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Sisters and brothers in Christ, let us pray...May the words of my mouth and meditations of our hearts be acceptable in thy sight, O Lord, for you are our strength and you are most certainly our redeemer. AMEN.

Sisters and brothers in Christ, at first glance, the gospel reading can be rather difficult to understand.

Jesus says, "The present generation is like children calling to each other."

And then Jesus shares two strange sayings, "We played the flute for you, and you did not dance. We wailed, and you did not mourn."

To which one might respond facetiously, "Maybe they were out of town."

Humor aside, we wonder, "What does that mean?"

"We played the flute, and you did not dance. We wailed, and you did not mourn."

PAUSE

And then Jesus goes on in this passage to say that people are saying that John the Baptist is possessed by a demon, and that Jesus is a glutton and a drunkard.

But then Jesus replies to these comments, saying, "Yet wisdom is vindicated by her deeds."

Wisdom is vindicated by her deeds.

Again, what does that mean?

Yes, this gospel reading, at first glance is a difficult passage to understand.

The language is cryptic. The meaning, obscure and puzzling.

PAUSE

So, let's back up and unpack this text.

First, what we see Jesus doing here is critiquing the people of his day, the present day generation living around him.

“To what will I compare this generation?”

Jesus is critiquing the people of his day.

And Jesus’ critique is not good. His critique is not positive.

He says that the people, and no doubt who Jesus has particularly in mind here are the religious elite—the Pharisees, Sadducees, the Scribes.

Jesus says that all the religious elite are like children, children who complain that the other children are not playing by the rules.

Oh, boo hoo, right?

That is what Jesus is doing here—comparing the religious elite to spoiled children.

For that is what the two sayings here likely refer to—children’s games.

Apparently, it was common at that time for children to play act “weddings” and to play act “funerals”—acting out the activities of those events.

“We played the flute (as one might do at a wedding), and you did not dance.”

“We wailed (as one might do at a funeral), and you did not mourn.”

The children are complaining about those who won’t play by the rules.

And, this, THIS, I’m sorry to say, Jesus, is not the way to make friends and influence people.

Calling the religious elite “children.”

Saying the religious elite are like spoiled youngsters.

This does not earn one brownies points, to be sure.

And, we can understand when Jesus says things like this, that this is why then Jesus gets himself into trouble during his earthly ministry.

PAUSE

But what are the religious elite complaining about exactly?

Who are the people not playing by the rules?

Well, none other than John the Baptist and Jesus Christ.

John the Baptist is not play acting the role of prophet as he should.

And Jesus is not play acting the role of Messiah as he should.

PAUSE

The religious elite complained about John the Baptist, saying “he has a demon,” why? Because John lived such an austere lifestyle.

Scripture says, John was clothed with camel’s hair and wore a leather belt around his waist, and that he ate locusts and wild honey, and that he roamed out beyond civilization, out in the wilderness, proclaiming a message of repentance.

And the wilderness it was believed was where the demons dwelt, outside the boundaries of civilization, so one can easily make the connection that John is possessed.

Yes, John the Baptist was probably not the kind of guy you invited over for dinner, if you catch my drift.

He probably smelled bad, looked disheveled, and was spouting off peculiar words.

And so, because of John’s strange behavior, it was rumored that he was possessed by some demon.

PAUSE

And the religious elite complained about Jesus, saying “he is a glutton and a drunkard,” why?

Because he (Jesus) was a friend to tax collectors and sinners.

Jesus was mingling, even so much as sharing meals, with people who were less than desirable.

And so, in the eyes of the religious elite, John the Baptist and Jesus are anything but holy people...

...because John the Baptist and Jesus are not playing by the rules, that is, they are not what was expected of a prophet nor of the Messiah.

PAUSE

And yet, Jesus says, “Wisdom is vindicated by her deeds.”

Another sort of cryptic message, which means that the proof of who one is is seen in the deeds of that individual.

The proof of who one is is evident in the actions of that person.

So in other words, the religious elite can say John the Baptist is possessed.

But, it doesn't change the fact that John the Baptist served as the prophet who proclaimed the coming of the Lord.

And the religious elite can say that Jesus is a glutton and a drunkard.

But, it doesn't change the fact that Jesus healed people, performed miracles, proclaimed the good news, and died and rose again.

Say what you will about John the Baptist and Jesus, but their deeds speak for themselves.

This is what Jesus is getting at, when he says, "Wisdom is vindicated, or justified, or proved right, by her deeds."

