

***Be Who Christ Was* Scripture: Matthew 11:7-19 & 1 John 4:7-21**

Amy Grant grew up in a religious and loving home in Nashville, Tenn. She regularly attended worship services Sunday morning, Sunday evening, and Wednesday night. The hymns she sang there shaped her faith and the message that would be part of her witness, but her church prohibited musical instruments in its worship. For her musical inspiration she turned to a crowded coffee house on Nashville's Music Row, and of course the Carole King and James Taylor albums she listened to at home.

In 1976 – weeks before her sixteenth birthday – she signed with Myrrh Records, which released her debut album the next year. Over the next decade or so, Ms. Grant produced dozens of albums that sold millions of copies, regularly made the Billboard charts, and earned her Grammy and Dove Award nominations.

When she started, contemporary Christian music was a little-known niche-market that was rarely heard outside of church basements and youth rooms. Some have said she probably did more than any other figure to put a warm and winsome public face on the growing evangelical movement. Her performances were polished, professional, and energetic. She captured the attention of the secular press, major-league concert venues, and national retail marketers.

Now, while many evangelicals hailed Grant as a musical ambassador to mainstream culture, others greeted her professional triumphs with complaints that she was too worldly and too sexually explicit. From the beginning, her career was marked by the controversy between those outward-looking evangelicals who believe the church's mission is to seek and save the lost, and those who believe the church is charged with the responsibility to preserve believers' holiness and moral purity.

Her energetic performance on the 1985 Grammy Awards telecast offended some evangelicals who considered her leopard-print jacket and bare feet improper. Her partnership with the Target retailer, which sponsored some of her tours, angered opponents of abortion who were boycotting the chain's parent company because of its support for Planned Parenthood.

A writer in the evangelical magazine “Christianity Today” criticized Ms. Grant’s 1997 release, “Behind the Eyes,” for its “complete absence of explicitly Christian lyrical content.” The ensuing controversy prompted the Gospel Music Association to adopt content requirements for its annual Dove Award entries.

“I never invested much emotional energy into putting out those grass fires,” she said. “I always kind of assumed that it is part of human nature to misunderstand people and assume the worst. So I didn’t say, ‘Oh, how awful it is to be misjudged.’” *(Rabey, Steve; May 11, 2002, “Religion Journal; A Chastened Singer Returns to Christian Basics,” The New York Times)*

In 1999 she divorced Gary Chapman – another popular contemporary Christian music artist. A year later she married country music star Vince Gill, who was also recently divorced. Almost immediately, her music disappeared from many Christian retail stores and radio stations, and she received no more invitations to perform at high-profile Christian events.

Grant never tried to justify her divorce. She has said, “I have come to see that Christianity is not really about the life perfectly led, but it’s about not giving up on the process and believing that there’s a much bigger picture to God’s purpose for all of us than our ability to screw it all up. We wouldn’t need a savior if everybody did everything all right.”

Something similar happened to Lauren Daigle. In an interview with WAY-FM Radio, Daigle defended herself by spreading a message of love. “I think the second we start drawing lines around which people are able to be approached and which aren’t, we’ve already completely missed the heart of God,” she said. “I don’t have all the answers in life and I’m definitely not gonna act like I do, but the one thing that I know for sure is I can’t choose who I’m supposed to be kind to and who I’m supposed to show love to and who I’m not, because that’s the mission right?” she continued. “Be who Christ was to everyone.”

In the midst of the controversy, Daigle said her calling is clearer to her now than it has ever been. Referring to her success as a crossover artist in an

interview with “The Christian Post,” Daigle said, “I think a lot of Christian backlash is just because they’re not used to being comfortable in an environment that might feel compromising... So, I think that’s the part that I just constantly go back to, ‘What is the Great Commission? To go out into the world, preaching about His love, sharing the good news.’ That’s how I look at it.”

Holiness used to mean something like strict religious observance – at least that is what Paul thought at first. What it really means is the love of God made known through the risen Lord Jesus Christ by the power of the Holy Spirit. Christians need to be cultivating a holy obsession with becoming holy people and what it really means.

Back to our scripture in Matthew 11, let me start by saying that Jesus questioning the crowd about their perceptions and expectations of the mission and ministry of John the Baptist feels abrupt and disjointed. John has been arrested and is being held in prison. He is hearing reports about the ministry of Jesus, but he is still not sure that Jesus checks all the boxes to legitimately qualify as the “Messiah.” John sends some of his followers to ask Jesus, “Are you the one who is to come, or should we look for another?” (Matthew 11:3). Jesus basically responds to them, “Go tell John what you have seen me do.”

