



## John the Baptist and Disappointment

**TEXT**  
*Matthew 11:2–6;*  
*26:36–46*

October 8, 2017 — Sermon by Rev. Tom Are, Jr.

Jesus was in the garden. He went there to pray. He was stressed. He was terrified. He went to the garden to tell God what was going on in his heart. There was more than a little distance between the heart of Jesus and the heart of God.

Jesus prays: *Let this cup pass by me. I do not want this. I do not want what you want, God. There's a bad thing coming and I don't want it.*

Perhaps the only thing worse than the physical pain his body would endure is the spiritual pain of being so disappointed in God. We don't talk about that often, but it's not uncommon to be disappointed, sometimes in ourselves; sometimes we are disappointed in others, and sometimes we are disappointed in God.

Jesus wasn't the only one to be disappointed.

John the Baptist was a prophet, but not just any prophet. He was the forerunner to the Messiah. John was a man with lots of answers. He stood tall in confusing times and pointed with hope to the new work of God. *There is one coming after me*, John said. *He is mightier than I. The winnowing fork is in his hand, and he will separate the wheat from the chaff. The good will be lifted*

*up, and the evil will be cast aside. When the mighty one comes, all that is wrong will be set to rights. God's promised day is coming.*

But within a year or so, in one of the most poignant moments of scripture, the strong, courageous prophet is broken. John, the man of answers, has questions. Jesus didn't look much like a mighty one. It looked for all the world that nothing in the world had changed. John is disappointed in Jesus. Jesus doesn't demonstrate the kind of power that John proclaimed. The chaff is not separated out; evil remains.

John was arrested. He was imprisoned for his faith in Jesus. He expected Jesus to come in power — the kind of power that would set an oppressive Herod on the run. But Herod reigns and John is in prison. The only thing worse than prison was the spiritual question, *Are you the one, or shall we wait for another? Are you the Messiah, or was I wrong about you all along?*

And Jesus says, *Go and tell John what you see. The eyes of the blind are opened. The lame walk. The lepers are cleansed. The poor hear good news.*

These are words John knew by heart. They were words from the prophets; signs of God's promised day. *The blind see. The*

*dead are raised. The poor hear good news.*

But no one would have blamed John if he asked, "Is that all?" Did he say any more? For you see, there was another part of that old prophecy. The prophet promised the Messiah will "set the prisoners free." Did Jesus mention the prisoners?<sup>1</sup>

No. Jesus doesn't say, *John, I am going to get you out. You hang tough, and I will break you out soon.*

Jesus says, *Tell John the eyes of the blind are opened, the dead are raised, but he's not going to get out of prison.* This is something John simply must endure. No one would blame John for being disappointed in Jesus.

If I understand the text, and if I understand our lives, in this world redemption is always partial. In this world the promised day of God comes only in glimpses. In this world evil is battled but never completely destroyed.

There are injustices that simply can't be made right. Some injuries can't be healed. Some relationships can't be mended. Some prisons can't be escaped. They just have to be endured. It's in these moments that the heart of faith cannot help but ask: *Are you the one, or shall we wait for another?*

Carol and I went to see the movie *Still Alice*. It's the story of Alice Howland. She is a renowned linguistics professor, but she begins to forget her words. It's annoying until it becomes worrisome. She visits a neurologist and learns that she has Alzheimer's disease. She's young, but it has its way with her. She knows a bad thing is coming and it's not going to change.

She describes her experience this way: "Who can take us seriously when we are so far from whom we once were? Our strange behavior and fumbled sentences change others' perception of us and our perception of ourselves. We become ridiculous, incapable, comic. But this is not who we are. This is our disease. I rail against myself for not being able to remember things. But I still have joy in my day. I am not suffering. I am struggling."

There's a bad thing coming and it's not going to change. So she struggles, she battles to endure.

And the faithful heart will ask, "Are you the one who is to come, or shall we wait for another? Are you still my God? Or was I wrong about you?"

Jesus said, *Tell them what you have seen and heard. The dead are raised. The poor have good news proclaimed to them.*

It's not the full promised day. But it is a glimpse. Redemption is partial, but it is real.

*Tell them what you have seen and heard*, he said.

What would you say about the reality of grace in this broken world? What would you say about the work of Christ in this broken

world? What would you say about the power of love?

My friend Matt told his father that he loved him.<sup>2</sup> He was leaving his father in inpatient psychiatric care. Matt's dad was consumed by clinical depression. They had taken his shoelaces and belt. Matt said that when the depression came, his charismatic father disappeared without leaving.

Matt told him he loved him because he did — and because he felt surely that if his dad remembered just how much he was loved, he wouldn't be sad anymore.

Matt was 16 at the time. As he grew older, he learned something about love. Love can't always fix depression because depression is not a result of a lack of love; it is a mix-up of chemicals in the brain. He said over time, he learned love couldn't fix his dad because love doesn't have the power to fix everything. He said what love *does* have is endurance.

