**Go and Tell It!**

**Text: Luke 7:18-23**

**Preached by Bruce D. Ervin**

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When I was a boy, there was a toy that was heavily advertised on television. It was a wind-up mechanical man called Mr. Machine. Made with clear plastic so that you could see all the moving parts. They shot the commercial with the camera on the floor, looking up, while a whole row of these Mr. Machines went marching past.

“Here he comes, here he comes,

greatest toy you’ve ever seen

and his name is…Mr. Machine.”

The things looked like giants! My sister had a life-sized doll that was almost as tall as she was, and I was sure this Mr. Machine was at least that big. So I’m playing at a friend’s house – I’m maybe six years old – and I pick-up this dinky plastic thing and I say, “What’s this?” And he says, “That’s Mr. Machine!”

It wasn’t what I expected. I figured it must be some cheap imitation. There is no way that Mr. Machine is this small.

It’s all about expectations. We see what we expect to see. And if we don’t expect it, we don’t see it. That’s the way I was with Mr. Machine. And that’s the way John the Baptist was with Jesus. Somehow he expected something different from Messiah than what he was hearing about Jesus. I mean, he was Jesus’ cousin. He had baptized Jesus and probably mentored him. He had great expectations that finally Messiah had come: to rid the Jews of the iron-fisted rule of the Romans and establish God’s Reign forever.

But Jesus wasn’t following the game plan. Which led John to think that maybe Jesus wasn’t Messiah after all. John wasn’t seeing what he expected to see, and he was confused and concerned. That’s why he sent two of his disciples to check out the situation. And they said to Jesus, “Are you the one who is to come, or are we to wait for another?”

It’s all about expectations. When we expect certain things, those are the things that we’re going to look for. When we expect certain things, and then God comes along and does something completely different, we’re likely to miss the mighty acts that God is doing. We might even be disappointed with what’s going on. God’s doing all of these amazing things, right before our eyes. But if it’s not what we expect, we might fear – perhaps like John – that all is lost.

So what, exactly, did John expect? Sitting there in prison, where he’s landed because of his opposition to the Jewish authorities and their Roman masters, what did John expect of Messiah? Like many 1st century Palestinian Jews, John may have expected that when Messiah came, he would liberate Palestine from Roman occupation. Like many, he might have expected some kind of military leader who would lead the revolt against the Evil Empire. Isn’t that what Jesus meant when he proclaimed release to the captives? Isn’t that what Jesus meant when he announced that he was sent to let the oppressed go free?

But the reports that John receives are nothing like what he expects. Whatever good Jesus is doing, he’s not organizing the Resistance. He’s not leading the Revolution. He’s not bringing the kind of good news to the poor and oppressed that John wants him to bring. I mean, for starters, John might have expected Jesus to do something for him; like spring him from prison. You know, Jesus proclaimed release to the captives. So maybe John is thinking, “Hey Cuz, how about bringing release to *this* captive?!”

“Are you the one who is coming, or should we look for someone else?” Churches like ours have been asking a similar question for a long time. Mainstream churches, with a proud heritage, who once occupied a central place in the life and culture of cities and towns all over this country; but in more recent decades they have been in serious decline. So, with each new pastor, there have been high expectations that this is the guy – this is the gal – who will turn things around. And then, when the turn around doesn’t happen, people start to ask something like the question that John’s disciples put to Jesus.

“Are you the one who is coming, or should we look for someone else?”

Or maybe a church like ours doesn’t ask this question of a pastor. Maybe they ask this question of a plan, or a strategy, or a new member, or a new staff person. Maybe as a church we ask this question of a thing or a person who seems to promise so much, but then what we expect to happen doesn’t happen. Maybe other good things are happening, but if it’s not what we expect, we don’t see it. And we are confused and disappointed once again.

“Are you the one who is coming, or should we look for someone else?”

Jesus’ response to this question is instructive. He doesn’t argue the point with John’s disciples. He doesn’t get into a debate about who Messiah is or what Messiah is called to do. He simply points to what’s happening; what he – what Jesus – is doing: “Go and tell John what you see and hear: the blind see, the lame walk, the lepers are cleansed, the deaf hear, the dead are raised, and the poor have good news preached to them. And happy are those who take no offense at me.”

These are the things that Jesus is doing. And the message to John – and to us – is clear: If you can’t see what Jesus is doing, maybe your expectations are off, or you’re looking in the wrong places. Maybe, in fact, he’s doing some pretty neat stuff right before our eyes, maybe right in your own heart, but we’re somehow missing it.

