



July 5, 2020 - Rest, then a yoke

Given by Rev. Mattei

Zechariah 9:9-12; Romans 7:15-25a; Matthew 11-15.25-30

If we concede that Jesus was human in all things, then he also had feelings and emotions. He showed great compassion for the poor and the sick but he also got upset with the money changers in the Temple, with the Pharisees, and with his own disciples. He enjoyed the company of others and he also valued time alone for rest and prayer. He prayed for unity among people but he was also aware that not everybody was buying his message. He realized that his message was hard for some people to take in and that it would cause division within one's family and society. In fact, the opposition to his message would be so fierce that not only he risked being hurled off a cliff but he was even expelled from his own hometown. He became a stranger to his own people: unwelcome, unwanted, and ostracized.

Jesus realized that his love for God needed to translate in love for the vulnerable. The freedom the gospel came to offer was to embrace the whole person (physically, mentally, and spiritually) and was meant for liberation from all ailments. If anyone suffered, all suffered: sin is never individual but is interwoven within the fabric of society.¹ That also meant that if one suffered, Jesus himself suffered by association: he cared and had empathy for the voiceless for whom he consistently showed compassion in his ministry. His own name spelled out the mission he had received from God, his Abba: he would be called *Emmanuel*, which is God-with-us, manifesting the closeness of God to all people, and *Jesus*, which means God saves, declaring that God is not satisfied with empty worship and lip service especially by the religious elite and those with access to wealth and social resources. If people are getting the short end of the stick and their plea is ignored, God wants true justice and liberation from any mistreatment and oppression.

In today's gospel, Jesus compares those who are rejecting his proclamation to children sitting in the marketplace and refusing to play each other's games (11:16-19). One group wants to play pop music but can't get the others to dance when the tune is piped.

¹ Society as an interdependent system develops out of Dr. Murray Bowen's family theory where a "problem" individual is not thought of as a symptomatic *patient* but as a representative of unhealthy family and social dynamics.



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The other group wants to play the blues but can't get the others to hum along with them. The differing styles coincide with John's and Jesus' ministries. Just as some refused to repent when challenged by John, whom they considered too rough and weird, so, too, they now refuse to join the celebrations of Jesus, dismissed as merely "a man, a glutton and a drunkard."

The children all just sit, content with calling each other names and blaming one other.

Different strokes for different folks don't seem to work for the people of Jesus' generation. They have choices to make: Will they dance or will they mourn? Will they be shaken and enticed to come closer to God through John's harsh and abrasive style or will they embrace Jesus' gentle and humble encouragement?

Unfortunately, whether it was John or Jesus calling the tune, few have left the sidelines to join the dance. Blindness, stubbornness and self-absorption are hard to beat. Jesus is not impressed with the people's claim of belonging to the correct religious group from birth² or the fact that they had the Lord's name ever on their lips and done fantastic ministry in his name.³ The kingdom of heaven requires compassion and the correction of injustices.

Consequently, Jesus' ministry (and by extension, our ministry) ought to be more than a hand down or a band aid on a wound. Whatever situation Jesus approached, he saw it with the eyes of a prophet, that is, from God's perspective. He recognized the gap between what is and what could be. When there was a need for healing or relief from demonic influence, that is, where God's reign was being thwarted, Jesus did not retreat but put his life on the line.

He expects his followers to look at reality from God's perspective and engage the oppressive powers that do not allow for life to flourish. Obviously, this requires discernment. We need to ask: who is hurting, what's causing the pain, where does God

² Matthew 3:7-10

³ "Not everyone who says to me, 'Lord, Lord,' will enter the kingdom of heaven, but only the one who does the will of my Father in heaven. On that day many will say to me, 'Lord, Lord, did we not prophesy in your name, and cast out demons in your name, and do many deeds of power in your name?' Then I will declare to them, 'I never knew you; go away from me, you evildoers.'" (Mt. 7:21-23)



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stand in all this, and what can I do to ease the suffering? There are always choices to be made. Even my sitting by the sideline is a choice that can contribute to the spread of evil.

The children in the marketplace behaved childishly. If we choose to sit out in the face of injustice, have we heard and understood the tune Jesus is playing for us? Just as wisdom calls out to us, so too, does foolishness. We must choose. Our choices will have consequences, one way or the other: Actions (and inactions) precipitate reactions. There are consequences for the choice we don't make.

