

First Presbyterian Church of Kissimmee, Florida
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Matthew 11:16-19 (NRSV)

[16] "But to what will I compare this generation? It is like children sitting in the marketplaces and calling to one another,
[17] 'We played the flute for you, and you did not dance; we wailed, and you did not mourn.'

[18] For John came neither eating nor drinking, and they say, 'He has a demon';
[19] 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."

Matthew 11:25-30 (NRSV)

[25] 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; [26] yes, Father, for such was your gracious will.
[27] 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.
[28] "Come to me, all you that are weary and are carrying heavy burdens, and I will give you rest. [29] 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. [30] For my yoke is easy, and my burden is light."

JOHN

Long ago God chose to reveal himself to the world. He prepared the way for this revelation by sending many prophets, concluding with a very special prophet named John.

John proclaimed dire warnings about the coming of a Messiah. People needed to get ready. They needed to repent and be baptized. The time was short.

But, no one listened. They said his message was too harsh. They laughed it off. They said he was "demon possessed."

John was right.

The Messiah did come. His name was Jesus. But, he was not the kind of Messiah the people or even John expected.

JESUS

Jesus was not averse to enjoying the good things of life. He was a joyful person who celebrated with food and drink.

Some people suggested that he celebrated a bit too much, that he was a "glutton and a drunkard."
More than that, he partied with all the wrong people.

Jesus responded to their criticisms in this way,

"You're just like children. No matter what game we play; you don't want to play.

John brought a serious message of judgment, and you said he was too serious. I have brought you the good news of God's love and forgiveness, and you say I'm celebrating too much! Some people are never satisfied."

In verses 21-24, the verses that weren't in our Lectionary reading, Jesus goes on to spell out the judgment that will come upon these people for their lack of faith.

It's pretty harsh stuff. In these verses Jesus sounds a whole lot like John the Baptist in his pronouncements. He seems ready to baptize them with fire as the prophet predicted.

WHY DID THEY MISS THE MESSIAH?

The question that always intrigues me about passages like this is "why?"
Why did the people who should have recognized the Messiah miss him and bring themselves to the brink of destruction?

Why did they "write off" the warnings of John? Why did they refuse to celebrate with Jesus when he proclaimed the good news of God's salvation and forgiveness?

I keep coming back to the same answer. They were too independent for their own good. They believed that they had the wisdom and intelligence to know God's will. They believed that they had the strength to do what God wanted them to do.

They studied the Word of God in minute detail. They were religious experts, and yet they missed the message on account of their pride.

They didn't need Jesus or John because they had all the answers ... or at least they thought they did.

But, it turns out that they didn't have the one thing that they needed. They didn't have the humility to rely totally upon the grace of God.

In their attempt to bring in the kingdom on their terms, they unwittingly brought themselves into peril of judgment.

A DECLARATION OF DEPENDENCE

It's ironic that on the day before we celebrate our Independence Day, we have a Scripture passage that glorifies dependence. In this country we don't even like the thought of dependence.

It is our greatest fear.

People often confide to me, "Pastor, the thing that I fear the most is losing my independence."

I must say that I share their fear. Most of us pride ourselves on our independence. We don't want to be beholden to anyone.

In this country we're always proud of who we are and what we can do. Any who dare to suggest that we are limited in any way are branded political heretics.

Now there's a lot to be said for those who demonstrate independence and initiative. I appreciate those who relish the opportunity to tackle tough problems. I am grateful for the freedoms we are afforded in this country.

But, we need to remember that all of us will face many problems in our life that we won't be able to solve. There will be many difficulties in our world that will not be resolved by any amount of power, money or military might.

COMING TO JESUS

Somewhere along the line we will run headlong into our limitations.

And when we do that, in that moment of despair, we will come close to the kingdom of God as revealed in Jesus Christ.

When we come to Jesus, we must not come as one who is wise and in control. We must come as little children, as infants struggling for survival. Then we will be ready to receive the good news of the gospel.

It is like those who struggle with addiction. The first step toward recovery is to admit that "we are powerless over this addiction in our life."

Our life is out of control, and we need help from a higher power. We need God.

