

Matthew 11:16-19, 25-30

11:16 "But to what will I compare this generation? It is like children sitting in the marketplaces and calling to one another,

11:17 'We played the flute for you, and you did not dance; we wailed, and you did not mourn.'

11:18 "For John came neither eating nor drinking, and they say, 'He has a demon';

11:19 the Son of Man came eating and drinking, and they say, 'Look, a glutton and a drunkard, a friend of tax collectors and sinners!' Yet wisdom is vindicated by her deeds."

11:25 At that time Jesus said, "I thank you, Father, Lord of heaven and earth, because you have hidden these things from the wise and the intelligent and have revealed them to infants;

11:26 yes, Father, for such was your gracious will.

11:27 All things have been handed over to me by my Father, and no one knows the Son except the Father, and no one knows the Father except the Son and anyone to whom the Son chooses to reveal him.

11:28 "Come to me, all you who are weary and are carrying heavy burdens, and I will give you rest.

11:29 Take my yoke upon you, and learn from me, for I am gentle and humble in heart, and you will find rest for your souls.

11:30 For my yoke is easy, and my burden is light."

Sermon: Nouns, Adjectives, and Intention

Meriam-Webster's Dictionary writes that:

Nouns make up the largest class of words in most languages, including English. A noun is a word that refers to a thing (*book*), a person (*Noah Webster*), an animal (*cat*), a place (*Omaha*), a quality (*softness*), an idea (*justice*), or an action (*yodeling*). It's usually a single word, but not always: *cake*, *shoes*, *school bus*, and *time and a half* are all nouns.

Here's what they say about adjectives:

Adjectives describe or modify—that is, they limit or restrict the meaning of—nouns and pronouns. They may name qualities of all kinds: *huge*, *red*, *angry*, *tremendous*, *unique*, *rare*, etc.

Based on these definitions, I will infer that nouns describe what is whole, while adjectives describe part of the whole.

And it seems to me the great tension of human existence, indeed of all creation, is the clash of nouns and adjectives. You see, I'm convinced that God is an entity solely focused on nouns. God creates, identifies, affirms, and loves the subjects of God's creation (everything in all creation!). And yes, it is true, that God hopes, expects even, that everyone of God's subjects will live into all the righteous possibilities and potential of their predicate, that they will eventually manifest love. But God never, not once, predicates the value of God's subjects upon their predicate. Our value as children of God is always, always, always rooted in subject. It's good to be a noun!

Humanity on the other hand, has made a habit of emphasizing its adjectives. Our systems and structures have been designed to limit and restrict the meaning of the whole. God created the world in six days, seven if you count the sabbath, and deemed all of it very good. And ever since that first Monday morning, humanity has been working to write a disclaimer that undercuts the totality of God's designation. Everybody and everything are *very good* as long as, unless, see the fine print below.

The arc of our scriptures support God's vision for wholeness. Every story, every covenant extends God's love and inclusion outward. From the garden, to Noah, to Abram and Sarai, to Moses, to Joshua, Israel – the collective community of God – is intended to expand outward. It's not that Abraham's descendants are entitled to God's exclusive presence and promises, it's that they are to be a conduit for connecting God, scattering God across the world. Every person, every part of creation is intended, righted even, to indwell in God's wholeness.

But humanity is stubborn. Even as God seeks to create ever-expansive circles, we keep using adjectives that constrict the boundaries of these circles. A few weeks ago, Bob mentioned the Hagar branch of Abraham's family. The circle wasn't big enough for two sons. God liberates Israel from the Egyptians, but not before an entire army is decimated. And cloaked in their newfound freedom, Israel evicts Canaan for having the audacity to live on habitable land. Woe to the boys and girls who live in foreign lands and worship foreign Gods; they will not marry our sons and daughters. Woe to Ninevah! Who told them God's grace was accessible; who told them God could change God's mind? Woe to the priests who did not descend from Zadok, servant to King David. Woe to the citizens of Judah who were not deported to Babylon – this new temple we're building is not for you! Woe to the

Samaritans who dare to worship God on a different mountain. We're lining up the adjectives to determine your worth, your value, your righteousness.

This is the frustration Jesus is addressing in this morning's pericope. God has created a game of wholeness and inclusion. And too many people keep acting like overzealous parents at an under-six soccer game. Yes, we *DO* have to keep score. Yes, my kid *DOES* need to play more minutes than everyone else. No, this isn't about fun. No, I don't have time to teach you fundamentals. Participation trophies? Come on, man!

We will not dance when you dance, we will not mourn when you mourn, we will NOT play your game. We are an *adjective* people.

Sure, John may cry out in the wilderness; sure, he may speak a fiery truth; sure, he neither feasts nor drinks. But make no mistake, he's a demon, because we don't like his adjectives. You see, John is not submissive, he is not patriotic, he is not compliant, he is not easily manipulated. He's too whole for us!

