

St. Mark's Episcopal Church
Sermon: Christopher McLaren
Sunday July 5, 2020 Proper 9A
Text: Matthew 11: 16-19, 20-25
Theme: The Unforced Rhythms of Grace

"But to what will I compare this generation?"

This is a very human Jesus. He's come among his own people offering words of liberation and blessing, and urging them to respond to what God is doing, but they won't play. If the game is funeral, they don't feel like mourning. If the game is wedding, they are up to dancing and merriment. What they do best it seems is to criticize, make judgments and fabricate reasons for their paralysis and inaction.

Jesus is frustrated with the lack of response to the new thing that God is doing. He points out that they've had different messengers wooing them into God's ways but they've stiff armed them and found reasons to reject them. Johnny B retreated to the dessert, fasted, exposed the hypocrisy of governors and clergy alike, ate off the land and prophesied from the margins with a very clear message of repentance but he was too course, too scary, and evidently had a demon (that's evidently an effective way to sideline a prophet). Jesus came telling stories, mixing with all sorts of people, showing up to parties, forgiving people, including outsiders, touching people who were deemed unclean and thus he was too unconcerned about his reputation and so was written off as a glutton and a drunkard, a friend of sinners and tax collectors. God gives two wildly different but beautiful ways to embrace and respond to the divine longing but we can be like spoiled children who refuse to play no matter what the game.

You and I both know the difference between the real reasons people do things and the reasons they give. These are fabrications, the smoke screens and the camouflages. These are the respectable reasons that make them look good. The real reason they refuse the invitation of God to change is that they are privileged. The way the system is set up, sets them up to succeed. They are rejecting Jesus and John the Baptist for a very simple reason, they are protecting their status, holding on tightly to what they have.

It brings to mind another of saying of Jesus concerning discipleship, "those who save their life will lose it and those who lose their life for my sake will find it."

In the end, Jesus is not overly concerned about the rejection of his teaching. It is the not the rejection that matters, it is the wisdom of his teaching seen in the deeds and way of life that they lead to, love in action that vindicates the way of Jesus. The proof is in the pudding as we say.

This is a tough passage if you think that you've got your act together or that you've very little to learn. Jesus is basically saying that those who think that they are wise and intelligent may not actually be getting the message. The "**These things**," they don't get are the mysteries of the kingdom of God, how divine love overwhelms the human heart and transforms the person and through them society.

The lesson of the parable seems to be that responsiveness to God is everything. God can move us into a deeper spiritual life in a myriad of ways through madmen and party animals. The most important thing is to resist our almost automatic critical posture while fostering our willingness to trust that God is at work within us. Those who use their knowledge to support and protect their own privilege at the expense of others are missing the point.

Jesus was of course speaking directly to religious people those who knew all the rules, followed the law strictly but missed the whole point, the goal of inner transformation and loving-kindness. Jesus is trying to wake people up, trying to help them see that their love is too small, too shallow, too protected but they will not play, they come to trap him in theological arguments and mental games seeking their own glory.

But there is another way, Jesus reminds us of who can receive the wisdom of God. "Little Ones," children, those who are open and alive and curious. The child mind is eager and not defensive or cluttered with too many rigid positions or opinions or inordinately attached to what it thinks. When one has a mind that is like that of a child one is always learning from experience, from the stories of others and testing things to see if they are beneficial. The flexibility and openness of the child mind allows it to give the new things that Jesus is proclaiming and real and deep hearing.

Jesus is telling us to cultivate a curious and open mind to his teachings. He wants us to listen deeply to what he is saying and doing and what is happening around us so that we can see the mystery of God at work.

Even as an adult one can have a "child mind" that is open to the deeper dimensions of the person not just holding on to old answers and ways of being. The child mind is a mind open to growth, newness, and relationship. The child mind is not protective or isolated, it desires to find a way that opens the heart and soul to God.

Jesus is telling us something very important about our own lives our own spiritual journeys. The Christian life is about staying open to the ever-demanding work of God within us, the ongoing transformation into Christlikeness that we are all meant to embrace. Do you remember that line from the baptismal covenant to grow into the full stature of Christ? None of us are there yet. God wants to pour life and love into his children, into you and I. That is what God wants to do, that is God's desire, that is the essence of God. God wants to fill you with life and love and in order to do that we have to be willing to let go of that which holds us back, our sense of

entitlement, our privilege, our status, our proud posturing, our desiring to have our act together, our needing to be right, our wanting to be in control, our need for recognition. These are all things we hide behind and in so doing we hide from the deeper wisdom of God.

"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 whom the Son chooses to reveal him."

Jesus knows God and what is more Jesus wants you and I to know God too. Jesus has the wisdom to understand **God's love as the permeating force of all creation and the will to enact that love in ever creative ways.**

Jesus wants us to know the wild love of God, the animating force of all creation, the power to enact new ways of love, justice and peace. The love of God is not a private love, it is meant to be shared, it is meant to be poured into our lives.

Whom does Jesus invite into God's love?

