

“Seeing is Believing” based on Matthew 11:1-19

Delivered by Pastor Drew Mangione, December 11, 2022, Shelby Presbyterian Church

A little more than a decade ago, my friend and fundraising mentor Mike Miller, delivered me the extensive results of a capital campaign feasibility report for the nonprofit where I worked. Mike’s consulting firm had done more than 80 interviews for the study. The results were positive – they said a \$2 million campaign was indeed feasible.

However, what was made abundantly clear about its feasibility was that while the Watertown Urban Mission was known and had a solid reputation in the community, potential donors were largely uninformed. They had questions about its impact.

It was bizarre, because the community leaders and donors who were interviewed said that they were very likely to lend support to the campaign and give money. But this was based largely on what others have said about it and local news reports about it. They didn’t have any first-hand knowledge about the organization. Some said their church’s support gave them the confidence to give. Others assumed their peers would support the campaign, so, they figured they would do the same if asked. Others said that if they saw it was going well, they’d be glad to pitch in their support.

Mike and I recognized that in our hearts, we knew the outcome of the study was right – a \$2 million campaign was feasible – but we knew it was anything but a sure thing. Most of the support expressed was conditional. They would need assurances. We knew we needed to get potential donors into the Mission’s facilities.

Prior to working there, I was a well-informed, compared to most, as a newspaper reporter, who had even written stories mentioning the Mission. Yet I had never really been inside before my interview. In fact, when I interviewed, I was arrogant. I had a better job in the wings. But after being there, this was the only job I wanted.

So, what we did was task an extremely talented events and recognition committee with a doing a series of lunches. We sent out formal invites to a select number of donors and community leaders and worked with our staff to create stations highlighting each program. This way, when our guests arrived, they could learn about each program.

After all, their interviews had revealed people knew we had a thrift store and they knew we had a food pantry, but they knew little else. Attending this lunch, they would be able to learn about the six major programs, which helped thousands of people each month in ways government programs did not and could not.

They saw what a five-day supply of food looked like for a family of four. They saw examples of the school supplies put in each of the 1,200 backpacks given to kids in need. They saw the hurdles the homeless face in finding secure housing, and how the Mission helped these individuals jump high to clear them.

We showed them how addiction needed treatment, not prison time, and how confronting the real consequences of your decisions is more effective than creating new ones. We showed them

the profits of a thrift store that gives away 35,000 items each year and lowers its prices in hard times. We showed them what a safe place with free coffee and snacks could mean for people struggling and living on the streets. And we did all this in the Mission's community room, in the middle of the day at lunch time, so that they could see the very real faces of the people they would be helping.

The people who attended these lunches, became ambassadors for the Mission. In the end, these guests ensured not only that the campaign succeeded, but that it finished five percent over goal and a year early. They pitched in their support so quickly, that months later, we were able to go public with the campaign, having already reached 56 percent of the goal within only a few months of the first lunch. Truly, for them seeing was believing.

Today's gospel reading feels at first like the John the Baptist we read about last week is now, not so sure of himself anymore, and not so sure about his cousin, Jesus. He has heard about some of what Jesus has been doing, but still has questions. John had been telling everyone about the pitchfork, the Holy Spirit, and fire, how the one whose sandals he was not fit enough to even carry, was going to chop down trees and burn away the chaff. Yet now John was in prison, awaiting his likely death and Jesus was in the countryside healing people and telling parables to all who'd listen. So, John asks, *"Are you really the one? Or is someone else coming? Who will do what I said, and judge sin?"*

This is understandable for John to wonder, as there is a great deal in the prophetic writings about judgement. The prince of peace is supposed to shatter the yoke, the bar, and the rod of oppression. Yet John is in prison, the puppet ruler of Rome, Herod Antipas has him captive. John knows what the Herod family does to those who oppose them. So, he might rightly ask, *"Are you going to chop down the Herods? Are you going to burn away the chaff to save me, the wheat?"*

But Jesus points to the inbreaking of God's Kingdom, pointing to the same prophecies John knows, but focusing on the other parts in them. Jesus tells John's disciples to be witnesses to all that is happening already: People who are blind are recovering their sight! People who had been unable to use their legs are walking around! People suffering with skin diseases are being cleansed! People who are deaf can hear! The dead are raised! And the poor are being given good news! Jesus wants John's disciples to see all of this and to hear the stories of all that has happened, and to believe in him, and report to John.

[Indeed, I will admit, the cliché of "Seeing is Believing," might be considered by some "ableist," implying perhaps that to believe, we must have the gift of physical sight with our eyes. But what is being revealed here points to the old writing adage, 'Show, don't tell.' This is about perception and understanding, far more than physical sight.

We see this in the next part where Jesus starts to address the crowd. These are the ones who may think they are in a special spot. They may well perceive themselves as better than John, since John, or at least his disciples, have doubts, but they are right there close to Jesus.

But Jesus knows that many of his followers, who may see John in a bad light by his question, are also those whose path to Jesus was indeed prepared by John – they saw him first. So, Jesus

asks, "What did you go out to gaze upon in the wilderness?" In other words, you went out to see John. Don't lie to me, I know you did. And was he just a reed blowing in the wind to you? Was he a dandy all dressed in fancy, delicate clothing? No, you went to him because he is a prophet, but Jesus shows them that John was much more.

