to bear. And this is certainly not easy. The journey and work to which the yoke of Christ calls us is daunting and exhausting. It will try and test us in ways we never imagined or expected.

There will be days when the risk and vulnerability and sacrifice seems too much, days, when like John and his disciples, we will cry out, "is this it? Is this what I placed my hope in? Are you really the expected one, the Messiah who will change the world?"

And as your cry echoes around you, while you are wondering if your ministerial work is really worth it, if it is making any difference, look around you, no seriously, look to your left and to your right, see the people who surround you, and take heart, because you do not walk alone.

We, all of us here at FBC, bear the yoke of Christ together, so keep going, knowing that you are a fellow traveler on a journey that started thousands of years ago with a man from Nazareth and twelve of his disciples. And know that each step you take, each act of ministry you perform, is building on a foundation that stretches across time, bringing the kingdom of heaven to those who need it most, one ministerial act at a time.