

“A Rock of Offense”

Matthew 11:2-15

Dear Brothers and Sisters in Christ,

Whatever you do, don't do or say anything offensive to anyone. That seems to be the mantra of our society in today's world. Everywhere you look there's a mine field of eggshells that everyone is expected to walk on as you navigate the sensitivities of the fallen creation. Granted, most of you, I think, don't particularly care about being politically correct or avoiding the pitfalls of so-called “DEI,” but the reality is that the world around us is constantly trying to avoid offending anyone. Everyone must be “safe,” and so no one is truly safe from the ridicule and belittlement of those who claim themselves to be the champions of “tolerance.” But, as Jesus says in our text this morning, giving offense is not His concern. The Gospel, that is, the forgiveness of sins is His concern, and bringing those whom He has called into His Kingdom. He is “a rock of offense,” as Paul records in Romans 9:33, because He is concerned only with proclaiming the truth, and anyone offended by the truth is not one who has ears to hear.

In our Gospel lesson, the Baptizer is not offended by Jesus, and Jesus is not implying that he is. After all, John sits in a prison cell for his continued willingness to proclaim Him as the Christ. But as he contemplates his faith behind those bars, he is indeed having doubts, so he does the only thing he can think of in that moment, and that is go ask the Son of God Himself. Since he can't go on his own, he sends his disciples to ask Jesus if he truly is the Messiah, or if there is another still to come. There's a dual doubt that exists within John in this moment. Doubt is creeping in as to whether or not Jesus is the Messiah, but also whether or not he is Elijah sent to prepare the way of the Lord prophesied about in Malachi 4:5. He is experiencing a moment of weakness in his faith, and that is a weakness that all are subject to and succumb to all too frequently.

How many times have you asked yourself, “How do I know that I am a called child of God?” Or, “How do I know that I have true faith?” “Is Jesus really the answer to my troubles?” Even worse, “I know Jesus is with me, but I need to figure this problem out on my own.” Your sinful nature, the flesh that you still bear as a son of Adam, is constantly going to attack your faith and seek to make you look to yourself instead of to Christ. That old man that still lives within in you is indeed offended by the truth of Jesus. Sin is robbed of all of its power before the Lord, and so it despises all that makes you look to Him instead of to your sinful desires. And that really is the reason that the world is offended by Jesus.

The world seeks a life of sin, not one of repentance as preached by John. Why should they deprive themselves of good things for something that is seemingly insignificant and “invisible” like faith in a Savior? So, their offense at the Church is understandable. It is completely contrary to the life they seek to live as those who have subjected themselves completely to the mastery of their sinful natures. They truly are those whom Paul speaks of in Romans that are “of the flesh” and have no Spirit within them. As those who are lost and willingly remaining so, they bury themselves in a mountain of sinful temerity and scorn anyone who seeks to reprove them for such a lifestyle. After all, it’s their “human right” to kill babies in the womb, and change their daughters into boys, and let their sons have homosexual relations with other boys.

But you can’t be fooled by their grandstanding and shouting down. As those who are in the true Church, you must stand for the faith that has been given to you. You must be offended by the sin that is so nonchalantly championed in the world, and increasingly championed in those who claim themselves to be part of the Lord’s Church. The Lord’s righteousness cannot tolerate unrighteous behavior, and for any who unrepentantly engage in such sinful activity, what awaits them is not forgiveness, life, and salvation, but eternal death and condemnation. The stakes are high, and they are very real. This is about the battle for your very soul, and Satan is constantly at war for his “piece of the pie.” This constant attacking and seeking to make sin “normal” are all about doing the opposite of what Jesus says in our Gospel lesson. The devil turns the Lord’s words on their head, and instead says, “Blessed is the one who is not offended by sin.” Let’s all just get along, and let people be whoever and whatever they want to be.

And this constant affront is enough to make anyone question whether or not they have true faith. John did it as he faced the probability of his death for such belief, and you face it as the world continually beats you down. So, how do you know that your faith is real? By the visible signs that have been given to you by the Lord, Jesus Christ. He has shown you your faith in the water and the Word which has baptized you for the forgiveness of your sins and claimed you as His own dear child. He has died upon the cross and given you His very body and blood in the bread and wine of His Holy Supper to impart the gift of redemption that He has won for you in His death. You don’t have to question it because you don’t have to look far to find it. You can come to the Lord’s table and touch, taste, and know that the Lord is good and that it is indeed FOR YOU. But even still, you will have doubts, just like the Baptizer in our text. You will say things like, “I can’t stop sinning. I keep buying into the devil’s lies and deceit. I am offended by what the Lord teaches.”