Jesus quotes the book of Malachi, the last of the prophetic books, about a messenger, and what's more, this messenger, does indeed point to a judgement day of the Lord, where the arrogant and the evildoer will be stubble and set on fire. The scene, and the whole book of Malachi, and with it, the Old Testament, then ends with a promise to send Elijah before the day of the Lord. Jesus uses scripture they know to show them where they are. Yes, he reveals for them the moment they are in. John did not point to the coming of Elijah, but John is the promised Elijah, John is the one who is truly pointing to the day of the Lord. No one born of a woman alone is greater than John the Baptizer, high praise indeed. He is the culmination of all the law and prophets before him, but what he points to, the very Kingdom of Heaven being in and among God's people, is far greater.]

Indeed, since John arrived as the transition point, Jesus says the Kingdom is forcing itself in, and that the forceful claim it – claim to already be on the winning team. This word translated as forceful was used in Greek for an involuntary act. It is the consequence, in the sense of something compelled to happen, or something overpowering, and in some cases with violence.

This is the inevitable conflict of the Kingdom of Heaven and the kingdoms of this world – whether they are personal fiefs, cultural expectations, nations or empires. This is the inevitable day of the Lord, which happens not because God desires destruction, but because, as the gospel of John put it, the world stands in judgement of itself. The world cannot handle this image of a God who comes to us to love us. The gods devised by the world present gods who exploit & abuse humans. These are ancient gods and the current ones of wealth, power and popularity.

The gospel though is of the one true God – Father, Son, and Spirit – fully complete, creating not out of a need, but out of love, and making humans in that image, the image of God, complete with freedom and the ability to love. The gospel says that when humanity uses that freedom poorly, wrongly directing that love, this triune God does not abandon the whole project, but the Father sends the Son not to destroy, but to share in our humanity.

The Son lived as we live, in our limits, and revealed God's presence by giving sight to those who cannot see, and opening the ears of those who cannot hear, giving the ability to leap to those who could not walk, cleansing those with skin diseases, raising the dead and proclaiming the good news, that the Kingdom is here. The King is here. The good news that God is with us.

This is not what the world wants – all of this shows is that sin and death are powerless. And so, the gospel shows us that when sin and death – the powers of this world – try to defeat Jesus, by sending God in our flesh, to the cross, he will die for us to save us from final death, not because it benefits God, but because by dying and rising for us, we get a share in God's life.

Friends, it is easy to want to jump to the end and believe that we are on the right side come judgement day and say, let's have it. It is normal to think that the judgement of the day of the

Lord will exclude us. But the Messiah, the anointed one, the King, our Lord and Savior Jesus, shows us that the Kingdom of Heaven is not about jumping to judgement, but revealing the presence of God now AND for all of eternity.

In that capital campaign, most of those interviewed for the study, when they were asked to give after being shown all that the Mission was doing, they gave more money than they initially said they might consider. Seeing was believing.

But for some, well, there is always a critic to find fault to object. One donor had indicated in the feasibility study that she would give a possible gift of \$100,000, but after learning all that the Mission does, offered much, much less. You see, she thought we made it too easy to be poor. As if second-hand clothes and furniture, five-days-worth of food every month, and help securing basic shelter was a plentiful bounty.

This is what Jesus points to in the final part of our reading – What to do with this generation? How often do we say to Jesus, “Why didn’t you dance when we played the flute?” How often do we act as if God’s existence depends on how God responds to us? How often do we question, “Why didn’t you fix what made us mourn?” How often do we act as if we are the center of God’s universe, rather than making God the center of our universe?

The donor who lowered her gift wanted us to change. She wanted us to enact new restrictions, in order for her to give more. We held our ground, and in the end, she did increase her gift. I don’t think it would have mattered. I think she had the final number in mind the whole time. The reason I don’t think it would have mattered, is what Jesus points out: John was criticized for not eating real food or drinking alcohol, and Jesus was criticized for eating too much and for drinking alcohol. In the end, you can’t win – but Wisdom is made just by her works.

My sisters and brothers in Christ, the gospel of Jesus means that he is our King. And this is what John pointed to and what Isaiah, Malachi, and the prophets foretold. And so, our faith is meant to be more than belief and more than knowledge. Our faith is meant to be faithfulness and an allegiance to this king to serve as we are called.

Each and every one of you shares in the belovedness of Jesus as the true Son, and each one of you then is adopted into God’s family to be a co-heir of God’s life. But that also means being a co-heir of being called to share God’s work. This means that like Jesus we are called to reveal God’s presence right here and right now.

Yes, we are called to proclaim the good news of Jesus, and with it, we are also called to be empowered by the Holy Spirit, to do the works which God has prepared for us. This means knowing we are loved, not in order to wish judgment on others. But it means knowing we are loved, in order to show love to others. Sometimes, the only scripture someone will ever read, is the way we act toward them, respond to them with them knowing we are Christians.

So, let’s show people Christ, not just tell them, because seeing is believing and the wisdom of Christ is justified by her works. There will be critics – John was too stringent, Jesus too free. Go and be Christ to others through the love you show. Don’t worry about how it will be judged but be concerned only with how it will reveal the love of God to those you encounter. Amen.