

“Come To Me”
Matthew 11: 16-19, 25-30
July 5, 2020
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In our Gospel lesson today, Jesus says, “Come to me, all you that are weary and are carrying heavy burdens and I will give you rest. Take my yoke upon you and learn from me; for I am gently in heart, and you will find rest for your souls. For my yoke is easy, and my burden is light.”

Hearing these readings on a day when many are still engaged in celebrating American Independence Day certainly brings to mind the symbolic freedoms associated with the signing of the Declaration of Independence. Along with these celebrations there is a time for rest. It is a long weekend, three days of rest rather than the usual two day weekend. Even though our country is made up of a diverse mix of people, nations, cultures, and languages, these readings challenge us to engage in a full understanding of power and a complete surrender to God. They challenge us to questions where our loyalties lie, but more importantly, we are challenged to understand that sin sometimes comes from inaction as surely as it comes from action. On this day we might even say that we are being challenged to free ourselves from the sinfulness of the world and to declare our lives in dependence to our God.

It has been a wearying time to be in the church lately. The grief for many over the loss of lives to the coronavirus is a hard weight to bear for our families and in our communities. The loss of jobs and livelihoods has been devastating. The inability to meet face to face, to comfort each other is nothing but a loss as well. The shutting down of so many things that we are used to and staying at home so long has felt like a long slog with a heavy back pack. The news about the coronavirus brings with it the ups and downs of the daily reports, but Jesus is telling us today – “Come to me!”

Today’s scripture lesson is quite a contrast to what we have been hearing Jesus say over the last few weeks. Jesus has been talking about the cost of discipleship – the certainty of persecution, conflict, suffering, and painful division for those who choose to follow him. “Leave it all behind, pick up your cross, give up your life for my sake.” Some difficult words to take in at times.

Today his tone changes, and Jesus is all sweetness and light – promising rest and comfort, light burdens and easy yokes. Now this is more like it! Gentle masters are much more to our liking, if we must have masters at all. In some respects though, Jesus’ words are a little more complex than they might seem at first.

First of all, the primary thrust of what Jesus is saying here is not directed toward people who have just any kind of difficulty. By “all you that are weary and carrying heavy burdens,” or the older translation, “who labor and are heavy laden,” Jesus doesn’t primarily mean folks with

ordinary problems, such as too many bills, being unemployed, sick, or having ungrateful kids, a hard life or whatever.

Jesus has all sorts of things to say about stuff like that, but that's not what he is talking about here. Here, Jesus is talking quite specifically to and about those who are on a religious quest, those who are seeking God and a closer relationship with God. He is calling to himself the religiously exhausted, those who, like Paul was just saying, have tried all of the usual ways of finding some peace with the divine and achieved only frustration. The yoke was a common symbol for the Law of Moses, especially for the details of the law and minute, ever-expanding demands of the legalism of the Pharisees. In many respects this was the main way the rabbi used the word "yoke," allegorically.

Matthew is presenting an exaggerated picture of the Pharisees because most of them were not nearly this bad and many were not bad at all, but there were enough jerks to justify the caricature.

And that is why Jesus says that the wise and intelligent – that is the religious leaders had missed the point. Then he adds that only the Son, not those leaders, and not you nor anyone else, only the Son knows the Father. The yoke of the Pharisees and their demands that you have to do this and that is exactly right in order to matter to God, in order to be a decent person, in order to be loved or counted significant – that is a yoke that Jesus rejects even though it was the yoke of the wise and the intelligent.

That yoke, the yoke of seeking God by keeping the rules, by doing what somebody or everybody else says is the thing to do, by trying to get it right all the time and so living constantly in fear of getting it wrong, that is the yoke that leads those who wear it to "labor and be heavy laden." It leads to living in what Paul just called "this body of death."

God does not want us to be frustrated and exhausted, God wants us to remember his presence is with us and God's love for us are never the results of our actions at time because He is in charge and we are not. In response to all of this, Jesus says, "Come to me." Not to a new law or a new teaching, not to a book or a list, but "to me." Come to Jesus himself.

In essence, Jesus is saying, "If you seek God; if you seek his love; if you seek a life that makes some sense; if you want a way of understanding the world that allows you to deal honestly with what happens and not be destroyed; if you want to be who you were created to be – the Jesus says "come to me." It is a call to a relationship. A relationship with Jesus and with the community that continues Jesus' life and ministry.

The alternatives, then and now, will fail, but Jesus will not! We are reminded of the commandments that God has taught us are kept by loving God and our neighbor. Such is the yoke of Christ. Since this yoke has to do with the commandments to love, those who seriously take that yoke upon themselves usually find that it is shaped very much like the cross that we wear around our neck.

By now, the gardens that were planted a few months ago look like they might bear fruit. Into the wet dark ground went the little seeds, many almost too small to see like the lettuce

seeds. A profound gesture of hope, the planting of seeds; a vote of confidence in the orderly and predictable power of life. Put those little brown specks in the ground and add water and you are going to get plants.

Of course some of them aren't going to make it. When they get to be a couple inches high, we have to thin them; pull about half of them up by their tiny roots and toss them so that the ones remaining have a better shot at the nutrients the soil will provide. Of course the birds and the critters have watched where you have carefully put them. They may do some thinning of their own for you so now you may not have as many growing plants as you started out with at first or as you had wished. The life is strong, but a lot can happen along the way. Growth into fruit-bearing maturity is not a sure bet.

God as a farmer is not an image we think of right away. We are used to thinking of God as a mighty ruler; God as a Father or God as a judge. Those are images we have seen and heard a lot. But God as a gardener, investing love and labor in us from which we spring into a season of life under the sun; to think of God as a farmer offers us an aspect of divine character that we usually miss. On the other hand, it gives us a glimpse of God as one who hopes for us.

The God who hopes and hopes for our good. The God who longs for everything to go well in our lives. Now that is a very different image from the one many people may carry, that image of a God who rains down trouble on the bad and prosperity on the good from a distant heaven.

This God of the garden is on our side, cheering us on, hoping that we will stretch and grow. God the gardener is invested in us. We might remember when we were young about some hopes that we may have had – famous movie stars, famous athletes, being a lawyer or whatever, so what do we think now?

By now most of us have found out that human hopes sometimes require an adjustment. Some of us have experienced things in our lives that we perhaps may not have chosen or ever realized would happen in our lives. Most of us have found that the power of which we felt so certain in our youth really wasn't ours after all. A lot can happen. Put in a few decades of life and you come to understand that a lot can happen along the way.

And yet, we have also come to understand something else in life; it has been during those times of trouble, those times when things decidedly did not go our way that we grew the most. We get strong from trouble, not from the trouble itself, but from surviving it. We may not be able to choose everything in our lives, but we can always choose whether or not to allow ourselves to grow from it. It is that choice for which God has enabled us to grow. God the gardener, the sower is always close to us and full of hope for our good.

When Jesus used this metaphor to help his hearers understand God's love he spoke to the people about planting things. Jesus also spoke about the cost of discipleship and the yoke that

is good to bear because it leads to life. To put it on is to be embraced by God's mercy and to carry it is to fulfill both God's will and our own deepest humanity.

Today Jesus gave us these most reassuring words "Come to me, all you that are weary and are carrying heavy burdens, and I will give you rest. 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. For my yoke is easy and my burden is light."

We are called to this new yoke that leads to the greatest journey of human existence and it leads to the richest fulfillment and deepest satisfaction that we can experience in our lives. Jesus said, "Come to me if you seek God, if you seek life, I will give you rest."

Amen