

TRUE AND FALSE CONFIDENCE

Matthew 3: 1-11; Luke 7: 18-23; John 3: 22-30; Mark 10: 13-16

In a former congregation, I had a family who were very involved in the church. They were a family of four, with two young girls. The older of the two was clearly very gifted. But within a brief time I was there, I was let into the struggle the parents were having with her. She was in a gifted class in school but was beginning to fail. The girl claimed the material was boring, the teacher ignorant and that she was wasting her time in school. Her parents invested in all kinds of programs and activities to keep her stimulated, but to no avail. The girl not only gave her teachers a hard time, but her parents too. Everyone was stupid. She knew what she needed to know and she needed nothing from anyone. As the girl grew into adolescence and teen years, things only got worse. She developed major behavioural issues and had to go to a special school. Eventually her parents couldn't handle her at home and she went away to a group home as she was also getting violent with her younger sister. Very sad... I've lost track of this family now as they moved away, but I do hope and pray some peace and stability has been restored in that family and in this young woman so clearly tormented.

But one of the issues raised by this situation, especially as raised by her teachers, is this: something seems to have changed over the last generation in many of the children teachers teach. Even young children develop a know-it-all attitude that is not open to learn, that plays the expert or dismisses anything to be learned they don't know as insignificant or useless to them. Whatever they do learn is for utilitarian purposes – to get a job that makes a lot of money. There is little joy in learning for its own sake and there is less respect for what teachers have to offer. It's as if there is a false confidence out there that betrays a deeper ignorance and an insecurity about claiming that there's a lot we don't know and need to learn.

It was the great Socrates the philosopher who said: The wisest person is the one who knows how little they know. Or more accurately, Socrates claimed that the wisest person is the one who claims they know nothing. But knowing nothing means a person is open to learn from anyone and anything, and therefore has the best chance of gaining wisdom. The more we claim to know, the more we are closed to learning even in areas we think we know a lot about.

But do we have to claim to be ignorant if we feel confident? And does confidence have to be arrogance? Finally, is confidence opposed to humble and child-like doubt and questioning? To help us discover some insight on such questions, let us seek out some revelatory wisdom from scripture. And in this regard, let us reflect on the witness of John the Baptist as a wonderful example of one who was both super confident and super humble, open to learning, questioning and seeking for truth rather than claiming to be the expert.

Our first reading is from the gospel of Matthew. Here we are introduced to John and some amazing things are said about him, namely, that he is the one about whom the ancient prophecy of Isaiah was pointing. John has a huge following. People are responding to his message of repentance and they are being filled with hope. But his message is also controversial, because he is essentially declaring that those in power and those who are spiritual authorities are false and failed leaders of the people. He is denouncing them publicly and doing so with absolute confidence and little doubt or fear. Who does he think he is? Where does John get such confidence? Is he so sure of where he's leading the people? Or is this just a power grab by him, competing against the establishment to create his own movement?

“Don't listen to what the authorities are telling you!” he is essentially telling the crowds. “They are fakes! They are relying on their privilege as children of Abraham rather than being authentic humans, accepted before God on that basis rather than their privilege as the powerholders and supposed experts of God's laws.” Wow! Power to you John! You've got the attention of the authorities and you've got the ear of many people. But do you not have any self-doubts? What if you've got it all wrong? What if you get yourself in trouble or worse, killed?

Well, for all John's confidence in the face of the authorities and the experts of the law, and despite his confidence in proclaiming his message with authority to many people who respond, John is also super humble when it comes to One, he claims, “who is more powerful than I”, who is “coming after me; I am not worthy to carry his sandals.” Wow! And even though John is baptizing people with water, this One who is coming who is so much greater than John “will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and fire.” Clearly, then, even though John is super confident with his message and with his denouncing the authorities who claim the privilege of their aristocratic lineage and high education, he is super humble when it comes to this One whom we know will be Jesus.

OK, so John is super confident and super humble. But what is driving him? What is grounding him in his confidence and his humility? It is the search for truth. Who is the expert on truth? We may have our opinions, our insights, and even our well-thought out and much researched ideas on truth. But has any truth ever been discovered without much questioning, searching and even doubting of what one thinks they know? Here's where our second reading has John questioning his earlier assertions about Jesus. Where he was confident he is now uncertain. Jesus doesn't fit John's pre-conceptions. He thought he knew what Jesus would be about? But clearly, Jesus is taking another path. Does John simply reject Jesus because he does not fit John's ideas of truth or about the path the Messiah must take?