Come to me, all who labor and are heavy-laden and I will give you rest.

Jesus invites anyone whose labor weighs them down. In his context he invites the religious people who are struggling to do everything right on their own power and to live up to all the expectations. In his time, the religious laws were endless and impossible and discouraging to the human soul and thriving. But there are others that labor and are heavy laden. It includes people oppressed by taxation from the empire, beaten down by discrimination, and terrorized by injustice.

I believe that this invitation of Jesus goes out to all who are world weary, who are no longer finding pleasure in life, whose tasks or losses are overwhelming, those whose backs are bent with too many burdens each day. This invitation of Jesus' is one that goes out to all of suffering humanity, especially those whose suffering has caused them to lose heart... who do you imagine this invitation going out to? the healthcare working in the NY or Miami or Houston or Albuquerque, those suffering from generations of poverty and lack of opportunities, the working mother who is now trying to work and care for her children at home amidst great uncertainty, immigrant families fleeing violence for the hope of a better life only to be detained in squalor and neglect, the angry protestor giving voice to the pain of a nation to the hidden and festering wound of racism that white folks have been trying to ignore for generations, the young black teenager who wonders if the system will every change, the college graduate living at home looking and looking for work. There are a lot of world-weary people out there and you may be one of them.

Jesus promises them rest but I'm afraid that it is not quite the rest you may have imagined. It doesn't mean less work and more sleep although that sounds pretty good. Jesus isn't offering more pay and shorter hours.

The rest that Jesus is offering is the rest of the seventh day of creation, the Sabbath rest when God saw that it was good and rested. Rest happens when we truly know who we are and to whom we belong. As St. Augustine said long ago, our hearts are restless until they find their rest in God. Jesus wants us to know the depth of God's love which fills us and restores us. When we know this love we live in harmony with ourselves, our neighbor, our environment, and God. Rest is the result of knowing the source of divine love and to have it poured into our hearts.

Take my yoke upon you, and learn from me; for I am gentle and lowly in heart and you will find rest for your souls. For my yoke is easy and my burden is light.

This is the Great Invitation, come to me all who are weary...

Does that describe you in these days of Covid? Weary that seems a good word for where so many of us are.

How do we find this rest?

The way to this rest is to yoke yourself to Jesus. A yoke is a harness that connected two oxen or cattle to the plow or wagon and too each other. Jesus tells us that his yoke is "easy." The Greek word here means "kind." A good yoke is one that is carefully shaped to that there will be a minimum of chaffing and pain. Jesus' yoke will be kind to our burdened shoulders, allowing us to carry the load more easily. In this sense our burden will be light.

However, that is not to say that the demands or the weight of discipleship will be any less but that there is some help in shouldering the burden.

The wonderful thing about this invitation of rest for the soul, is that it is issued by one who intends to share the burden with us. "Take my yoke upon you." Literally means become my yoke-partner, connect yourself to me and we will shoulder your burdens together. It is an invitation to community, to shared ministry, to shared life with God. It means that if we are willing to follow Jesus, to become his disciples then we will find that the burdens we used to carry alone are no longer as burdensome in the company of the Risen One. To be yoked to Jesus is to pay serious attention to his way of life to learn what obedience to God looks like, for in doing so we will find rest for our souls.

Hear this invitation again in the words of Eugene Peterson's The Message

Are you tired? Worn out? Burned out on religion? Come to me. Get away with me and you'll recover your life. I'll show you how to take a real rest. Walk with me and work with me – watch how I do it. Learn the unforced rhythms of grace. I won't lay

anything heavy or ill-fitting on you. Keep company with me and you'll learn to live freely and lightly. (Matthew 11:28-30- The Message)

For us Jesus is wisdom, the one who shows us the good way, where the restless can find rest for their souls. This good way is not devoid of hard work or obedience for that would not be life at all. John the Baptist crying out in the wilderness demonstrated the kind of life found in honesty about one's need of God and in exposing the powers that be in this world that work against justice and freedom. Jesus demonstrated in his teaching and life the joyful obedience to God rather than a slavish devotion to rules and the exclusion of others. It is the quality of the relationship with Christ that makes our life and work well, the rest for our souls possible, and a sense that one is alive and participating in the emerging way of God. "Come to me," is an invitation by a humble and gentle Jesus to follow him into the kingdom of God.

In following Jesus, we become part of a people who know that it is not we ourselves who are in control but rather it is this gentle and humble Jesus who holds the future. Knowing that Christ holds the future we can be patient in the midst of struggle and with ourselves. In the practice of knowing Christ we are drawn into a relationship that teaches us where true freedom lies, not in a nation, or an economy, or a career but in learning how to live and love, how to forgive and heal, how to give and nurture and how to grow and serve like Jesus who is with us in it all. It is not that the struggles of life, the dangers of the world cease to exist or affect us, it is rather that we are not alone in the struggle, for we are yoked to the source of life itself in our acceptance of the Great Invitation.

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

Come learn the unforced rhythms of grace.