Remember the teaching of the Apostle: "Love believes all things. Love hopes all things. Love endures all things."<sup>3</sup>

Matt said, "Even when brain chemistry runs us down, love stays on its feet. Even when we can't see the path before us, love gets through. Love plays rope-a-dope with the slings and arrows of creation, and someday — when sin and death run out of steam, when guilt and shame have no more worlds to conquer — on that day, love will still be standing."

God's love won't fix everything right away. But the love of the one who created you will still be standing on that final promised day.

*Are you the one? Or shall we wait for another?* Jesus said, *Tell them what you have seen and heard?* What would you say?

My friend Matt says:

*I have learned what it's like to be in prison.*

*I have learned what it's like to love deeply and still be helpless.*

*I have learned what it's like to hear Jesus say, I can't fix this. I can't bust you out of that prison ... but I will come in there with you, because that is where love will be found.*

John was beheaded by the powers of evil, and Jesus was strung up and crucified in the most agonizing way the Romans could imagine.

I wish it weren't so, but the truth is, redemption is always partial in this world. God's promised day comes, but it only comes in glimpses in this world. Evil is battled, but it is never fully destroyed in this world.

John asked a question that Jesus would later ask: *Are you the one? Does it have to be this way? Can't you fix this? Was I wrong about you all along?*

Jesus said, *Tell John what you have seen and heard. And they did. We were blind, but he opened our eyes. We were dead, but his love brought us to life. We were poor, and his love treated us like royalty.*

*Is that all?* John asked. *Did he mention the prisoners?*

Yes. Sometimes there is a bad thing coming, and it won't change. Sometimes love must endure.

It wasn't everything John wanted to hear. But evidently, it was enough. John never recanted.

Even from prison, John remained a prophet. He spoke out against injustice, and he pointed to the light.

I am grateful for John today. I am grateful for anyone who points to the light.

Sometimes — not all the time, thank goodness, but sometimes — we all bring the same hurt to this room. Sometimes we carry with us the same prayers. It's true today.

There were young people shot dead in Lawrence last weekend, but the world wouldn't notice because within hours, we were saying these words again: "the largest mass shooting in our history." That sounds sinful to me.

There is a lot that our faith says about this, and I can't begin to say it all today. So just this: We saw courage in the face of cowardly violence, and that was a little light in the darkness. That's what love looks like when it endures. And we have heard our leaders offer their thoughts and prayers, as they always do, and I am grateful for that. But I hope those with power pray not for the grieving, but I hope they pray for guidance and direction — because from those in power, for them to pray is simply not enough.

We have a debate about guns in our nation. Some say this is now and always a problem of an individual; it's a mental health issue. It's hard to argue with that. Who in their right mind would shoot and murder their neighbors?

Those who believe this is a mental health problem, I wonder what it would take to actually do something about that. Others

say, it's not so simple; there are communal forces at play. They say the access to guns needs not to be unfettered, but rather well-regulated. Those who believe that is the case, I wish they too would do something about that.

At least this: We should admit that none of us know as much as we claim to know about causes and responses. So rather than wrap ourselves in certainty, we should work together because too many people are dying.

In the meantime, we should be honest with ourselves about those who are being killed. The national debate about guns is said to be about freedom. If this is the case, then we should recognize that those who paid with their blood — not unlike the brave men and women in the armed services who sacrifice for our freedom — these men and women, young and old, children and grandparents, mothers and fathers, in Las Vegas, Orlando, Virginia Tech, Sandy Hook, San Bernardino ... I could go on ... have been sacrificed by our freedom.

I, like you, am disappointed. I'm disappointed in myself. I'm disappointed in others. I'm disappointed in God. I want love to fix it all. But sometimes love must endure.

John said, *Are you the one, or was I wrong about you all along?*

I have to confess I preach a bit more than I know today. I have had some disappointments in my life, no doubt, but nothing like John. Some of you have faced the dark night in ways as he has. What I know is, I have witnessed among you — and in many who

have gone before — the testimony from those who have lived in literal and metaphorical prison. And so many, like John, have had the courage to ask the question: *Are you still God? Or was I wrong?*

And then so many have found a strength that endures, a love that does not let go and they have remained prophetic, pointing to the light, holding fast to the good. They have continued to live toward God's promised day.

So if you find yourself in a place where the honest question of your heart is: "Are you the one, or have I been wrong about you?" listen to the voices who have dared ask the question before. For they long to tell you what they have seen and heard. They will tell you of the power of grace; they will tell you of a love that endures. It won't fix everything, but it will give you strength to endure.

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<sup>1</sup>Isaiah 35:5–6; 61:1

<sup>2</sup>This entire story is found in "What Love Can't Fix" by Matt Gaventa, *The Christian Century* (February 4, 2015), p. 10

<sup>3</sup>1 Corinthians 13:7

**This sermon was delivered at Village Presbyterian Church, 6641 Mission Road, Prairie Village, KS 66208.**

The sermon can be read, heard or seen on the church's website: <http://www.villagepres.org/current-sermon-sermon-archives.html>.