No! John is a sincere seeker of truth and humble enquirer. He wants to understand who Jesus is. He wants to give him the benefit of the doubt. Perhaps John knows less than he thinks he knows. The search for truth must not be hampered by our ideas and opinions as if winning the

argument and convincing those around us is the end goal. Truth must be pursued for its own sake even if the truth discovered means we have been ignorant and wrong. John is ready for anything. He will take no offence at Jesus breaking the mold of his preconceptions about the Messiah.

What Jesus is telling John is that rather than judgement and condemnation, he will come with compassion and love toward those who are downtrodden. He has come to heal the wounded and broken, and he offers love generously without waiting for repentance. Any change that comes in people must come as a response of love rather than judgement. Rather than demand repentance for the forgiveness of sins, Jesus proclaims forgiving and generous love freely to all, and those who humbly open their hearts to it will experience transformation through the Holy Spirit. Love rather than judgement creates the change Jesus is offering. And this is different than the message John was proclaiming. Jesus is proclaiming God's vision for the people differently than John and yet he respects John as an authentic seeker and prophet.

Wow! OK, but what about John? Does he take any offence at this contradictory approach Jesus is taking to him? Does he reject Jesus as a false messiah because he doesn't tick all of John's boxes of who and what the Messiah is supposed to be? No! absolutely not! John says this to his followers: "You yourselves are my witnesses that I said, 'I am not the Messiah, but have been sent ahead of him.' He who has the bride is the bridegroom (namely: Jesus). The friend of the bridegroom (being John), who stands and hears him, rejoices greatly at the bridegroom's voice. For this reason my joy has been fulfilled. He must increase, but I must decrease."

Isn't this incredible? John is basically saying that even though he doesn't fully understand what Jesus is about, he acknowledges that Jesus is the Messiah and John will rejoice in that. And even more. John will step out of the way rather than stand in the way. "He must increase, but I must decrease." John's purpose is to prepare the way, not stand in the spotlight. His purpose is to seek for the truth even though there are mysteries he has yet to comprehend. Truth must never be sacrificed to win an argument or gain a point. The more we claim to know, the less space there is in us to learn something, perhaps, we don't know.

And this brings us to our final reading, also from the gospel. And even though this reading does not mention John, it truly reflects John's attitude and approach when it comes to truth and learning, and that is: child-like trust and an openness to wonder and discovery. Even though children were precious in Jesus' world just as they are in ours today, children at that time were not taken seriously as having anything to contribute until they grew up. They had a lot to learn and they had to get out of the way when it came to important public events and conversations. But Jesus points to children as possessing the kind of natural qualities many adults are missing when it comes to their ability to absorb what Jesus is offering. "Truly I tell you," says Jesus, "whoever does not receive the kingdom of God as a child will never enter it." In other words, unless we adopt the child-like qualities of openness to something new, a trust in something

different, a capacity to listen with our heart and discern the authentic rather than becoming mesmerized by power, glory and what's popular... and unless we are open to change rather than attached to what we know and what has been, then Jesus will never get a genuine hearing.

Today, we have welcomed new members into our communion of faith through baptism and profession of faith. Even as those baptized are adults, we recognize that baptism is also something we do with children, recognizing that what we receive and the space we enter through baptism is far more important than just answering some questions. And more than this, the very questions we answer have to do with commitments rather than knowledge and information. Where our heart is and what we commit to are the foundations of all we will gain in our thinking and ongoing growth in believing. Faith, hope and love grow out of a child-like wonder and an openness to fresh discovery that will change us and keep changing us as we grow into our communion with this Jesus we seek to follow. And as we grow in our communion with him, we feel ourselves becoming ever more his heart, hands and feet in our engagement with our world in all its wondrous mysteries to be discovered and cherished.

John is a great example of one who is confident and alive to denouncing all that is false in his world. He knows what is true and he knows what is false. At the same time, he knows how little he knows and how much he has yet to discover and understand. He can open his heart, and when he discerns a source of genuine truth that he may learn from, he offers his trust.

And so, may we too, like John, be we children or adults, cultivate child-like wonder, openness and a discerning trust. May we never give in to that which is false and corrosive of compassion. May we stand up strong and clear-minded for justice when it comes to those most marginalized. But may we also discover the joy of learning what we don't know, and even from those we cannot imagine may have something to teach us. God is speaking to us. May we learn ever more deeply how to listen. Amen.