

Sermon on Matthew 11:16-19; 25-30 for 07/09/2023

“We Didn’t Start the Fire”

You may be surprised to hear this, but every time I preach, and I have to pick a title for a sermon; I always use what song I drew inspiration from that week while writing. It just so happens that not too long ago, I was listening to “*We Didn’t Start the Fire*,” not by the great Billy Joel but instead by Fall Out Boy. Now I know what y’all are thinking, can this 2000s pop-rock band live up to the task? No, but they certainly tried, and it is not great, but while reading this passage in Matthew, It made me think more about who Jesus is talking about and the problems of that time. This cover of *We Didn’t Start The Fire* is about all the major events since Billy Joel’s version, and this is a passage about the yoke and the problems of the generation of Jesus’ time. It is like mixing biscuits and gravy; it sounds weird, but I promise there is a connection. Even if it may be a bit of a long shot for a catchy sermon title. In this passage, we see Jesus addressing not specific individuals and their failure to respond in a crisis but the whole society. In other words, Jesus speaks to entire generations and their failure to respond to crisis. These are not exactly words of celebration either. This addresses the failure to respond to an utterly clear song. Instead, we find ourselves regularly dancing when we ought to be mourning for those whose burdens are heavy and need rest. **Jesus focuses his attention on those whose need help so that they can find peace and comfort through lifting life's burdens and offering rest, even for the lonely soul.**

Coming to this passage in Matthew, Jesus has much to say about this subject. “But to what will I compare this generation” It is like children sitting in the marketplaces and calling to one another, We played the flute for you, and you

did not dance; we wailed, and you did not mourn.”¹ Even going so far as to describe how people of Jesus’ time viewed Him and John the Baptist, stating, “For John came neither eating nor drinking, and they say, ‘He has a demon’; the Son of Man came eating and drinking, and they say, ‘Look, a glutton and a drunkard, a friend of tax collectors and sinners!’ Yet wisdom is vindicated by her deeds.”² Many loved to look at Jesus and John and point the finger because they did not follow the proper ways of doing things, the ways that *they* did things. Sounds a bit familiar, doesn't it? For a while there, about every few days, while studying throughout school, I often came across articles about how Millennials, or now Gen-Z, are the worst generation. For example, this Time Magazine article from 2013 is titled “The Me Me Me Generation” or this book I had to study in Seminary titled “Generation Me: Why Millennials Are More Confident, Assertive, Entitled - and More Disappointed with Adulthood Than Ever.” written in 2006. Over the last couple of years, when I read these articles, I often thought to myself or talked with my friends, “I wish they would at least let us get out there and fail first before criticizing us.” We were just getting on our feet and already being scrutinized by the previous generations. Over time these articles turned into titles such as “Millennials are Screwed” or “Why Millennials are Facing More Economic Anxiety than (dot dot dot).” Funny enough, I have noticed in recent years that there has been a shift in blame from Millennials to Gen-Z, saying they are the most confident, assertive, selfish, etc. generation. Even if you take it back to my parent's generation, the blame shifted on them right when they came of age, saying they would be the softest generation. Same for the baby boomers, whom the “greatest generation” would often criticize. I believe it is better to give you a few examples. So I will read a series of quotes compiled in 2017 from a BBC article. Some of

¹ Matthew 11:16-17 (NRSV)

² Matthew 11:18-19 (NRSV)

these quotes may sound familiar, so let me know after service if you remember hearing or saying these things while growing up. After each quote, I will include the year they were published. So here we go:

- “We defy anyone who goes about with his eyes open to deny that there is, as never before, an attitude on the part of young folk which is best described as grossly thoughtless, rude, and utterly selfish.” - 1925
- “They’re out-of-touch hipsters who spend too much on coffee and too little on facial hair care. Many are spoiled, entitled, or both.” - 2016
- “They think they know everything, and are always quite sure about it.” - Aristotle, 4th century BCE.
- “It’s an irony, but so many of us are a cautious, nervous, conservative crew that some of the elders who five years ago feared that we might come trooping home full of foreign radical ideas are now afraid that the opposite might be too true and that we could be lacking some of the old American gambling spirit and enterprise.” - Life, 1950
- “Young people are high-minded because they have not yet been humbled by life, nor have they experienced the force of circumstances.” - Again, Aristotle, 4th Century BCE.
- “What really distinguishes this generation from those before it is that it’s the first generation in American history to live so well and complain so bitterly about it.” - Washington Post, 1993
- “A few 35-year-old friends just now are leaving their parents’ nest. Many friends are getting married or having a baby for the first time. They aren’t switching occupations because they have finally landed a ‘meaningful’ career - perhaps after a decade of hopscotching jobs in search of an identity. They’re doing the kinds of things our society used to expect from 25-year-olds.” Wall Street Journal, 1984

- “They have trouble making decisions. They would rather hike in the Himalayas than climb a corporate ladder. They have few heroes, no anthems, no style to call their own. They crave entertainment, but their attention span is as short as one zap of a TV dial.” - Time, 2001
- “They’re lazy... Millennials are lazy and think basic tasks are beneath them.” - Daily Mail, 2017
- “Probably there is no period in history in which young people have given such emphatic utterance to a tendency to reject that which is old and to wish for that which is new.” - Portsmouth Evening News, 1936

