

Week of April 18, 2021

Matthew 11:20-30

²⁰ Then he began to scold the cities where he had done his greatest miracles because they didn't change their hearts and lives. ²¹ "How terrible it will be for you, Chorazin! How terrible it will be for you, Bethsaida! For if the miracles done among you had been done in Tyre and Sidon, they would have changed their hearts and lives and put on funeral clothes and ashes a long time ago. ²² But I say to you that Tyre and Sidon will be better off on Judgment Day than you. ²³ And you, Capernaum, will you be honored by being raised up to heaven? No, you will be thrown down to the place of the dead. After all, if the miracles that were done among you had been done in Sodom, it would still be here today. ²⁴ But I say to you that it will be better for the land of Sodom on the Judgment Day than it will be for you."

²⁵ At that time Jesus said, "I praise you, Father, Lord of heaven and earth, because you've hidden these things from the wise and intelligent and have shown them to babies. ²⁶ Indeed, Father, this brings you happiness. ²⁷ My Father has handed all things over to me. No one knows the Son except the Father. And nobody knows the Father except the Son and anyone to whom the Son wants to reveal him. ²⁸ Come to me, all you who are struggling hard and carrying heavy loads, and I will give you rest. ²⁹ Put on my yoke, and learn from me. I'm gentle and humble. And you will find rest for yourselves. ³⁰ My yoke is easy to bear, and my burden is light."

When Work is Worthless

In college I went on a couple of mission trips to Guatemala. The focus of the trips was never on work projects, rather it was about building relationships and learning the history of the marginalization of the indigenous peoples of Guatemala. Nevertheless, we always engaged in some kind of project. On my first trip that project was at a new "hospitalito" in Santiago Atitlan - a small, non-profit clinic serving the Maya population of that region where there was no other medical care. Our group arrived as the hospitalito was preparing to finally open its doors to the community. Much of our work was outside in the construction of a wall to surround the building and protect it from storms. It was incredibly difficult work, but we all felt proud of what we accomplished in the few days we had to give, especially knowing that this new clinic would provide healthcare to so many in desperate need. Then, in October of the same year, a tropical storm hit Guatemala dead on and a mudslide wiped out the hospitalito. It was absolutely devastating for that community. But we, who worked on a wall that turned out to be utterly useless, also felt devastated. Our disappointments were obviously far less than those whose lives were destroyed in the storm, but there is something disheartening about knowing work you did made absolutely no difference in the lives of others. The wall didn't keep the mud back - not that it ever stood a chance against tons and tons of mud traveling at more than 60 miles an hour from the top of a volcano.

The work that Jesus did throughout his ministry was always far more important than that of college students in a foreign country during Spring Break, but even his work sometimes came to yield no results. He preached and taught and healed, yet even some of those who witnessed his grandeur or experienced his healing said, "no thanks," and continued on with their lives as if he had never appeared to them. Those of us who have faith in Christ more than 2,000 years after his death find it unbelievable that there could have been some who met him, who saw him work, who experienced in ways we cannot the power of his presence, and did not accept him as the Son of God. Especially befuddling was the fact that the places called out - Chorazin, Bethsaida, and Capernaum - were Jewish cities where the majority of the population were steeped in the belief that the messiah was coming. Yet they did not believe when he appeared. Jesus' work there yielded no results; it was worthless.

But, it wasn't really worthless. No work ever is. Even our little wall that could not have held the mud back wasn't worthless. That hospitalito only stayed closed for 16 days. They

reopened in a makeshift clinic and operated that way for a couple of years until they could get a new building built. And this time they had the eyes of the world, as so many heard about the plight of this community and came together to build a modern facility far larger than they ever dreamed before. A tiny setback led to a huge payoff. And it was the same for Jesus' ministry. Sure, three important cities rejected him, but it did not diminish his work. And even if many in those towns didn't change their lives, there were really important things that happened there that did change lives. Among these important things is this - Peter, Andrew, and Philip were all from Bethsaida and they gave up everything to follow Jesus, and after Jesus' death and resurrection, they led the church and helped make it what it is today. So Jesus' work was not worthless. We might never know the fruits of our work when we do it. It might even seem like a total failure in the moment, but good things are always happening. God's work is never finished, the good will prevail.

God of hope - when we are feeling dismayed, you present us with new possibilities to turn fear and disappointment into joy. Failure is turned to success. Hatred is turned to love. Death is turned to life. Thank you for this good gift - may we never lose sight of all of your goodness. Amen.