Once they have left, Jesus begins to ask the crowd who remains about their assessment of John the Baptist. Jesus offers them a range of options; quite possibly Jesus is rehearsing the kinds of comments he has heard and overheard as he has been walking from village to village.

John’s ministry did attract lots of attention. People came from all over Judea to hear him preach. Many of them were moved to confess their sin and submit to baptism.

Others took offense at the harshness of his message. It was much easier to disparage him – his message, his diet, his clothing – than to accept the criticism he heaped on them. If his detractors could get people to question the character of the messenger, perhaps people would dismiss the content

of his message.

Jesus speaks to the heart of this controversy – this difference of interpretation. “Don’t be confused any longer,” Jesus seems to say. “What did you go out to see? A prophet? Yes, I tell you, and more than a prophet” (11:9). Jesus not only establishes John’s place in the great line of God’s prophets, Jesus proclaims that John is “more than a prophet.” “He is the one of whom it is written: Look, I’m sending my messenger before you, who will prepare your way before you” (11:10).

What follows is really quite puzzling. “I assure you that no one who has ever been born is greater than John the Baptist. Yet whoever is least in the kingdom of heaven is greater than he” (11:11). Jesus seems to be challenging everything we know about greatness. He is turning our ideas about position and prestige upside down. He is calling us to consider how different things look from God’s perspective than from our limited experience. God’s ways are different from our ways. “This world’s wisdom is foolishness to God” (1 Corinthians 3:19).

Jesus seems to recognize that he has left his audience dazed and confused. “To what will I compare this generation? It is like a child sitting in the marketplace calling out to others, “We played the flute for you and you didn’t dance. We sang a funeral song, and you didn’t mourn”” (11:16-17). Those who rely on their own insight are like children who can’t decide from one moment to the next what they want.

The people who were in this very crowd had probably been among those who complained that John was too radical, too austere, too extreme. And even though Jesus seemed a bit more relaxed, they weren’t that comfortable with some of the invitations he accepted. Perhaps they thought Jesus should be a little more careful about associating with some of *those* people.

The message is clear. If you are unwilling to receive God’s wisdom, you will

use any excuse to reject the one who delivers it. John is too strict. Jesus is too accommodating.

Before Jesus proceeds to heap on the “woes,” he closes with this maxim, “Yet wisdom is vindicated by her deeds” (11:19, NRSV). The New Living Translation reads, “But wisdom is shown to be right by its results.” The Message paraphrases it like this, “The proof of the pudding is in the eating.”

No matter how people assess God’s messengers or God’s message, Jesus is clear that those who seek to follow God must trust God to fulfill God’s promises. Once again, as Paul writes the Corinthians, “Don’t fool yourself. If some of you think you are worldly-wise, then you should become foolish so that you can become wise. This world’s wisdom is foolishness to God. As it’s written, *He catches the wise in their cleverness*. And also, *The Lord knows that the thoughts of the wise are silly*” (1 Corinthians 3:18-20).

We live at a time of a polarized and hyper-partisan politics of division. But think about it, America’s democratic, republican government is truly one of God’s chief gifts to us, a blessing we too often take for granted; and politics – derived from the Greek *polis*, “people” – is the primary agent by which God cares for all of God’s people. But in recent years, the emphasis is increasingly on inviting us to define ourselves in terms of what/who we’re against rather than what/who we’re for, and this fosters a negative identity of opposition that too easily and quickly breeds hate and can lead to violence.

The last months we have seen demonstrations across our country and around the world. The death of George Floyd was one of the precipitating events, but the harm done to people of color that is being protested has persisted over centuries. A coalition of voices is coming together to raise questions about how we might work together to move forward as a nation to address the persistent problems of systematic racism, injustice, and inequality.

In some ways, the current demonstrations seem to echo the demonstrations that were led by Martin Luther King, Jr. more than 50 years ago. In other ways, they are clearly building on the progress he and others in the Civil Rights Movement initiated.

Then, as now, there are those who object to the way the demonstrations are conducted. People object when marchers block city streets. People object when signs don't fully express the sentiment that they think would be fairer and more accurate. People object when the protestors question the modes, methods, and motives of those who have been charged with responsibility for preserving the peace.

It may be years before we are able to see where God is leading us – who was right and who was wrong – but for now I agree with Lauren Daigle: “I don't have all the answers in life and I'm definitely not gonna act like I do, but the one thing that I know for sure is I can't choose who I'm supposed to be kind to, and who I'm supposed to show love to ... because that's the mission right? Be who Christ was to everyone.”

Credit is given to Rev. Ashley Randall for his commentary and insights.