I am sure we don't want to sit by the sideline because we love the Lord. We want to step up and be agents of change. There is so much change that is called for. But the questions that come up are: Where will I start? What can I do?

But before we engage in practical things to do, the poor and the oppressed may be better served by other questions we may want to ask ourselves such as,

- Am I clear about what the Lord requires of me?
- Do I have a fuller understanding of what the kingdom of God is about, that is, not something we enjoy in the afterlife but the liberation from all chains here and now?
- What am I afraid to lose if I followed Jesus all the way (status, wealth, family, friends)?
- What am I trying to avoid? What am I for?
- Am I living in integrity with my values?
- Am I truly seeing what is going on around me from the perspective of those who suffer or am I too busy defending my position?
- Am I willing to listen, deeply listen, and then perhaps even champion the needs of others who call for equity and cry for a structural change of all our institutions or do I dismiss their demands as inappropriate?

Often, evil is so interlocked in so many aspects of life that confronting it may be overwhelming. Just hearing about evil in the news can be demoralizing and evoke



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feelings of hopelessness. Jesus understands all that so he extends an invitation when he tells the weary to “come, find rest.”

As we learn and mature in our walk with Christ, we should grow in understanding the importance of knowing God and perhaps more importantly being known by God. Starting from there and finding rest with him allows us to re-center and examine ourselves. We need to let the Spirit of Jesus question us. We need to spend time with our fears. It’s OK to confess where we have come short, where we have remained indifferent or even contributed to other’s pain.

As I mentioned in the past, Jesus’ ministry of teaching, preaching, and healing manifests the binary dynamic of God’s realm: when the Word of God is proclaimed to us we are faced with judgment and salvation, division and healing, law and gospel. God’s Word exposes our sin and therefore convicts us. At the same time, it graciously offers salvation and healing as it pierces our hearts and opens our eyes. Sin lures us away from the Holy. God’s Word intends to offer salvation as it attempts to redeem us from sin, clean up the stained image of God in us, and reconcile us to what is holy. Judgment is a tool God uses to open our eyes and ears, to draw us toward repentance, not to induce brokenness but to uncover and heal what is broken.

The division generated by sin is the final product of the failure to respond to Jesus’ ministry (11:16-19 and 25:31-46). Salvation, on the other hand, is the outcome of Jesus’ ministry among the most vulnerable and yet the most attuned to his message (11:25-30). The wise and the intelligent are too full of themselves to be able to receive what Jesus has to offer. Willingness and receptivity require humility and openness of heart. This is the beginning of our attunement to God’s work in the world. Willingness and receptivity make it possible for us both to see and to respond faithfully to God’s presence and power.

But rest in Jesus is only the beginning. He clearly states soon after inviting us to find rest in him that that rest comes with an easy yoke and a light burden. The purpose of the yoke is for us to take on what we’d rather not. That seems to be the cost of associating with Jesus. What shall we say? But be assured: the yoke is easy and the



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burden light exactly *because* we are associated with him. It gives meaning to our life. When we feel the yoke and the burden we know he is nearby, directing us.

Over 30 years ago, Archbishop Desmond Tutu, warned us “If you are neutral in situations of injustice, you have chosen the side of the oppressor.” So, what are we to do? We can start by educating ourselves about the plight of those who suffer. *White Fragility* by Robin DiAngelo and *The New Jim Crow* by Michelle Alexander are a good place to start.

Next, avoid passing on racist jokes about African-Americans, Latinos, and Asians or demeaning remarks about gays, lesbians, and transgender people or people of other faiths. If you witness a hate incident, say something. You can’t remain neutral, the incident has already involved and affected you. Offer support, stay nearby and possibly film the incident. If things escalate, invite the targeted person to join you in leaving the area, then ask them how they are feeling to offer emotional support.

Another thing we can do is to financially support organizations whose purpose is to advocate for those unjustly targeted, such as the Southern Poverty Law Center (www.splcenter.org) or the American Civil Liberties Union (www.aclu.org) and church organizations that advance the rights and the protection of the LGBTQUIA+ community such as ReconcilingWorks: Lutherans for Full Participation (www.reconcilingworks.org), or those who offer healing and hope to refugees and immigrants such as Lutheran Services Florida (www.lsfnet.org).

May the Good Lord bless us with the revelation reserved for infants. May we find rest in him and courage to take on the burden. Amen.