If we recognize that fact, there is hope.
Jesus said,

[28] "Come to me, all you that are weary and are carrying heavy burdens, and I will give you rest. Matthew 11:28 (NRSV)

The word translated "weary" in this context probably refers to emotional fatigue. We speak of being "burned out" or "losing heart." That's what this passage means, and that's why this particular verse has had such appeal down through the ages.

All of us feel this way at one time or another.
We all come to the end of our rope from time to time.

Some of us (as Tennessee Ernie Ford put it) "owe our soul to the company store." No matter how hard we try we get farther behind. Nothing seems to work.

Sometimes the burdens are too much to bear.
We find out that we have a serious illness.
We lose a loved one.

What burdens do you carry?
I'll bet that most of us here today carry a heavy burden of one sort or another.

Our Scripture for today tells us to come to Jesus, and He will give you rest.

I believe this with all my heart. It is a wonderful message of comfort and hope, and I have personally leaned on this promise many times in my life when the burdens have mounted..

THE "EASY" YOKE

Jesus does give rest for those who are weary, but note this carefully.

Jesus doesn't promise a permanent vacation!

Jesus does say,
"Come to me, all you that are weary and are carrying heavy burdens, and I will give you rest. "

But, in the very next verse Jesus also says,
"Take my yoke upon you ..."

Now I know that Jesus goes on to say that his yoke is "easy" and that his burden is "light." But, let's face it. A burden is still a burden, and a yoke is still a yoke.

Instead of rest for the weary, this verse seems to indicate that Jesus is offering tired people better equipment! That doesn't seem like such a bargain!

Perhaps Jesus is telling us that our overburdened state is not just due to the fact that we have too much work to do. We are overburdened because we work too hard on the wrong things.

Our sense of physical and mental exhaustion is due to misplaced priorities and a lack of meaningful work.

On the other hand, if our work is meaningful, we can toil for hours without feeling weary.

THE ROUTER CABINET

Not long ago I decided to build a cabinet for my router table.

I was enthusiastic about the design. I imagined how helpful the new cabinet would be in my shop. There were several new woodworking techniques that I wanted to try on this project.

And so, on my day off, I worked from early morning to late at night in order to complete the project. I didn't even stop for lunch! (I know. It's hard to believe, but it's true.)

Why was I able to do that? Why could I work so hard without stopping?

I was building something that had a purpose. I had a vision of what I wanted to accomplish. I could see the project taking shape, and the creative process was reward enough.

I was tired at the end of the day, but I wasn't weary. I was yoked to my project, but the yoke was easy.

HOPE GREATER THAN CIRCUMSTANCES

In a much greater way, a willingness to serve Christ changes the way life feels. There is a certain ease to life even though the circumstances in which we find ourselves might be quite difficult.

Perhaps that's why the apostle Paul said that he was not affected by the circumstances of life. He knew what it was to have plenty and he knew what it was to be in need. But, he had learned through experience to trust the purpose and promises of God.

Using Eugene Peterson's paraphrase of Philippians we read what Paul had to say,

[13] Whatever I have, wherever I am, I can make it through anything in the One who makes me who I am. Philippians 4:13 (MsgB)

Jesus offers us vision, direction and meaning.
A sense of purpose makes his yoke easy.

THIS GENERATION

I began my sermon by saying that "long ago" God chose to reveal himself through the prophet John and Jesus. But, this is not just a story about what happened long ago.

This is also a story about what happens here and now. God, through the power of His Spirit, continues to reveal Himself to us.

The call of John the Baptist to prepare the way of the Lord, and the good news of God's grace in Jesus Christ are as important to us today as they were over 2,000 years ago.

How does this generation react to their message?

We react a lot like that first generation. We laugh at those who suggest that we need to get our own moral house in order.

We criticize those who seem to accept sinners too easily. We smugly think that the fault always lies with the other person.

But, sometimes, by the grace of God, we have to come to Jesus. The burdens add up to the point that we can't live the lie any more.

We realize that we are not independent and self-sufficient as we thought. Things are broken in our life, and we cannot fix what is broken.

BURDENS THIS WEEK

This week, as I was writing this sermon on bringing our burdens to Jesus, I got a chance to put my money where my mouth was!

