

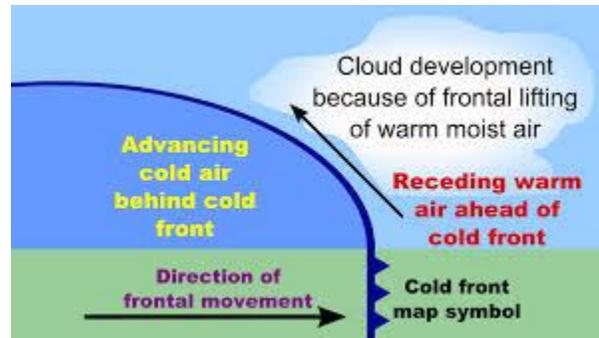
“Excuses, Excuses”

Zechariah 9:9-12 & Matthew 11:16-19, 25-30

Rev. James Ramsey ~ July 6, 2014

“Excuses, Excuses.” We all have them. Nobody has more excuses than fishermen. They have to be prepared when they come back to the dock or go back to work on Monday and field that dreaded question, “Did you catch any fish?”

The answer is so often “NO” that we fishers have to follow that up with some explanation as to why...in other words, an excuse – there was a cold front, the water temperature isn't right, the barometer is stuck, there was too much fishing pressure, there was a late spring, the thermocline has not set up, the mayflies were hatching, the forage base has crashed.



Fortunately Ben and I didn't need very many excuses last week. We had a great trip to Canada! We caught lots of bass and some big ones, too.

We were grateful to catch a good number of muskies, as well.

Yet we still went hours at a time without catching anything and inevitably we would be scratching our heads as we came off the lake and some bystander would inquire,

“Did you catch anything?” We used more than one of the aforementioned excuses last week.

This morning's text in Matthew draws attention to a whole different set of excuses, not having to do with fishing, although most of the disciples would be familiar with those, but rather with the acceptance of the Gospel.



The first vignette depicts a generation that cannot come to grips with either John the Baptist or Jesus. They will not accept John the Prophet, who came as a sober figure, a wild-man with a strange diet who called people to repentance -- they labeled him demon-possessed. They refused to accept John as God's messenger, as "the voice of one crying in the wilderness -- Prepare the way of the Lord, make his paths straight."



Neither will they welcome Jesus, who came as a convivial character, eating and drinking with all sorts of people, many of them questionable. They could not accept that Jesus was the very Son of God, who came to baptize with fire and the Holy Spirit -- they dismissed him as a glutton and a drunkard.

"This generation," as the text says, has been given every opportunity to hear, but they refuse.

I wonder about our own generation's excuses. How do we explain away or dismiss the call of the Gospel? We have almost as many excuses for avoiding an encounter with Jesus Christ, as we do for putting off regular exercise!

Are we too busy, distracted by everyday responsibilities, fantasies, and amusements?

Are we too tired, bogged down by a lack of rest, by being over-worked and under-appreciated?



Are we too selfish, focused on our own narrow interests, perceived needs, solitary aspirations?

Are we too arrogant, thinking we know better, can decide for ourselves, stand above a need for forgiveness?

Are we too overloaded, so that we cannot hear another appeal, another commercial, receive another invitation -- even one that promises the peace which passes all understanding?



What's your excuse for plugging your ears to the call of God? What are your neighbors' excuses for not worshiping, giving, praying, accepting, serving, caring, sharing?

How many excuses can we come up with for not embracing the Good News of the gospel?



Matthew's vignettes in chapter 11 hearken back to answering a single question. The imprisoned John the Baptist has sent his followers to Jesus to ask, "Are you the one who is to come, or are we to wait for another?"

They were looking...listening for God. Are you? What about your neighbors?

In our day we could easily discount John the Baptist because his abstinence is too strict, and we could just as easily reject Jesus for being wishy-washy, a bleeding-heart, a push-over, one whose behavior is not strict enough.

Excuses, Excuses!



The petulant, complaining nature of these charges begins to make the speakers for "this generation" or any generation, sound like Goldilocks--finding everything too hard, too soft, too hot, too cold.

Matthew contrasts the many who reject Jesus with the few who accept him. Those who hear Jesus' message and respond are called "infants," for theirs is a childlike faith (see Matthew 18:3).

These "infants" have realized and accepted that Jesus' miracles are not just isolated magical acts, but are rather important signs which mark the approaching kingdom of God. Only those with childlike faith, not those who boast great wisdom, are able to recognize these signs as true portents of the kingdom.

Jesus answers that "wisdom is vindicated by her deeds."

Matthew's second vignette reveals the intimate connection between Jesus and God. As messiah, Savior, Jesus reveals the knowledge of God. But he also offers the "great invitation" urging "weary" and "burdened" believers to accept "rest". Jesus is shortly coming to the point in Matthew where he will address Sabbath activities (in 12:1-8 and 9-14).

Jesus will make clear he does not intend to abolish all the ancient Sabbath observations--but he did intend to reinterpret the law by finding new ways to fulfill it. Jesus taught a radical understanding of the depth of the law's spirit. The "rest" Jesus offered more than just a break from practicing every jot and tittle of Torah mandates.



To introduce this new kind of "rest," this new concept of faithfulness to the Sabbath spirit, Jesus offers believers a new "yoke." Not only is the yoke "easy" and the burden "light," the baggage is knowledge which Jesus shares with the new believer ("learn from me").

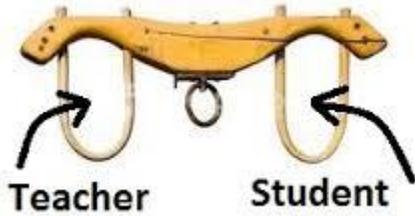
So often we seek to "go it alone." We don't need shocked by John the Baptist and we don't need a Savior. We imagine we can work it out – that we can extract ourselves from the conundrums we create, that we can self-help ourselves into salvation, that we can somehow manufacture the Good Life apart from the knowledge of God.

Sooner or later we come to the spiritual realization that John the Baptizer was right in calling for a change of life...that is repentance...and in pointing to Jesus the Christ. The Baptist understood where the power of God lived...in Jesus – and that he, John, was not worthy even to carry the sandals of Jesus. Yet Jesus came to him in the Jordan River, accepted him and his baptism.



Taking on a yoke these days sounds like a chore...something to get out of, to find an excuse for, akin to helping an acquaintance move. "Hey, I'd love to help lug your sofa bed to your new third floor apartment, but unfortunately I have plans that weekend. I'll be out of town – far out of town. It might have been more commonplace and acceptable in ancient Palestine. But it was still heavy lifting.

Jesus invites us to take HIS yoke. This yoke is "his" because Jesus also wears it. We take him on and all of our burdens seem so much lighter, because we're not carrying them all by ourselves. In fact, when it comes to heavy lifting, Jesus is a real ox – in the



strongest sense of that image! Believers are invited... called to join Jesus, not just to be loaded down with a new law while he watches. Jesus offers us salvation --- bringing new ways to understand, to think and (in the new yoke) to do.

Taking on Jesus and his yoke doesn't mean more work – but blessed rest! However you conceptualize a peaceful, holy, satisfying, transforming rest...

Life with Christ gives you such – rest certainly from the burdens of sin and responsibility but also rest for your souls. Don't excuse yourself from that!

