

Are We Spectators or Participants?

Matthew 11:16-19, 25-30

Preached by Rev. Phyllis A. Norman July 6, 2008

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This morning's Gospel reading actually begins at chapter 11 with John the Baptist in prison. Evidently John sent some of his own followers to Jesus to ask a specific question: "Are you the one we have been expecting, or are we still waiting?" Jesus very rarely ever answered a question directly and that day was no exception. Jesus told John's disciples: "Go back and tell John what is going on: the blind see, the lame walk, lepers are cleansed, the deaf hear, the dead are raised, the wretched of the earth learn that God is on their side. Is this what you were expecting? Then count yourselves most blessed."

In other words, you decide for yourselves. Jesus said to these people what we know to be true today: actions speak louder than words. In the NT Letter of James, the author says, "by my works I will show you my faith" (2:8). Those words were our stewardship theme in 2006. James tells us to live well, to work out our faith in good deeds and holy habits.

We assume John the Baptist's disciples left to go back to the prison with Jesus' words. Then Jesus turned to address the people he was teaching. They also wanted to know who Jesus was but only out of curiosity. They asked intellectual questions of Jesus, with no theory or practical application. Apparently the crowd was there to watch with no intention of participating—they were merely spectators.

Spectators! Carl coached Little League in Woodbury in 1978 and 1979 and then gave it up after that second season. Carl had a good team—they worked hard during practice, and played their best during the games. They weren't the best in the league but the boys loved the game. It was the parents: they would sit on the sidelines and the bleachers and tell Carl and the other coach what to do and how to do it. The parents would yell at the kids; they would yell at the coaches; and they would yell at the referees and the umpires! But when Carl would ask them to assist, they refused. Theirs was the easy seat, with no intention of coaching or refereeing—the cost of being involved was too high for them.

Two thousand years ago Jesus said, "How can I account for this generation? The people have been like spoiled children whining to their parents, 'We wanted to skip rope, and you were always too tired; we wanted to talk, but you were always too busy.'" Jesus looked at the crowd and reminded them they did not like John because of his austerity and they did not like Jesus because of his flamboyance. John and Jesus both rocked the boat; they both upset the status quo. Today we call them extremists.

But that is not the issue—the real issue is both John and Jesus demanded response. We cannot stand by and watch from the sidelines. We are either part of the kingdom of God or we are not. Being a Christian is not a spectator sport.

When I was in high school I played basketball. Today I love to watch baseball—I love to watch football even more. I have even managed to learn the rules over the years. I do

not know anything about soccer but if I wanted to I could learn that too. However, knowing the rules does not make me a player. Knowing the rules is not enough to make me a coach or a referee. If I want to play first I need to practice: I must pick up a bat and learn how to swing it, or take a football and learn how to kick and throw and catch it. If I want to be a player I need to be on the playing field practicing so I can be available when we play the game.

John Alexander wrote The Secular Squeeze. In it he reminds the reader that Jesus said, “by this all people will know you are my disciples: if you have love for one another” (p.138-149). Jesus did not say, “By this all people will know you are my disciples: if you have the right beliefs.” Jesus spoke of love and love recognizes deeds. Love is commitment to someone or some ones. Love gives to and for another person. Love enters into a relationship in which one or more parties are affected.

Love is not a set of rules. I just completed a class at Hartford Seminary: The Ethics and Theology of Marriage. The professor told us a story about a prenuptial agreement that was some 34 pages long—was that supposed to make the couple ‘s love last longer? Would they love each other better? No. Love can only be experienced. Love can only be recognized. There is no way to make a set of rules that encompasses all there is to love. Besides if we could come up with the rules, just knowing them does not make us loving people.

Love for one another and our love of God are no different. Love must be expressed in some way or it is not love. Jesus is our example of faithfulness to God lived in such a way we still recognize in Jesus the fullness of God. You see, Jesus was not a spectator in life. Jesus participated fully in both the joys and the sorrows of life. Jesus had fun at the wedding at Cana; he cried when his friend Lazarus died; he was angry when people gambled in the Temple; and he was overjoyed when the children gathered around him. Jesus’ passion was what gave life meaning—that same passion is what makes us Christians, that passion that Jesus invites us to take up and carry.

I know we experience that same passion. There is a woman at the Village at East Farms who is in Hospice care. I visited her Monday. She was very weak and had difficulty breathing and was lying very still. But when I asked her to tell me about England where she was born, her whole demeanor changed! Her eyes twinkled. She smiled. She became passionate about her story and for a little while life returned to her.

We have choices. We can sit on the sidelines but there will not be much substance to our lives. Or, we can get involved in life, “They will know we are Christians by our love.” Like James we can flush out the words from the prophet Micah who voiced God’s plan for living: “He has told you, O mortal, what is good; and what does the Lord require of you but to do justice, love kindness, and walk humbly with God” (Micah 6:8). Or said more plainly in Eugene Peterson’s translation: “God has already made it plain how to live, what to do, and what God is looking for in men and women. It’s quite simple: Do what is fair and just to your neighbor, be compassionate and loyal in your love, and don’t take yourself too seriously—take God seriously.”