The "burdens" started mounting up. My office remained closed due to mold damage. The frustration mounts on that issue.

I went to the mailbox this week and found that my homeowner's association has decided that I need to replace my fence. It looks too "old" they say. I thought it just looked "rustic." I have 30 days to correct the deficiency.

There were several other unexpected and of course, unwanted bills in the mail that day.

My dogs got into a scuffle and knocked over my beloved Weber grill, breaking critical parts on the sidewalk. There will be no Fourth of July cookout at my house!

But, I soldiered on with my sermon, dutifully typing in words of comfort and hope for my flock to hear this Sunday. But, on Thursday evening when I turned on my "blessed" computer, hoping to retrieve those words of comfort so lovingly prepared for my people, guess what happened?

That's right. Jesus saves, but I didn't, at least not to a floppy disk! The screen said that sector 6.00.27b was bad. I somehow imagined the female "computer voice" from Star Trek when I read,

"We're very sorry, but Windows cannot start. Please select safe mode and try again." Every attempt to start the computer was futile. Even "safe mode" didn't work.

Believe me, that computer was not "safe." In fact, in my state of mind that computer was in grave danger. I childishly wanted to condemn my computer and her makers at Dell to perdition.

Words from the 11th chapter of Matthew came to mind, "You thought the destruction of Sodom was bad Ms. Computer. Just wait and see what happens to you."

PRACTICING WHAT I PREACH

It doesn't always work this way, but in this case I somehow got around the bad sector on my hard drive. I did it by using the time honored technique of turning the machine on and off several times.

I'm not sure why this works. I like to think the computer responded to threats of fire and brimstone.

Anyway, in my joy over finding the computer that was lost and more importantly the sermon that it contained, it hit me.

I wasn't practicing what I was about to preach!

I needed to bring my burdens to the Lord. I needed to yoke myself to something that was a bit more important than old fences, broken grills and balky computers.

The bad feelings and burdens in my life were largely self-imposed.

Many of our burdens are self-imposed. We thrash around seeking freedom, but freedom can only be found by entrusting our lives to a power that is greater than our burdens, be they major or minor.

THE BIRD AND FREEDOM

Dale Galloway told a story about an experience he had when he was a custodian of a large church. One Saturday he was cleaning the sanctuary. He had the windows open, and a little bird flew in.

Once inside the bird flew around for a while. He said that it looked like it was having a grand time as he explored the interior of that cathedral. Then, all of a sudden, it must have dawned on the bird that he was trapped inside the sanctuary. He began to frantically fly back and forth through the air, looking for a way out.

After a while, he landed upstairs in the balcony. Dale ran up the stairs after him. As he reached down to pick up the bird, it took off again. Back downstairs Galloway went from one end of the church to the other following the tiny bird.

Up against the top of the window it hit, trying to escape its captivity, but to no avail. Finally, in utter exhaustion, the bird gave up. He fell to the floor, totally spent by his quest for freedom.

Galloway walked over to where the bird lay, knelt down, gently reached out his hand and picked up the fallen creature. He carried the bird over to the window, and opened his hands. The little bird flew away with a new life. He was free at last.

Dale wrote,

"Just a few years ago, I was broken, torn apart emotionally.

I frantically tried all sorts of things in an attempt to find freedom.

And then one day, completely exhausted and not knowing what to do or how to get out of my situation, I fell into the hands of my Heavenly Father.

He picked me up.

He nursed my wounds with love.

He healed me of all my brokenness and made me whole.

God has set me free to fly the heights again."

A FREE CAPTIVE

What about you?

Are you really free?

Jesus tells us that true freedom comes only when we are yoked to Him. True freedom comes only when, like that little bird, we submit ourselves totally to Him.

There is a hymn that goes,

"Make me a captive Lord, and then I shall be free."

This is my prayer for all of us, that we may be so captivated by the will of God as revealed in Christ Jesus that we may be freed from the burdens of this world.

May God give us a burden worth bearing and a yoke worth wearing.

Make us a captive Lord that we may be truly free.

Amen.

FIRST PRESBYTERIAN