

“Rest for Your Souls”

Fourteenth Sunday in Ordinary Time / Proper 10

Matthew 11:16-19, 25-30

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From the Pulpit

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Prayer for Illumination: God of our weary years and God of our silent tears.... Open us to your Holy Spirit moving in this place, through these words which are read and proclaimed. May they fall all our ears and in our souls that we may be strengthened and renewed each day.

Comfort. Refreshment. Rest. Things we all need. This is the time of year when people hope to get some refreshment. We hope to slow down a little, play a little more, have more time, here in the midsummer, to refresh ourselves and the people we love. Take a trip, if we can afford one. Relax a little at home, if we can't. We are tired. We need a break. A little refreshment. A little comfort.

In the age of all day political news cycles, global and national upheaval, family lives moving at blazing speed (in multiple directions), who doesn't need some space to sit and be. We find ourselves in a house of worship, a cathedral of grace, seeking the presence of God and the Holy Spirit moving among us offering peace and comfort.

Whether we want them or not the burdens we carry can be overwhelming. We are strapped with things we can't control; work life that is too much, home life that is not peaceful, relationships that drain us instead of giving us joy—we carry

heavy burdens. The burdens come in all varieties and weigh us down.

Some of us bear the yoke of illness;

Some of us bear the yoke of loss and grief;

we bear the yoke of caring for those who cannot care for themselves;

the yoke of unemployment or underemployment;

of hunger;

of homelessness;

of oppression or marginalization;

of violence;

of anger;

of depression;

of addiction.¹

These are just some of the yokes that we have chosen to carry. Some of the yokes have chosen us.

Whatever the burden you carry with you this day, we all want comfort. Refreshment. Rest. Jesus offers us rest. Jesus also offers the disciples and us a special invitation. Our desire may be for Jesus simply to take all the weight away, so we don't have to carry it. Jesus seems not to offer that sort of help in the way we would want. He says he will share the

¹ A prayer from John W. Vest, and posted on **John Vest**. <http://johnvest.com/>

load with but, not completely take it over. It is only after we take that yoke and learn from him that we will find rest for our souls (v. 29).

This invitation is the gift of Jesus' very presence with us. He offers his very self to us, to come along side us and share in the burdens we carry. **In him, we will find not only rest but a new path of discipleship and living.** God calls us into a relationship with Jesus and with the divine. Wherever we go – we discover God in Jesus Christ is already there. God is already there waiting for us, encouraging us, forgiving us, guiding us. This is what makes the burden light, the yoke not just easy but joyful.²

God is constantly calling us to engage our lives in the faithful journey of discipleship. And often, we don't take up the call. We'd rather push it to the side, and reject the offer completely; instead, plowing on our own way. We feel more comfortable forging the path that we create.

During the time of Jesus, the people rejected John the Baptist because he was too harsh and judgmental out there on the banks of the Jordan River. Then Jesus comes along and he opens his arms wide to everyone. Every sinner that crosses his path is welcomed to join him. The people reject

² <http://www.davidlose.net/2017/07/pentecost-5-a-where-we-least-expect-god-to-be/> july 2, 2017

Jesus because it appears that his standards are too footloose and fancy free.

Rejection is an important and necessary skill we all develop. As we grow up we learn that not every invitation is worth accepting. We cannot be all things to all people. We need to make discerning choices all day long about what we can do and what we must refuse to do. We form a framework about who we are and a set of expectations about what we will do. It makes it easier for us to process the many choices we have to make every day. “Oh, I always do things like this, yes I will do it.” Or, “Oh, I never do something like that; no I will not do that.” The whole process is a normal function of personal identity.

But here is the thing. When God comes knocking on the doors of our lives it is rarely to say, “Hey just wanted to let you know that you should stay exactly the way you have always been.” And the divine rarely arrives tailored to fit our personal expectations of who God is and how God should be. So what do we do? Very often we turn on our filter of evaluation and say that is not who I am so I reject what you are saying and you do not look like what I expected so I do not believe you are God.

Those people who rejected John the Baptist because he screamed too much and Jesus because he was too friendly to the obvious sinners were not stupid, or not wanting to receive God. They were just using the filters they had developed for who they were and who God is and things did not add up.

Because God is so much bigger than our categories and our rules, and even our imaginations, it is inevitable that God's actions in the world will surprise us. And we do not like surprises. Some of us say we do, but we really do not. When we say we like surprises we mean when someone throws a surprise birthday party or when we accidentally discover a fabulous new restaurant. Most of us do not like it when we are surprised to learn that our entire life is being turned upside down and these are the kinds of surprises God can bring.

Life is full and complicated enough for us most of the time. The last thing we are looking for is disruption to the routines we create in order to believe we might have some control over the roller coaster of life. We created our routines and assumptions to make our lives easier and none of us want our lives to be any harder than they are now. But here is the biggest surprise of the entire endeavor.

Listen again to the final verses of this morning's text. "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." God's unexpected arrival in our lives bringing us unexpected news is readily seen as a difficult challenge to the lives we have created.

But very often the lives we have created, or at least parts of them, are making things more difficult for us than we realize. **The biggest surprise is that in Jesus, God is not calling us to be something or someone other than who we truly are, but to be exactly who we truly are.** We do not realize how many of our assumptions and routines are actually masking who we truly are as children of God.

We do not realize how often our rules inhibit God's life-giving grace from flooding into our lives. Now do not get me wrong, the yoke we are being called to wear is one of service and discipleship. There will be challenges and obstacles to overcome and plenty of good old-fashioned work. **But each step leads us closer to who we really are and there is no sweeter way to live your lives than being who you were created to be.**

If we want, we can obviously find ways to walk away from God's call, to dig ourselves deep down in our routines and assumptions to make sure we never see what is being offered. Yes, Jesus is inviting us forward and asking us to put on a yoke. And yes, that yoke will bind us in certain ways. We can become bound to yokes that damage us, addictions, dysfunctional relationships, jobs that demean us.

Or we can become bound to yokes that though they may be heavy, do not seem so heavy because of the connections they create for us: relationships of mutual trust and support, jobs that reward and fulfill us, even passionate hobbies that challenge and enlighten us.

Perhaps, like any good salesman, Jesus is stretching the truth a tad when he says, "My yoke is easy, and my burden is light." A chapter earlier he calls upon his followers to take up the cross" and that does not sound easy and light. Loving our neighbor is not always easy and light. Being the church together is not always easy and light.

But here is what Jesus knew that we need to learn and be reminded of on a regular basis; when we choose to put on a yoke of meaningful purpose, a yoke of faithfulness, a yoke that strives to join in the creation of God's reign, we discover our true selves. We discover who God created us to be. We find

ourselves putting down the things we carry that bring us limited satisfaction. We find the ultimate satisfaction, the ultimate freedom of recognizing who we are and whose we are and what our purpose is in this world.

The first Psalm describes those who choose the yoke of faithfulness: “They are like trees planted by streams of water which yield their fruit in its season, and their leaves do not wither. In all that they do, they prosper.”³

Thanks be to God. Amen.

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³ With Gratitude for thoughts and inspiration from Rev. Doug King at Brick Presbyterian Church for his insight on this passage. Used with permission. www.brickchurch.org