

**Centre Congregational Church, UCC  
The Rev Dr Scott Couper  
Sunday, July 9, 2023  
Sixth after Pentecost**

**“A Tribute to Pollyannaish Christians”**

**Scripture: Matthew 11:16-19, 25-30**



Credit: Christ Presbyterian Church in The Hill, New Haven, CT

This morning, I am going to begin my sermon by proposing an answer to the question I pose. The answer is: ‘our default setting’. If you need to write ‘default setting’ down, please so. Because there will be a quiz at the end of the sermon whereby you will be asked to provide the suggested answer to this morning’s question. Now, the question is: “What is it about us that renders Jesus’ teachings so counterintuitive and, sometimes, even absurd?” Answer: “Our default setting”.

Most modern vehicles have Bluetooth wherein the vehicle connects, communicates, and cooperates with a person’s smart phone. My children enjoy this feature because they can pipe their favorite music through their phones and

thus listen to the latest hip-hop music rather than listen to a lovely bouquet of chamber or baroque music to which I enjoy listening. Yet, there is a catch. You need to inform the vehicle's computer to which phone's Bluetooth should the car listen. You see, when Micah, Madeline, and I get into the car at the same time, all three of our phones begin talking to the vehicle and it's hard, I imagine, for it to decide whose music from whose phone to play. The decision is ultimately made by the vehicle's 'default setting'. When my children come to visit, they have the opportunity to change the vehicle's default setting from my phone to theirs so that they automatically play the music they wish to listen. (Likewise, when dating, a woman knows that I would like to enter into a long-term committed relationship with her if I invite her to make her phone the 'default' for my car. Such are the ways of romance today!)

Our scripture reading this morning from Matthew's gospel troubles me greatly. It is not a reading I often hear from the lectionary calendar and it is not one on which I recall preaching before today. Why am I uncomfortable with the reading? Because it speaks against me. And possibly you too. It makes me very uncomfortable. Perhaps, it also makes you uncomfortable.

In Jesus' time and place, many who were exhausted by oppression and impatient for the Day of the Coming of the Lord when the kingdom will be

restored to God's people asked Jesus, "Are you the one? When are you going to do it?" You see, many believed that John the Baptist heralded the coming age. And he ended-up in jail – and then beheaded. Then many believed that Jesus heralded the coming age. And nothing still was happening. Many began to doubt. Jesus then explained to them if they haven't yet heard and understood that the Kingdom of God was within them, then they might never. Jesus argued, 'You did not follow the teachings of John the Baptist. You only found fault with him. Now you are not following my teachings. You only find fault with me'. Jesus admonished them by saying you are so busy looking for error that you cannot hear the truth. Jesus essentially lamented that as a leader of a faith community, 'I am damned if I do and damned if I don't'. Jesus told them they were like children who could not decide what it was that amused them, so they ended-up doing nothing.

The reason why this scripture makes me uncomfortable, and perhaps you as well, is twofold. One, and most seriously, those of us, including me, who claim to be Christians, often do not really believe what Jesus taught. Most of us, for example, do not believe 'blessed are the poor' (Luke 6:20-21) – most of us do not really believe that Christ is revealed in the poor. Spend enough time in Harmony Parking Lot or the Transportation Center and you will know the truth of which I

am speaking. Most of us, for example, do not believe “love your enemy” (Matthew 5:43-44) – we sometimes even justify our enmity against the minister and fellow members of our own church! Another reason why this scripture makes me uncomfortable is that Jesus preached that the learned and the wise are often the most ignorant of his teachings. I have four years of undergraduate work, three years of divinity school, and six years of study to earn my doctorate. That is thirteen years of higher education. I, like many of you, am proud that I consider myself educated. I strive to be discerning and a wise adjudicator of that which is right and wrong. But, am I any more faithful for any of this? Is it all just ‘vanities’ (Ecclesiastes 1:1)?

Today, Jesus proclaims to me and to you that all that education, intelligence, and wisdom comes to naught as a follower of Jesus Christ if our default setting is not attuned to the heart and mind of God. Jesus in two instances taught us the heart and mind of God. The first instance was when he preached the Beatitudes (Matthew 3:5-10) on the Sermon of the Mount. The second instance was when Jesus taught the Pharisee who was considered to be an expert in the Law: “‘Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your might’ (Deuteronomy 6:5). This is the first and greatest commandment. And the

second is like it: 'Love your neighbor as yourself'. All the Law and the Prophets hang on these two commandments" (Matthew 22:37-40).

In our church's next Christian Theology class, we will explore the Apostles' Creed and the Nicene Creed as we examine how we moved from Jesus' teaching to those of the institutional church. One of the reasons why I do not include the Apostles Creed (NCH 881) or the Nicene Creed (NCH 883) in worship is because they speak little or nothing of the Beatitudes or of the commandments summed into two. The creeds are ancient Greco-Roman philosophy and ecclesiastic compromises by which Jesus would have been mystified if he heard them taught as matters of faith that, only if believed, were salvific. Neither creeds even mention the word 'love' as motivation for anything. Note that both of essential teachings of Jesus begin with, and thus are based on, love.

Our scripture reading informs us that Jesus' and our generation struggle understanding the mind and heart, and thus fail to follow the will, of God because our default setting as humans incline us to overvalue education, money, power, and even one another's favor. The overvaluation of these qualities causes our default setting to be anthropocentric rather than divine. And I, as a so-called religious leader, perhaps, am the guiltiest of all. Perhaps I, more so than any of you, so desperately needs Church, this church, this worship service, and the Word

of God in the scriptures to snap me out of my default setting for even just an hour, or a day, perhaps a week. I need this (worship) and I need all of you *every week* or I will be forever lost and stuck in my default setting.

In addition to weekly worship, being with Christian role models, fellow believers, and those rare few who are inherently predisposed to think and feel like God, enable us to also change our default setting. I will tell you a secret: those who seemingly love ‘without sense’ have inherited the realm of God. It is those who are Pollyannaish who are blessed by God to hear and see the gospel. Those who ‘do the right thing because it is right’ are attuned to the Spirit of God. Those who serve the church without reward that are truly servants of God (and that eliminates me). Those who need not have tasks done *only their way* serve others rather than themselves. Brattleboro and Centre Church has many such faithful role models – and many, if not most, are not confessing Christians.

Together now: To attune ourselves to God, we must change our ‘what’?

Default setting.

When we change our default setting, we worry less about who to impress. We worry less about success. We worry less about being right or wrong. We worry less about having to learn more. When we change our default setting to God, the burdens that we carry are taken-off our shoulders and we are relieved. Jesus

advocated to us to receive God's word as infants. If we do so, we will have rest.

The yoke is easy and the burden is light, if our default setting is God's spirit.

This was the Word of God. And it was spoken to the people of God. And the people of God responded, "Amen".