

6th Sunday after Pentecost
Sermon 7.5.26

Matthew 11:16-19; 25-30

“But to what will I compare this generation? It is like children sitting in the marketplaces and calling to one another, ‘We played the flute for you, and you did not dance; we wailed, and you did not mourn.’ For John came neither eating nor drinking, and they say, ‘He has a demon’; the Son of Man came eating and drinking, and they say, ‘Look, a glutton and a drunkard, a friend of tax collectors and sinners!’ Yet wisdom is vindicated by her deeds.”

At that time Jesus said, “I thank you, Father, Lord of heaven and earth, because you have hidden these things from the wise and the intelligent and have revealed them to infants; yes, Father, for such was your gracious will. All things have been handed over to me by my Father, and no one knows the Son except the Father, and no one knows the Father except the Son and anyone to whom the Son chooses to reveal him.

“Come to me, all you who 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.” (473)

I officiated a baptism once, a young adult who’d grown up in a mixed family, Jewish and Catholic. The young person had been raised without religion but with strong cultural markers. This baptism: it wasn’t good news to the Jewish father. But the luke-warm Catholic mother told me she was fine with it. “When it comes to religion,” she said, “everyone has to find their own way.”

Well, of course, how this strikes your hearing depends on where you’re starting. If you’re beginning your journey to God from a place that constricts your search, constricts it to a certain path, perhaps one that’s straight and narrow; and that dictates what you’ll find in a prescribed, even proscribing, vision—of what God is, of what truth is, of what salvation is (saved from what? saved for what?); if you’re to travel a strictly dictated path, then to find your own way might sound like a gracious gift. But if you’re starting from a random point in space that has no relative points even by which to orient yourself, then further license to find your own way might land you on the dark side of the moon: “Houston, we have a problem,” except there is no Houston.

How it landed with me? Well, I had just gone to the trouble of baptising this person, had indeed a few years earlier gone to the far greater trouble of going to divinity school for four years and indeed of going into debt. So, it felt a little facile. Like I was manning one of those booths in the *hallway* of a shopping mall, not even peddling something worthy of an actual store.

But (I see you thinking) isn't this sort of what Jesus was talking about here? Religion, heavy, heavy religion. And then, by correction, he himself: "Come to me, all you who 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 might tend to think Jesus was talking about the general weight of things, the weight of the world that we each carry around on our shoulders, the weight of our worry that keeps us up at night—and that he, by contrast, could lighten that load. That coming to Jesus means laying your general burdens down. That keeping company with Jesus means not being plagued with anxiety or distress.

Which is a good reading, a good preaching point for these anxious days.

But a more contextually minded understanding of what Jesus was likely talking about is the weight of religious practice, its rites and commandments and strictures. Really, this invitation is more rightly heard as Jesus understanding himself as one to lighten the burden of religion.

It was a contrast that was set up in the earlier part of what we heard this morning. It's the contrast set up between Jesus and John.

It's been a while since we've heard from John or about John, John the baptizer who was Jesus' cousin according to the Gospel of Luke, born about six months ahead of Jesus. He was also more commonly, across all four gospels, understood to be the herald or the witness of Jesus, the one to come before him to prepare a way for him in the world. And the one for whom John understood himself to be preparing was a typical messiah in Jewish imagining. He would be a man of zeal, here to bring justice to the people Israel and to beat back the imperial powers. He would be a man of violence even, a warrior sent to reestablish the rightful place of the people of God in the world.

This was nowhere more true than in this gospel, the Gospel of Matthew. In this gospel, John doesn't merely baptize Jesus but does so with the attending promise that here had come someone as if with a winnowing fork in hand, set to clear the threshing floor, set to gather in all the good wheat and to gather also the chaff which he'd throw into the fire.

But now Jesus had been alive and on the move for months, maybe years. And he'd been active in his ministry of healing and preaching, gathering disciples and sending them out in his name—and there had been no clearing, no winnowing fork in hand, there had indeed been no chaff in fire.

And now also John was in prison, Herod having captured him because he was too acerbic a prophet for any king to withstand. John was clear about his understanding of Herod having taken his brother's wife, possibly even murdered his brother so to take his wife. John was clear, this wasn't lawful, this was far from righteous. And Herod hated to hear it, mostly because Herod's wife hated to hear it. So Herod had John arrested and now imprisoned in the palace dungeon.