You can see a trend here. We love to blame the next generation because we have all the answers, right? Well, in the usual fashion, Jesus flips the expectations on where wisdom is located and how it is acquired; that is, wisdom belongs to the little ones, to “infants,” to children, and to the descendants because it is given and revealed to them, specifically, by and through the Son.³ If you notice, this passage in Matthew skips a section and leads us into Jesus’ prayer of thanks for another relationship, that is, between the Father and the Son, and for “wisdom revealed to infants.”⁴ Now, I hope that Jesus is not asking the children here to have the wisdom or experience necessary to fix a broken pipeline in a men's bathroom; for that, I will trust Mr. Patterson. No, I do not believe that Jesus is talking about the more administrative matters of the church being left in the hands of the infants.

Although, that would be quite the site to see. Instead, when we think about how we live out our Pastoral duties and how we are the church in the world, children are often a source of profound wisdom. Throughout the year, you will hear some “remarkable” things being said from up here in the diamond during the time with children. They often just say what they think, whether outrageous or profound;

³ Connections, 136.

⁴ Ibid.

they are certainly coming forward authentically as themselves. Some may say it is that childish wonder they have; some say it is because they are naive and haven't experienced enough of the world yet. Shoot, that's what Aristotle thought. Maybe, Jesus is saying that the problem is us and what society has turned us into. Maybe we have been humbled or burned one too many times. When we spend so much time pointing at the next generation as the problem rather than lightening the burden of our neighbor, that may be the problem. Jesus is not addressing the failure of individuals to respond, but of the society as a whole who somehow fail to respond as they might to an utterly clear song.⁵ So what does all this mean for us as a multigenerational crowd? What Jesus is saying in the first half of this passage is quite clear; regardless of what generation you hail from, you will become disillusioned with what's important at some point. It is also clear what is important to Jesus, and that is caring for those who are suffering. Karl Barth insists that righteousness always requires favoring the threatened innocent, the oppressed poor, widow, orphans, and aliens... God always stands unconditionally and passionately on this side and on this alone: against the lofty and on behalf of the lowly; against those who already enjoy right and privilege and on behalf of those who are denied and deprived of it."⁶ To put this in more plain terms, God stands with the oppressed, and Jesus is present more in times of need than in times of plenty. Christ is there more in times of desperation than in times of certainty. This is a common thread that can be seen throughout the gospels.

As I was reading this passage and thinking about these words presented to us by Jesus, many stories and examples came to my mind about how best to explain this. About how best to drive this home. I thought about my favorite movie, *Star Wars: Return of the Jedi*, and how the young Luke Skywalker defied the odds.

⁵ Feasting on the Word, 212.

⁶ Feasting on the Word, 214.

Going against the metaphorical previous generation of Jedi to defeat the Empire, throwing away his lightsaber defiantly in a sign of nonviolence, refusing to strike down his father as the Emperor, Yoda, and Obi-Wan wanted him to. However, that is not the type of struggle that Jesus is talking about. I thought about King of the Hill, the hit Mike Judge TV Show set in the fictional town of Arlen, Texas. More specifically, in the episode where Bobby Hill, one of the main characters in the Hill family, is forced to go to Military School by his grandfather because he is not doing things the way his father envisioned for him. So he is sent away in an attempt to “break him down and build him back up,” only to find out that Bobby is more like mush and can’t be broken and it can’t be built up, but it has an edge. Same problem as Star Wars; this is not the type of struggle that Jesus is talking about. I could stand up here and talk about all the times in my life when I have either fallen short of this call from Jesus or times when I felt like the children; however, we all know that I am not the demographic Jesus is speaking on behalf of. No, if I am being honest with y’all, this is a text I have struggled with. I feel I am a part of the crowd that Jesus is criticizing. The struggles that Jesus talks about are apparent for us to see; you can leave this sanctuary and see it outside around most street corners. So I am left thinking about the Yoke Jesus is talking about in the second half of this passage and the rest offered for weary people. This rest is not offered to the strongest and the most powerful, but instead, rest is offered to those who have been made weary by a world that fails to comprehend them and what they have suffered through.⁷ The yoke Jesus is offering us, the easy yoke, means having something to do: a purpose that demands your all and summons forth your best. It means work that is motivated by a passionate desire to realize God’s kingdom. To accept the yoke of the gentle and humble Lord is to embrace

⁷ Feasting on the Word, 216.

the worthy task that puts the soul at ease. As a multigenerational church, it is a task for us to help put others' souls at ease. Maybe y'all feel like I do; maybe you are looking for ways in which we can help ease the struggles out there in the world. If that's the case, then we need to tap into that childlike wonder and imagination. We should be listening to what the kids are concerned about. If it means working toward a certain future in which all of God's dreams will finally come true, then this is undoubtedly a good start. So to accept this yoke offered by Jesus is to embrace this worthy task, putting souls at ease. As seen throughout the Billy Joel version and the Fall Out Boy cover of *We Didn't Start The Fire*, there is always work to be done. We love to pass our problems along for those after to inherit. So to that end, there is work to be done to lessen that burden on these kids. If Jesus is focusing his attention on those who need help, then we ought to do the same. Amen.