PAUSE

So with all this said, with this explanation of the gospel, the question begs to be asked, who are the people of our day who are not playing by the rules?

Who would we classify as persons who not are playing acting as they should?

For me, this question speaks to another question that I continue to struggle with, but which is very much along the same line of thought.

The question is this, "Who are the prophetic voices of today?"

Who are those persons who are bucking the norm, like the John the Baptists and the Jesuses of yesteryear?

Who are those persons, who even though they buck the norm, and don't play by the rules...who are those persons whose deeds, even so, vindicate them in the end?

Again, in short, who are the prophetic voices of today?

We can think of the likes of Rosa Parks, who didn't play by the rules, when she refused to give up her seat on a bus, that sparked the Civil Rights movement of the 1950s.

And on the heels of that incident, we can think of the prophetic voice that was Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. whose voice of "wisdom" continues to be "vindicated by her deeds," as African Americans continue to break color barriers in our country.

PAUSE

And we can think of the likes of a Jewish man named Primo Levi, who survived a year in the concentrate camp at Auschwitz.

Primo Levi is a giant in my estimation.

He didn't play by the rules either, because like most people in a death camp at that time, he was supposed to die.

He didn't, and he went on to write about his experience.

His survival is proof enough of how "wisdom is vindicated by her deeds," because he and others showed the resilience of human nature in the face of horrific evil.

But, furthermore he became a prophetic voice with his writings.

And he detailed an account of his experience at Auschwitz with a book with the same title.

But what is most profound is a quote of his, explaining his opinion of why the holocaust happened.

It is a quote of incredible importance still today, a word of prophecy really, whenever we witness one group of people trying to destroy another group of people.

He wrote in the preface of his book Auschwitz: "Many people—many nations—can find themselves holding, more or less wittingly, 'every stranger is an enemy.' For the most part this conviction lies deep down like some latent infection; it betrays itself only in random, disconnected acts, and does not lie at the base of a system of reason. But when this does come about, when the unspoken dogma becomes the major premise in a syllogism, then at the end of the chain, there is the Lager."

This is why the holocaust happened.

In short, it is an “us versus them” scenario taken to the extreme.

And Primo Levi’s insight is so significant, because “us versus them” scenarios continue to present themselves over and over and over again, and the holocaust and Primo Levi reminds us of what can happen if we let the “stranger is the enemy” mentality win out.

So yes, there have been incredibly powerful prophetic voices in history.

There have been persons who have not played by the rules.

And thank God, praise to be to God, there have been such persons.

But who are those prophetic voices today?

Who are those voices around which people rally, like they once did around say Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr.?

To some extent, President Zelensky is a prophet voice today.

The Ukrainian people did not play by the rules.

They were supposed to roll over and submit when Russia began its incursion.

The country was supposed to fall within days, if not hours, when Russia tried to take the airport in the capitol of Kyiv those many, many months ago.

But the Ukrainians held their own, and still do.

And Zelensky has been a powerful voice, a prophetic voice of defiance in the face of unprovoked aggression.

And Zelensky has rallied his country and has rallied many-a-nation around its cause.

And so, yes, Zelensky may be the closest thing we have to a true prophetic voice in our present day.

PAUSE

And so, again, today in our gospel reading we give thanks for those like John the Baptist and Jesus, and others throughout history, who have not played by the rules, who have not conceded to the expectations around them.

And, we...WE must consider as well, where in our own lives we are called to buck the norm, to go against the rules, for the sake of wisdom, for the sake of justice, for the sake of truth.

For we follow, as Christians the example of Christ, who himself most powerfully bucked the norm, and who most powerfully did not play by the rules, when he did not stay dead on the cross.

But instead, Jesus rose again, proving that his prediction whereby he would die and on the third day be raised, was not just wishful thinking.

On that first Easter morning long ago, wisdom was vindicated by her deeds.

And Jesus' prophetic voice rings out loud and clear till this day, with the simple prophetic message, which is, "Love wins."

Not death, not hatred, not cruelty, not bigotry, not evil, not aggression...

No, love wins. God so LOVED the world that he gave his Son to die, that we might have life. Love wins, that is the prophetic message.

And so let us love, even if it means we buck the norm...

Let us love, even if it means we are not playing by the rules someone else has set down...

Let us love, because anyone who speaks and acts in love is themselves a prophetic voice.

Thanks be to God. AMEN.