Meanwhile, Jesus the messiah was out apparently enjoying himself. Eating with sinners. Cavorting with tax collectors. So: "Are you the one who is to come or are we to wait for another?" This is the question John's disciples came to ask, sent as they'd been by the imprisoned, soon to be executed, master. "Are you the one who is to come or are we to wait for another?" Disappointment. Confused disappointment. "This isn't what we were expecting. This isn't—you aren't—what the world actually needs."

Jesus would answer John, telling his disciples to return to him saying, "...the blind receive their sight, the lame walk, those with a skin disease are cleansed, the deaf hear, the dead are raised, and the poor have good news brought to them. And blessed is anyone who takes no offense at me."

In other words, this messianic triumph in and over and for the sake of the world wouldn't come all at once, by force, by threat of violence, and then by the actual use of violence. This messianic triumph in and over and for the sake of the world will happen by appeal, by the appeal of love and healing and wholeness, made one by one, slowly over time, and from a place of freedom in the hearts of each one and everyone who chooses to follow, to join in and join up. Overcoming the powers and principalities won't be done on the terms of those same powers and principalities, it will be done on the terms of grace and

divine love. You can't dismantle the master's house using the master's tools, so said Audre Lorde, echoing Jesus, if not because she's a Christian, then because Christianity is true in the same way that she spoke what's true.

Jesus would then turn to the crowd, which was perhaps titillated at this conflict among cousins, the ascetic John versus the libertine Jesus. If Jesus is right, then John must be wrong. If Jesus' laxity was right, then John's unbending zeal must be wrong, even embarrassingly wrong, "cringe" as the kids today might say. Indeed, as John's disciples went away, Jesus began to speak to the crowds about John, defending him as no "snowflake" and rightfully not so, indeed chastising them about their either/or thinking: "What did you go out into the wilderness to look at? A reed shaken by the wind? What, then, did you go out to see? Someone dressed in soft robes? Look, those who wear soft robes are in royal palaces. What, then, did you go out to see? A prophet? Yes, I tell you, and more than a prophet. This is the one about whom it is written, 'See, I am sending my messenger ahead of you, who will prepare your way before you.'"

His defense of John comes from the heart, even as he knew he would continue to disappoint John, disappoint indeed unto John's death. John would die at Herod's hand and there was nothing Jesus could do about it, not if he was to continue to be the Messiah God, if not the world, had in mind.

"Truly I tell you, among those born of women no one has arisen greater than John the Baptist, yet the least in the kingdom of heaven is greater than he. From the days of John the Baptist until now, the kingdom of heaven has suffered violence, and violent people take it by force." Jesus, however, would start a new trend. He would avert the kingdom of heaven by nonviolence, by peace.

Which brings us to the chiding of the crowd that we heard today: "...to what will I compare this generation? It is like children sitting in the marketplaces and calling to one another, 'We played the flute for you, and you did not dance; we wailed, and you did not mourn.' For John came neither eating nor drinking, and they say, 'He has a demon'; the Son of Man came eating and drinking, and they say, 'Look, a glutton and a drunkard, a friend of tax collectors and sinners!' Yet wisdom is vindicated by her deeds." In other words, when it comes to the fickle mood of the crowd and its heightened expectation coupled with the urgency of the mission, you're damned if you do and you're damned if you don't...

So you should simply stick the course that God has laid for you, that acerbic John has made for you, and that the world needs of you: manifest a gospel of freely offered love and trust the liberty of each human soul, moment to moment, throughout their lives, to choose for or against; and trust also the long sweep of time to make ever wider the appeal, history itself a story of providence and grace,

two steps forward, one step back,
a story of God-with-us moving from edenic garden to beloved kingdom,
two steps forward, one step back,
tacking along, this way then that,
sailing into headwinds by going this way then that,
two moves forward, one move back.

It's not the most satisfying way, but it is the most withstanding.

It's not the most cathartic process, but it is the most steadfast.

It also happens to travel light.