Because maybe we’re focused on what we’re doing, rather than what Jesus is doing. And maybe we’re expecting too much of ourselves, and too little of Jesus. That’s a common problem among U.S. churches. Some years ago a retired preacher spent a year traveling around the country, listening to sermons in all sorts of different churches. And when he got back home, he said that almost every sermon boiled down to this: “You know, if we all tried just a little harder…”

The good news of Messiah in our midst really has very little to do with what we’re doing; or what we might be doing. We could call a moratorium on all of our ministries for a year, and do nothing, and that would not change the fact that Jesus is right here, in this very place. We don’t have to wait for another person or another plan to come and save us because the One who has already saved us is already here.

It is so easy to think that our salvation somehow depends on what we can do in Jesus’ name, as if we’ll only be saved if we can please Jesus by doing as much good as we possibly can. Not that we would ever say this because we all know – at least with our heads – that we’re saved by God’s grace and not by our works. But we sure act like we think that it all depends on us and what we do. And not just we here in this church, but North American Christians in general act this way. “If we all tried just a little harder…

Maybe God would love me more.

Maybe I would love myself more.

Maybe I wouldn’t feel so worthless.

Maybe I’d finally get my long dead mother or father or brother off my back because I never could satisfy him – I never could satisfy her – no matter *how* hard I tried.

When I was in seminary, working my tail off for reasons that are no longer clear to me, my friend Charles would bang on my door at 5:30 so we could go to dinner together and he’d say, “So, Bruce, what did you do to justify your existence today?”

Charles was a Presbyterian who had taken very seriously the biblical notion, amplified by the theologian and reformer John Calvin, that salvation is totally and completely an act of God’s grace, that the work of salvation was completed through Christ, in eternity, before the foundation of the world was laid, and there’s nothing that we can do about it (see Ephesians 1:3-6). Charles knew this, and he knew as well that I was very carefully and meticulously trying to work out my own salvation, through every bit of hard work and every good deed that I could possibly do. Yes, I was working out my salvation in fear and trembling, as the Bible says (Philippians 2:12), but without any awareness that God was at work within me, empowering me to work for *his* good pleasure (Philippians 2:13), that God was at work all around me, that God – by God’s gracious work in Jesus Christ – had already saved me. I thought it all depended on me. Charles, in his own teasing way, was trying to remind me that it all depends on God.

It’s not about what you do; it’s about who you are. You are a child of God. You have been perfectly and wondrously made by God. You have been crafted and molded by the One who holds you still in the palm of his hand. It’s not about what you do; it’s about who God has made you to be, and why God has made you to be. The Westminster Shorter Catechism teaches us that the purpose of humanity is to praise God and enjoy him. I don’t see anything there about all the things that we’re doing, or should be doing, or wish that we could do if there were more hours in the day. No! The purpose of your life and of mine is, first and foremost, to praise God and *enjoy* him. Because he loves us, just the way we are. Because he has saved us, by his grace alone.

“The poor have good news brought to them,” Jesus said. Maybe we need to let some of that good news wash over us as well. Because we need to be gentle with ourselves. “If we could all try a little harder…” the preachers say all over the country, but maybe we’re all trying too hard. Of course, there’s plenty of good work to be done, and I have no doubt that in time we will do whatever it is that God is calling us to do. But in the meantime, we need to be gentle with ourselves. Because it’s not about us; it’s not about what we can do. It’s about God; it’s about what God has done, and is doing, and will do: through Jesus, and through all of you as well.

You want to know what I first found so endearing about you all?

It was seeing the way that you love each other.

It was your sense of humor.

It was the way in which you wrap your arms around your kids.

It was your hospitality; including the way in which you offered hospitality to a newcomer, to me.

It wasn’t your programs. It wasn’t your ministries. It was you. All of you. Children of God. Just the way God made you.

Maybe that’s not what you expected. Maybe, like me, you thought you had to do it all.

Maybe that’s not what you expected; but then Jesus wasn’t what a lot of people expected. Which is why, even as he did all sorts of wonderful things, a lot of people didn’t recognize him as Messiah.

Folks, how ‘bout we let Jesus do what Jesus needs to do, and we focus on what we need to do; or, better yet, in the short term, maybe we should focus on what we don’t need to do. Because, in the short term, maybe we don’t need to do anything. Except love each other. And let ourselves be loved…by God. And let God’s love wash over us. Let Jesus’ love wash over us, if you prefer to put it that way. And then go and tell whoever will listen what you’ve experienced in this place: that here there is a family of God – here there is a community of faith – where people love each other. Like any family, they fight a lot; but they love each other. And they take care of each other. Because Jesus is in this place. Amen.