
What Have You Seen and Heard? A Sermon on Luke 7:18-30

Man-Hei Yip

*Assistant Professor of Systematic Theology
Wartburg Theological Seminary*

Have you ever wondered why seminary professors don't give you an easy answer to your questions? Today's gospel text is another classic response from Jesus: Not answering the question directly.

Here in the first six verses of the text, Jesus did not give a "yes" or "no" answer to the question posed by the disciples of John the Baptist. The issue is not about why Jesus can't give a specific yes or no; rather, the question itself is complex and requires more than a simple yes or no response.

"Are you the one who is to come, or are we to wait for another?" This question was asked twice. Apparently, this is an important question for the questioner and those concerned about whether this one is really the one "who is to come."

Now think for a moment, when we ask the question, "Are you the one who is to come?" are we also asking the person to prove one's qualifications so we can see if this one would fit the job description? Are we then presupposing what this one should look like? What criteria was being used to determine if this was the one who really was to come? And in this case, are John the Baptist and perhaps his disciples as well looking for something that could meet their expectations of what the messiah should be?

The question leads us to probe further into who Jesus is. And now Jesus is going to tell us who he is. Instead of giving a yes answer to John's messengers, Jesus provided a track record of what he has done. In verse 22, Jesus answered, "Go and tell John what you have seen and heard: the blind receive their sight, the lame walk, the lepers are cleansed, the deaf hear, the dead are raised, the poor have good news brought to them." By displaying his credentials, Jesus is not asking for our endorsement or approval. But if he were, there might be a lot of work for him to catch up. (Endorsement and approval interviews are never easy. We all know that.)

Those who hold certain views on the eschatological expectations of a messiah might not be impressed with such credentials. The Messiah, who is to come, would be associated with a vision of establishing God's kingdom in confrontation with Roman rule and oppression. In fact, John the Baptist was imprisoned at the time of sending his disciples to Jesus, according to Matthew 11:2, for the crime of speaking truth. His expectations of the coming one would unsurprisingly involve bringing judgment to the world, which was mentioned a few chapters earlier (3:17), and perhaps,

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also, free him from prison. Jesus' performance did not match up to the expectations. That being the case, Jesus honored the work that John had done in preparing the way for him.

What also deserves our attention is that Jesus' unapologetic answer to John's messengers destabilizes fixed notions of messiahship by offering multiple experiences across and within communities. "(T)he blind receive their sight, the lame walk, the lepers are cleansed, the deaf hear, the dead are raised, the poor have good news brought to them." By proclaiming that, Jesus has also indicated his fulfillment of Isaiah's messianic promise. Jesus is the one. This coming one, comes to redefine the role of the Messiah, and expand the scope of salvation. God's salvation has come to those who were conventionally excluded from the hope of it. Jesus embodied a different vision of God's kingdom that complicates the discussion of who are to be included as recipients of hope and salvation, and further, disrupts the routine of things by lifting up the lowly, bringing wholeness to people on both personal and communal levels, and reordering power relationships.

What have we seen and heard?

It is such a strange time when the world in which we live is continually fragmented by ideologies of violence and destructive narratives. Connection with another human being becomes flimsy and fractured. It is also a fascinating time to see and hear the blossoming of ideas and concepts that promise to dismantle injustice of all kinds.

But it is tempting to give easy answers to big questions, at

this juncture. The world wants what is pleasing to the eye and the ear. It is therefore tempting to prophesize the resources we have leaned on for direction, guidance, and healing during these precarious times as the only sources of wisdom decent enough to be listened to. These resources so easily turn us into some kind of experts who set the agenda of what to say and not to say, thus who is in and who is out.

Then, who do we think we are when we say we are privileged to participate in the event of preparing “your way for you”? Where can we see and hear the “You” during the preparation, when all that we see and hear is how we can achieve that end and make things happen by our unshakable certainty?

Judith Butler, in her work *The Force of Non-violence*, reminds us that “We are living in a time of numerous atrocities and senseless death.”¹

But none of us should seek to be saints, if what that means is that we hoard all goodness for ourselves, expelling the flawed or destructive dimension of the human psyche to actors on the outside, those living in the region of the “not me,” with whom we dis-identify. . . then, we have entered into a bifurcated reality in which our own aggression is edited out of the picture or projected onto others.²

We have seen and heard all those atrocities and senseless deaths, but we cannot allow ourselves to create a discourse on the etiology of a disorder that reduces what we have seen and heard into one that absolutizes what we think the way things should be.

Not only has our very discourse on what we have seen and heard fragmented the dialogue with people whose lived experiences are different from our own, but it has also failed to address unnecessary binary situations that divide people, and unfortunately helped prolong that divide. We have seen and heard enough over the last few years.

We are not called to construct “a bifurcated reality” that reinforces our self-righteous claims by expelling those “not me” and dis-identifying them. Those “not me” are also created in God’s image. They do not need our approval to be who they are. They are not made separate nor their intrinsic value anything less than.

In the season of waiting, we are invited to pause and deeply reflect on what we have seen and heard. The in-breaking of God’s reign through the coming one, who has transcended borders and boundaries wondrously and mysteriously causes us to tremble. For Jesus’ expanded and non-conforming response tells us of who he is, and that alone disrupts our way of knowing. In our act of preparing the way, we are reminded that the way itself is independent of our knowledge and understanding, and it does not rely on our own doing lest that ends up seeking a yes to prove our theological and personal convictions.

In the season of waiting, we are given the privilege faithfully and humbly to witness to what we have seen and heard. And what

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we have seen and heard reveals the one who is to come, the one who has already gone beyond the limits of knowledge structured in a narrowed frame of temporality and spatiality.

The salvific activities realized by this one to come offer the ground for us to traverse in the here and now. The salvific activities realized by the coming one re-direct our attention to the pain and suffering of the world in the realm of the everyday. We are graciously included in the event of preparing the way to speak of how the salvific activities have been rooted in the radical love of this coming one, and how this one to come has opened up new eschatological possibilities: “the blind receive their sight, the lame walk, the lepers are cleansed, the deaf hear, the dead are raised, the poor have good news brought to them.” We are not seeking a yes that satisfies our desires of feeling good and being right, but the wellbeing of others including but not limited to their aspiration, dignity, and humanity. We are called to witness to the hope that is grounded in the promise of God in Jesus Christ, who has come to be with us “in a time of numerous atrocities and senseless deaths,” which is subversive good news to the world.

May Christ be our Light that shines in our hearts so that we can see, and may this Light prepare us to be and becoming so that we can live as the embodiment of God’s kin-dom in preparing the way for the Lord. And “all flesh shall see the salvation of God” (Luke 3:6). Amen.³

1. Judith Butler, *The Force of Nonviolence: The Ethical in the Political* (London: Verso, 2020), 185.

2. Butler, *The Force of Nonviolence*, 186.

3. Published in honor of my professor, Dr. Norma Cook Everist.