Yes, Jesus, you are much more fun than John. You are absolutely someone we'd like to have a beer with. The problem is that you think it's okay to have a beer with anyone, to sit at the lunch counter with anyone. You're a glutton, and a drunkard, and we don't like your adjectives either! You are too inclusive, too hospitable, too loving, too attuned to Torah. And you have the audacity to associate with sinners and tax collectors. Sorry man, you're just too whole for us!

Do you see the pattern, Millbrook? God designs a world that is enough, even more than enough. And then God invites creation into an

abundance where God, people, creatures, and land live in mutuality. And throughout history, humanity has had such a small sense of faith in the possibilities of mutuality that they both preach and practice a gospel of scarcity, a zero-sum gain world where one person's happiness must mean another person's sadness, one person's fortune another's misfortune. God becomes a pie to be carved up, a commodity to be exhausted.

Jesus tells us that real discipleship pushes back on the narrative of scarcity. A scarcity mindset never lets up. Pax Romana is never peace, it's just a game of Whack-a-Mole. Do you ever get to enjoy being king or queen of the mountain if you are always consumed with who you need to knock down? And what is the weight of a thousand tiny transactions all waiting to be repaid?

I haven't quoted a more modern gospel, recently, *Ted Lasso*. But there's a great line in the show where Ted opines that too often people are judged by their worst moments rather than their best. And all of us have bad moments. I would argue that a zero-sum gain world asks us to identify the very adjectives that define a neighbor's worst moments, and then use those adjectives to constrict the circle of God's love. But Jesus tells us that discipleship in God's world means never allowing an adjective to limit the meaning of the whole, never allowing the pessimism of a scarcity mindset to Samaritanize our neighbors.

Can you imagine? Love, unbounded? It sure isn't practical in today's world, but it comes with a promise for those who are bold enough to leap toward it. Obedience to the Jesus-way brings an easy yolk, and a light burden. And I ask you, has there ever been a time when our loyalty or our trust in our Creator felt like an unworthy pursuit? Has there ever been a time when God's consistency or integrity was in question? Has

there ever been a time when loving God and God's love for us required anything less than us simply being your own selves?

Now ask yourselves the same questions of the institutions that hold our loyalty, and especially those who dare to hold themselves in sacred company? How heavy are their burdens? How much of ourselves can we be within their set of adjectives?

This is what Jesus is telling us this morning, Millbrook. You, me, we, all of us, are loved beyond measure, held in the hands of an affectionate Creator, who yearns for our potential to burst forward, who delights in our presence, who says to themselves each and every moment, "I'm so glad I made you!" And while there a thousand adjectives I could use to describe the people who sit in this room, I hope you'll leave here remembering a noun, a word of unchanging distinction: *Beloved*. *YOU, ME, WE, ALL ARE GOD'S BELOVED*. Thanks be to God!!!

More Thoughts:

If you'll indulge me, I want to say a little more about nouns and adjectives. And I want to say it in the context of two things. The first being the 250th anniversary of our nation. The second being recent headlines of a peer church in North Carolina removing Baptist from their formal name.

My name is Bob, a noun. More formally, James Robert Stillerman. And I can tell you that in any given moment, I am a happy Bob, or a sad Bob, or a faithful, or doubting, or cantankerous, or tired, or hopeful, or energized Bob. But regardless of any of those adjectives, or the way I feel in any given moment, I am no less or no more of myself.

I will also tell you that I identify as a Christian, as a Baptist, and as an American – I think those are all proper nouns – who also can be happy, or sad, or faithful, or doubting, or cantankerous, or tired, or hopeful, or energized. And I believe I am no more or no less of those things in any given moment.

I will tell you that as an American, and a Baptist, and a Christian, I am very proud to be associated with three movements that have helped introduce some of the most expansive expressions of liberation in human history. And in the same breath, I ache, I grieve, because our pursuit and achievement of liberation has too often come at the expense, and continues to come at the expense, of so many neighbors who still long for liberation. We are both beautiful and flawed. Like our ancestors before us, we have experienced the bountiful blessings of God, while simultaneously being lured into a gospel of scarcity. We are a dramatic story, still waiting to be resolved, still the not-yet that will someday-be.

And in these hyper-partisan and polarized times, I believe we've really leaned into adjectives and qualifiers to credential our expressions of faith and patriotism. How often do we hear people say, "I'm not that kind of American, that kind of Baptist, that kind of Christian...?" We spend so much time defining *who we aren't* we often fail to make space for *who we are*.

Well, this is what I know. We pledge allegiance to a flag where we claim liberty and justice for all. We fly a banner lauding a kinship that unites all humanity in service and love. We belong to a faith tradition that 400-plus years ago established four essential freedoms: bible, soul, church, and religion.

Nouns, Adjectives, and Intention
Bob Stillerman
Sixth Sunday after Pentecost, 7/5/2026
Matthew 11:16-19, 25-30



We, Millbrook, have the capacity to realize these qualities. We, Millbrook, have the enthusiasm, imagination, and creativity to build a more just, more free, more loving world than the one we have inherited. We, Millbrook, have the grace, mercy, and stability of a Creator who give us the space to try, and try, and try again. And I believe that's a semiquincentennial worth celebrating.