

Pent4_Proper9A_070311_mcr
All Saints Episcopal Church

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

As much good as I think the creation of the Revised Common Lectionary has done for us churchgoers in terms of bringing to us a nearly full reading of the Bible over the course of three years, today is one of those days when I wish the Lectionary Elves who chose the lessons would have left some verses of our Gospel reading in, instead of taking them out!

Last week's reading from Matthew stopped at the end of chapter 10, a chapter of instructions Jesus gives to his disciples as they prepare to go out into the world. He ends with a couple of verses about being hospitable, about welcoming the stranger, with, "whoever gives even a cup of cold water to one of these little ones will not lose her reward." But instead of picking up at verse 1 of chapter 11, the lesson begins at verse 16 of chapter 11, which doesn't make much sense if you don't know what comes before. So let me fill you in.

Chapter 11, verse 1 begins by saying that once Jesus is finished with his instructions, he begins to go out into the cities to teach and proclaim his message. John the Baptist, who is in prison, hears what Jesus is doing, and sends his (John's) disciples to ask Jesus if he is the one who is to come, or if they are supposed to wait for someone else. Jesus tells them to look around at what's happening: the blind can see, the lame can walk, the lepers are made clean, the deaf can hear, and the poor have heard the good news. And, he says, blessed is anyone who takes no offense at Jesus.

As the disciples return to John, Jesus begins to preach to the crowd about John with high praise. No one who has ever lived is greater than John, he says, and he is the fulfillment of prophecy, a man sent by God to prepare the way for the Messiah. And yet, Jesus says, even the least in the kingdom of heaven is greater than John.

It is only after these several verses that Jesus begins saying the things we hear in today's lesson. *What's wrong with y'all? When John came he was, an ascetic, living in the desert, not eating normal food, but strange things like grasshoppers and honey, and he didn't drink wine. And you all decided that he must have a demon.*

Then I came along, and because I enjoy eating and drinking at table with friends who have, according to some, questionable reputations, you have decided that I am a glutton and a drunk! You are like a bunch of kids who can't decide if you want to play wedding games or funeral games, and so you don't do either one! But, he says, wisdom is vindicated by her deeds. Jesus - the embodiment of Wisdom, the Word made flesh - is supported in his claim as the one who is to come, by the deeds he sent John's disciples back to tell John about.

Then, as you may have noticed, there is another gap in the verses of our lesson, and Jesus begins to pray, seemingly out of nowhere, thanking God that God has "hidden these things from the wise and intelligent and revealed them to infants." What we have skipped are a few verses where Jesus berates the cities where he has performed most of these deeds, because they did not repent as a result of his actions. The wise and intelligent might be anyone who rejects Jesus, but they might especially be the religious leaders who are self-important and hypocritical. They know the law but they don't understand the meaning of justice, mercy and faithfulness.

But the infants are not thought of as wise and important. They are, instead, the poor in spirit, the meek, the merciful, the persecuted - all those 'blessed are' folks that Jesus preaches about. They are blind, deaf, sick, lame, lepers, tax-collectors and sinners - all those who come to Jesus for healing and hope. It is God's gracious will to reveal Godself to the infants instead of the wise, so it is the infants who know that Jesus is the one who is sent by God and the one who reveals God.

Then Jesus turns his prayer into an invitation: "Come to me, all you that are weary and are carrying heavy burdens, and I will give you rest."

If you grew up in the Episcopal Church during the days of the 1928 Prayer Book or if you spent most of your time in the church going to a Rite I Eucharist, you will probably remember the verse like this: "Come unto me, all ye that travail and are heavy-laden, and I will refresh you." It is one of four passages from 4 different books of the New Testament that were often recited by the priest before the Offertory. They were known as the 'Comfortable Words.' I have to say that, having heard these words for all of my life, I never thought much about what they meant or about how they were comfortable (not understanding that *comfortable* meant *able to soothe, ease, or console* instead of *relaxed or well-off*).

So what a wonderful change to make, letting new language - language we actually understand - give this statement the power that it should have!

Hear it again: *Come to me, all you that are weary and are carrying heavy burdens, and I will give you rest.* If none of the rest of this lesson sounds like it translates to our lives in the 21st century, surely this part does!

Who isn't weary these days? Who doesn't have burdens these days? Who needs rest?

We are burdened with anxieties and fears. *How will we make ends meet? What if my child doesn't get in to the prestigious college I think he should go to? Will this disease take my life? Will I be in pain?*

We are burdened with temptations and responsibilities. *I think I can stretch the truth on this application and no one will notice. I know I am supposed to watch my diet, but this dessert is so fabulous! Well, I really want to have an iPad, so I can get it now and pay the water bill next month. I don't really need to make a will now; I can do it another time.*

We are burdened with failures and guilt. *I didn't do the best job I could have done. We are getting a divorce. I wish I had told my mother I loved her more often. I shouldn't have cheated on that test.*

Here is the Good News: Jesus invites each one of us that is carrying a burden to find rest with Him. Not rest like hanging out on the sofa or on the lounge chair by the pool, doing nothing ever again, but rest as in re-creation - the re-creation of our bodies, our minds and our souls. Life-changing rest.

He also invites the weary: *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.* The yoke was a familiar symbol from back in the day, and might be for some of us if we have had experience in a rural farming setting. The yoke was put across the backs and shoulders of oxen in order for them to pull heavy wagons, plows, or other farm implements. Having 2 oxen yoked together at least made the job a little easier for each of them since one lightened the load for the other. It was also used as a means of oppression and subjugation on prisoners

or war and slaves. But it was also used in a positive way, as a rabbi would use the yoke as a metaphor for living obediently and happily to Torah.

So what did Jesus mean by yoke? It could be that the yoke is Jesus' teaching - the Way - which does not bring burdens upon us, but gives us life instead. He invites us to learn from him, not as a harsh taskmaster, demanding that we do whatever he says, but as one who is gentle and humble in heart. But, like the yoke for oxen, taking Jesus' yoke upon ourselves is to become yoked to the One who is bringing God's kingdom of justice, mercy and compassion into the world; and it is to have our burdens lightened by the one who shares it with us. His yoke is easy, because his burdens are not about the expectations of the world that we put on our own individual shoulders, but are about turning outward towards our neighbor, helping to bring that very justice and mercy into the world as an interdependent community.

Come to him. Take his yoke. Find rest.

Not a life of ease; Jesus promise risks and challenges if we follow him. It is a life of service to which we are called, but it is a life of freedom and joy instead of slavery. It is a life yoked to Jesus in God's gracious and merciful reign, free from the burden of our sins and the need to prove ourselves. All of us here will one day find ourselves bearing a load too heavy to carry alone. None of us is self-sufficient, no matter what our culture says.

We are all in need of comfort and refreshment; may we find it in Christ Jesus.
Amen.