

SERMON FOR JULY 5, 2020 Proper 9A Bill Hale

The Holy Gospel of our Lord, according to Matthew (Mat 11:16-19, 25-30)

Jesus said to the crowd, “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 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.”

The Gospel of the Lord!

Good morning, brothers and sisters in Christ, and companions on the journey whose end we do not yet understand! I wish you a safe celebration of this very different Fourth of July! If ever (in my lifetime at least, and perhaps in yours,) we find ourselves “walking by faith and not by sight,” (2 Cor 5:7) it is now. And yet we continue our journey, not alone, but in community with one another and sustained by the presence of the Lord in our midst and in our hearts.

Even living in a state of lockdown, we are not like the ostrich, living in self-imposed ignorance of what is happening all around us. The daily statistics of how the pandemic is not abating, but increasing in severity, are known to all of us—in fact, it is hard NOT to be confronted, even assaulted, by dreadful numbers of those testing positive, those falling sick, and those who losing their lives to this virus. After a while, the burden of information itself is taking its toll. We are all getting weary, bowed under the weight of anxiety, feeling isolated in our attempts to protect ourselves, powerless to protect others, including our loved ones, and fearful of what may come next.

At the same time, the social situation of our nation is convulsed. We cannot celebrate the Fourth of July with the usual gatherings or fireworks, yet the noise of conflict rises all around us. Perhaps the epidemic set the spark for the current demonstrations, but in any case, it is clear even to those among us most unwilling to see what is happening--that we cannot celebrate freedom for this republic when the freedom does not extend equally to all. We cannot lie to ourselves by quoting that “we hold these truths to be self-evident” if videos from cell phones across the continent give evidence that “life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness” are the privilege of some groups or a single race, but denied to others based upon their race, gender, economic status, or other

factors. How can we as Americans mouth a simple declaration that “all men (even if that term intends to include women as well) are created equal, and...endowed with inalienable rights” when access not only to education and the means to earn a living, but even access to health care, food, and nutrition—are denied so sizeable a portion of the people who also bear the name “Americans?” Not to mention fear of violence and death which threatens some but not others.

The causes which are now challenging our nation to face our national faults and to repent and change our ways also contribute to the cost of getting through every new day. The war of American independence from Great Britain may have ended nearly 240 years ago, but the great American Revolution continues its struggle to meet its ideals even today. But like all such struggles, even for the best of causes, it takes its toll. To paraphrase Thomas Paine when he spoke of the cost of this struggle, we live in a time “that tries the soul” of us all.

I come before you today as both preacher and pastor. As a preacher, I have the obligation to proclaim the Gospel. That means, I think, both opening up the Scripture provided for this day, and also sharing the Good News it contains. As a pastor, I need to realize how stressful current events are for all of us. You don’t need me to remind you that the pandemic is going on around us, nor that there is unrest in our streets, but it is essential to reflect that we can comprehend both through the lens of God’s Word—and the fullest understanding of God’s Word for us as Christians is to know it as Jesus Christ himself, the Word become flesh. It is the voice of Jesus we need to hear amid our overwhelmed thoughts and troubled hearts, when he says,

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

Rest! How many of you have shared my experience of the past three months, when sleep either did not come readily, or was interrupted by anxious thoughts? How many have gotten up in the middle of the night, unable to rest, troubled and agitated by what is happening, or by anger at –who knows exactly what? But angry and frustrated nonetheless, and wanting nothing so much as a respite from it all, to be able to trust that things which try our souls during the day will eventually give way to freedom from fear of falling sick, or losing someone close to us? Or that the day will come when we can unite as Americans in a more just society, worthy of our cherished dreams of liberty AND justice for all? Perhaps then we could actually rest..

When Jesus speaks these words, he speaks to us, now, in the midst of our strife. He offers rest because he is with us, in our struggles, in our trials, by our side and offering his yoke.

Too often, we become like “the wise and the intelligent” Jesus refers to when he speaks of things being hidden to them while being clear even to children. Take the *yoke* he speaks of. Nearly every agricultural society found that you could plow better or move carts loaded with grain more efficiently if you placed two mules or oxen side by side using a wooden yoke over their shoulders. The burden was shifted from the single beast to the pair, to the advantage of all.

So when Jesus says,

“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,”

he means just that. When we are overburdened and weary, there is Jesus, crouching next to us and offering this yoke to him. What had been entirely on our shoulders and straining our backs, now is shared by his shoulders. More than that, he offers us the chance to “learn from” him—the word has the same root as that used for “disciple.” Jesus willingly walks yoked by our side, sharing the burden in this simple image. The yoke is promised to be “easy,” making the burden—now significantly called by Jesus, “my burden” —“light.”

Please understand, my brothers and sisters in the Lord, that these verses cannot be understood as a simplistic, magical end to all our troubles. It would be a lie to see Jesus’ call to share the burden with us by accepting his yoke (the word “my” is emphatic) as a promise to whisk away all our problems. But when we consider who Jesus is, this offer is incredibly powerful in demonstrating what the love of Christ is like. In the previous verses, Jesus address God as “Father, Lord of heaven and earth.” He declared that no one knows God as Jesus himself does. Further, that all things had been handed over to him, and that Jesus now has power to make God known to those whom he chooses.

At that precise point, Matthew has Jesus offer this call to come to him—and it is specifically addressed to those who are bearing burdens and heavily laden, bowed down with cares and troubled, weary and frightened, weak and overwhelmed. That probably fits all of us, I would think. It is not in the strength of our perception of our own righteousness or holiness that Jesus calls

us. It's not when we have gotten our act together, let alone on the basis of whatever this world considers signs of power and prestige—not our wealth, or intelligence, our celebrity or “success,” our dominant gender, or racial purity, or whatever other attribute we might prize but which is meaningless to God.

Rather, this God-sent divine Jesus calls to us in our exasperated state to come to him that Jesus himself might offer his yoke, connecting to us in our weakness and need, sharing our burden, and promising to us rest. Instead of the unbearable weight of our present burdens, he offers us the chance to choose his light load and easy burden. Why would Jesus say this? Because he is “gentle and humble in heart.” Imagine! That means that we are not alone in our present state of confusion or angst. Even now, in the sleepless nights of 2020, in the middle of a world-wide pandemic, Jesus calls us to let him share our burden. When all seems either overwhelming or downright hopeless, in his divine humility and with all compassion for our distress, Jesus keeps us from despair and offers instead to help us to bear what, in the end, we as humans must bear. But because of his love for us, Jesus puts aside the glory of his equality with God to call to us and to take our yoke on his shoulders.

Have a safe 4th of July weekend, and hold fast to the promise of freedom which is our nation's true greatness. And in our own humility at what Jesus continues to offer us in his love, let us hold fast to his call by taking his yoke. Trusting in the promise of rest in him, let us embrace the Good News of God in Jesus our Lord!