I recently came across a piece of writing I read in divinity school, something I underlined I imagine because I loved it, Paul Tillich writing in the mid-20th-century about this very passage. The great German-American liberal theologian and preacher, he was joining a chorus of important voices in theology and religion to critique religion. Karl Barth of Germany was the first in this genealogical line. In the 1920s, in that teetering interwar period, he was celebrated as conceiving of the God of Jesus Christ as being against religion, that is, "*pneuma* against *sarx*." Next Dietrich Bonhoeffer, also of Germany but a crucial 20 years later, imagined, amidst so much religious nationalism co-opted by the Nazis, a "religionless Christianity." Now, Paul Tillich proclaimed, from this side of the Atlantic, that religion is the burden by which humanity is made weary. He claimed that Jesus was addressing in particular among the crowd those who were religious, or moreover those who were trying very hard to be religious in a context in which religion was very hard: "Come to me, all you who are weary..."

With reassurance, Tillich wrote, "The burden He wants to take from us is the burden of religion [—that]...great attempt of man to overcome anxiety and restlessness and despair, ... to reach immortality, spirituality and perfection...That is the meaning of the call of Jesus: 'Come to me.' For in Him this New Being is present in such a way that it determines His life."

He continues, “These words certainly do not mean that Jesus imposes a new theology or a new religious law upon us. [Quite the contrary, for] we would turn down His call with hatred if He called us to the Christian religion or to the Christian doctrines or to the Christian morals. We would not accept His claim to be meek and humble and to give rest to our souls if He gave us new commands for thinking and acting. Jesus is not the creator of another religion, but the victor over religion; He is not the maker of another law, but the conqueror of law. [Therefore] we, the ministers and teachers of Christianity, do not call others to Christianity but rather to the New Being to which Christianity should be a witness...”

And he concludes, “Forget all Christian doctrines; forget your own certainties and your own doubts, when you hear the call of Jesus. Forget all Christian morals, your achievements and your failures, when you come to Him. Nearly nothing is demanded of you—no idea of God, and no goodness in yourselves, not your being religious, not your being Christian, not your being wise, and not your being moral. What is demanded is only your being open and willing to accept what is given to you, the New Being, the being of love and justice and truth, as it is manifest in Him whose yoke is easy and whose burden is light.”

Amazing that I once found these words so refreshing. Because, the thing is, we live in a different world than Jesus did two millennia ago and a different world even than Paul Tillich did not even a century ago. Whatever burden religion presents today, it’s hardly one of being too heavy. If anything, I’d say it’s entirely too light, far too unyoked from its practices, traditions, time-tested truth. Really, whatever shame might have once plagued because of heavy religion has given way to a powerful shamelessness that threatens us all. Whatever virtue-signalling might have once made society priggish and stultified has turned utterly to a vice-signalling that has us electing leaders who promise to be a big middle finger flipped to the whole world, promising eventually, in the apotheosis of it all, cage-fighting on the White House lawn.

I appreciate the insistence on a lightness of being that comes with the grace of God. But I don’t think the way to do this is to strive to leave behind religion all together: to forget all Christian doctrines, our certainties and our doubts; to forget all Christian morals and all our ideas of God and goodness, all our notions of what to do and how to be. Not anymore.

I do agree with him that most of all what's demanded of us is that we be open, and invite others also to be open, and willing to accept the love and justice and truth offered us, which we find manifest in Jesus Christ. But I don't think forgetting so much of what's come before is the way forward now. Not anymore.

For these have already been forgotten, it seems to me—and not just the creeds and councils, the trappings and institutionalism, the pomp and circumstance that's the stuff of silliness in popular portrayals of them. But these too have been forgotten—the cross, the crucified Lord; the One who, through the Law of Sinai, calls us to self-restraint; the One who, through prophets and poets, calls us to compassion; the One who, through Christ crucified and resurrected, calls us to self-giving love: this God is all but unknown, even among those—especially among those—who most loudly yell in “defense of religion,” and most proudly and publicly wear as jewelry the cross.

So a tricky balance, here, in this rather more inspirational booth than you'd find in the hallway of a mall, offering wares in the hope that they don't wear out. A yoke, yes; but one that's easy. A burden, yes; but one that is light. Religion that binds, but in a blessed way such ties, for each and all, herein and beyond.

That's the hope.

Thanks be to God.