Satan is exceptionally good at convincing your sinful flesh that it is unworthy of the gifts the Lord brings to you. But therein lies the joy and comfort that only your faith in Jesus as your Savior can bring you. Despite the infirmities of your flesh and the fact that you simply can't grasp hold whether or not you have true faith, Jesus carried every bit of that angst and doubt to the cross upon His own shoulders. And He did it FOR YOU. You—the imperfect questioner who's constantly wondering if this is all right; the unrighteous sinner that is always giving in to the desires you seek to avoid. That is the truth of the Christian life. You are all, just like John, *simul justus et peccator*, simultaneously saint and sinner. You are all believers and unbelievers, and the doubts about the Lord will always find their way into your mind until you attain the glory of heaven. That's what Isaiah says in our Old Testament lesson. "It shall belong to those who walk on the way; even if they are fools, they shall not go astray (Is. 35:8)."

You who are in the true faith are very often "fools" who seek after the ways of the unholy, instead of walking in the "Way of Holiness." But nevertheless, you do not go astray. For you are baptized children of God who have received the Lord's mercy through His continual grace that is showered upon you for the sake of His only Son, Jesus Christ. By the blood He shed upon the cross, you stand as one who need not fear the devil and His attacks. You need not fear your doubt and angst, because Jesus has covered that with all the filth of your sin when He took it to Calvary. He has given you ears to hear the truth of His salvation, and by that blessed Word of reconciliation, you have the promises of the Lord, and He will fulfill and has fulfilled His promises to you. It is all His work, and He has willingly done it, and continues to do it FOR YOU.

There is nothing you can do on our own when it comes to your faith. There is no malarkey of "God helps those who help themselves." Strength and increase in your faith are an act of God upon your heart, and He does all of that by "what you hear and see (v. 4)." And what you hear and see is the Scripture fulfilled in the person of Jesus Christ. The promise of the seed of the woman of Genesis 3:15 comes before your eyes today in His very body and blood and into your ears in the Word He speaks to you. No matter how much you struggle to understand the Lord, He understands your every frailty and weakness, because He has taken them upon Himself and borne them to the cross for your redemption. He has fulfilled the Scripture where Isaiah says to those with an anxious heart in 35:4, "Be strong; fear not! Behold, your God will come with vengeance, with the recompense of God. He will come and save you." You don't have to rescue yourself from the offense of sin, because instead Jesus has offended sin in your place. He has taken away its sting and brings it to nothing as He buries it in the tomb.

So many of the world's priorities are all about not offending and coalescing with one another at any and all cost. But in the faith, you must, by the adjuring of your Lord and Savior, offend and divide. He Himself says not long before the account of our Gospel lesson in Matthew 10:34, "Do not think that I have come to bring peace to the earth. I have not come to bring peace, but a sword." Luke records that Jesus came to bring "division," and that truly is the point of the Gospel. To divide the sheep and the goats in the judgment is why we preach its truth, that those whom God wills will be given the gift of faith and stand as those who have received His redemption. Jesus offends with this division, and so you, too, offend the world with your solid confession of your faith in Him. You ought not be worried about bringing offense with your faith, but should stand upon it with all its sharpness as it cuts to the heart of the unbeliever as they are called to repentance and faith in Christ. The Word is preached so that more of the Lord's sheep would be called home and lose their offense at His words and thus receive His promise of eternal joy.

Jesus is "a rock of offense," because He is the cornerstone of the faith, and the reason the world despises you as a believer in Christ. But He only brings offense to those who are not in the one true faith. As those who have "ears to hear," you are not offended by His words, but comforted and assured by His blessed gift of forgiveness. Do not let your doubts that creep in by the devil's deception deter you from standing strong in your faith in the face of the world's offense. Tell the world "what you hear and see (v. 4)." What you hear is the precious Word of the Lord in the preaching of His Holy Gospel. What you see is the reconciliation He brings in the visible Word of His Holy Sacraments. By the blood of the One who brings offense, all have been redeemed from the scourge of sin, and, by faith, that redemption is applied to you and all who believe in the crucified and risen Savior for their salvation. Face the offense of the world with full hearts that believe in the promise of Jesus that you will live in eternity with Him in the light of His glory in the house of your Father, because that is the truth you have been given, and the gift that no one can take from you. Amen.