



Identity Crisis Matthew 11:2-11

A few days ago Bill and I watched a new movie called “The Good House” based on the novel by Ann Leary. It stars the 73-year-old Sigourney Weaver playing a 60-year-old realtor named Hildy Good, in yet another great role for older women. The crux of the story is that Hildy has a

serious history of alcoholism in her family and has herself long struggled with this disease. After doing rehab she’s been on the wagon for awhile, but at a party following a big sale she relapses as the new owners tempt her into a toast. From there it’s a quick downward spiral: Deep into multiple hard drinks, she throws up her arms joyfully and announces to whoever’s listening, “I finally feel like myself again! It’s good to be back!”

Of course, this can’t continue. There is a love interest in the charming Kevin Kline. After a personal scare and the threat of losing him, things eventually resolve as she gives up drinking once and for all. A happy ending, I guess, but I was left with a question: Who was the real Hildy Good? The exuberant, fun-loving drunk, or the stable, successful teetotaler?

Of course, science tells us it is the latter. Alcohol’s effects on the brain are well established. But even still, Hildy’s identity crisis is what drives this movie forward. We are left wondering: Without alcohol, will she ever arrive at the point where she can say with a clear mind, “I finally feel like myself again”?

Here in Matthew 11 John the Baptist finds himself caught in an identity crisis, but not his own – instead, concerning Jesus. Imprisoned in prison by Herod because he had condemned Herod’s marriage to Herodias as illegal, John has heard about what Jesus has been doing. But today’s reading makes clear he is confused. Is Jesus the one to come, or is the world supposed to wait for another?

How could this be? We might imagine that John would have some kind of divine insight into who Jesus is. After all, John leapt in Elizabeth’s womb when the two pregnant cousins met, upon hearing Mary’s greeting. An angel announced John’s birth to his father Zechariah. Throughout the gospels John is portrayed as a prophet – in fact, Jesus refers to him as the “Elijah who is to come,” and we know that all legitimate prophets were divinely inspired, bearing messages directly from God. John’s proclamation that we heard last week, “Prepare the way of the Lord,” seemed filled with insight and conviction. So how could he be in crisis over Jesus’ identity?

If you see things from John’s perspective, it’s actually easy to understand how he could have doubts. John was obviously expecting an imminent end of the created order, involving judgment of the wicked (3:12). Last week we heard him proclaim, “Even now the ax is lying at the root of the trees; every tree therefore that does not bear good fruit is cut down and thrown

into fire.” Instead he languishes in Herod’s prison fortress of Machaerus [May-kaaar-us], east of the Dead Sea.

So John is justified in wondering, now that Jesus has come, why his wicked captors were having their way with him. Why had he had not yet experienced the fulfillment of the promise of “liberty to the captives”? (Is 61:1). All he can do is send his disciples to Jesus with the question: “Are you the one who is to come? Or should we wait for another?”

It should not surprise us that some Christians today may ask similar questions: If Jesus is really the one who brings God’s kingdom to fulfillment, why is our world still suffering from, injustice, polarization, and violence? Why are we still waiting? How long must we wait? Will Jesus really come to redeem those who suffer, or should we look for another?

Jesus himself gives us the answer just as he gave it to John’s disciples: Go and tell about what you see! Look at the signs around you! Tell of the miracles that you observe, and bring that good news to those who really need to hear it.

What miracles, you might be asking? You might not be witnesses to the deaf gaining their hearing or the dead being raised, but there are signs all around you every day. You just have to see them for what they are and not dismiss them weird or random.

We had one of these at church on Friday. It was sparked by one of our church signs. On Friday afternoon I got a text from Jess at Stepping Stones: “Do you know anything about a program, “More cookies, less hate”? I wrote back, “Haha, that is just a saying on one of our signs.” She then told me that someone dropped off a box of cookies in response to this alleged program. “Wow!” I texted. “Please enjoy them.” “LOL I will put them out for staff,” she wrote back.

My “Wow” was an understatement. I was floored. OK, maybe the box of cookies was simply a joke. Maybe it was a merely a kind gesture. But maybe, just maybe, it was one of those little miracles that are happening around us all the time. I personally think it was an angel who left those cookies. An angel sent to tell us that, yes, there is something in that saying. That every expression of hope moves the world one notch closer to the kingdom of God. To my mind, that box of cookies was a tangible sign of moving one notch closer. Less hate.

I texted this little occurrence to Lou Farrell because I knew he’d get it. He texted back that he sent it on to the United Nations. “You might be onto something,” he said.

Or not, skeptics might say. Maybe all this was nothing. Jesus knew that many people would be bent on critiquing and dismissing him. “Blessed are those who take no offense at me,” he says today. Neither he nor the kingdom he was proclaiming was what anyone was expecting.

But the unexpected is exactly what we need more of, because it lifts us up out of ourselves. In Advent we look ahead to what is to come with hope, expectation, eager longing. But let us not miss those surprising signs in the present moment that are pointing the way.

Amen.