

Genesis 24:34-38, 42-49; 58-67 “Please give me a little water from your jar to drink.”

Romans 7:15-25a “For I do not do the good I want, but the evil I do not want is what I do.”

Matthew 11:16-19, 25-30 “Take my yoke upon you and learn from me.”

Going to Church vs. Being the Church

O God of our coming home, grant us the wisdom, the strength and the courage to seek always and everywhere after truth, come when it may, and cost what it will.

One of the particular pleasures of planning worship collaboratively, in addition to being able to work with people I really enjoy, and in addition to having help with the chores, is the way in which my colleagues make choices and suggestions that I would never think of. You know, the thing about other people is that they have other ideas. Other people bring things to the virtual table that challenge and stretch my own ideas, sometimes in ways that are very surprising. (I say virtual table, because so much of our collaboration happens via email and quick phone calls with not much time for the luxury of deep in-person conversation about wherever we are on our spiritual journeys!)

So this week when Nancy Granert suggested “Softly and Tenderly” for our Gospel hymn, I was startled. It’s one of my all-time favorites and yet, I would never have thought of using it to surround this Gospel text. I thought, “well maybe somewhere else in the service but not with this passage from Matthew!” I spent some time thinking about where else we might use this hymn – after communion? As an opening? Should we just find another Sunday soon? I do really love it and I love to wrestle with ideas (and I love Nancy Granert and her musical instincts) so I had to think hard about how I was interpreting this Gospel passage and what hymn I might suggest as a Gospel hymn instead. Lines like this came into my mind: “the peace of God, it is no peace, but strife closed in the sod...” or “come labor on. Who dares stand idle on the harvest plain?” or “take up your cross” or, even though we never ever sing hymns like this at Emmanuel Church, “onward Christian soldiers” or “fight the good fight with all thy might!”

It’s tricky because Handel made such beautiful musical work of the last three verses of this Gospel passage, and the Christian Church in general has made milk toast of the Rabbi from Nazareth, that we can easily miss the fact that Jesus is both cranky and critical in this part of the Gospel. In fact, the crankiest verses of this passage are omitted altogether. Where our Gospel portion picks up, it’s clear that things aren’t going the way Jesus had hoped. In this passage, Jesus is angrily expressing his frustration with his generation. (It’s somehow comforting to know that nostalgia for the wisdom of previous generations is as old as dirt – which is adam in Hebrew – or as old as the second generation: the son of adam which gets translated into “Son of Man”!) The problem with Jesus’ generation is that they’re unresponsive to the spirit of God working among them. They’re unresponsive to deeds of power. They’re inhospitable and disconnected from the movement of the Divine. They’re not laughing or weeping or fasting or feasting when called upon – they just aren’t getting it in spite of what he’s said and done -- and Jesus is exasperated.

In the next part (in the verses that are omitted from our reading this morning), Jesus condemns the cities in Galilee –Capernaum, and neighboring towns of Chorazin and Bethsaida, saying that the notoriously godless cities of Tyre and Sidon would have been responsive -- they would have gotten it – if they’d experienced his deeds of power. It’s a fairly ugly tirade against entire populations of cities for not believing in God’s power to heal, for not responding to God’s

desire for compassion and mercy. Ironic. And the irony is intensified by the *Softly and Tenderly* hymn because Jesus has just condemned the place that had been home for him and for his disciples.

Then, according to Matthew, Jesus makes a quick turn of thanks and praise to God for the ragtag group of people who have crowded around him. He contrasts them with people who are thought to be wise and intelligent, but who have completely missed the boat when it comes to seeing the hand of God at work. Having finished his tirade, for the moment anyway, Jesus remembers to give thanks to God for God's gracious will. And that leads to one of the most beautiful and comforting passages in the Gospels. Jesus says to all who are weary and are carrying heavy burdens, "Come to me. . . . 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." All who are weary and are carrying heavy burdens. (This could be any of us.)

At its most basic, most literal, a yoke is a beam of wood that serves to redistribute weight. A yoke makes something easier to carry or to move. A well-made yoke makes carrying heavy buckets of water, for instance, much less work. This builder's son probably knew something about making a comfortable yoke! Yokes allow two to share a load, two oxen or two people can share a load that is too heavy for one. But as early as the time ancient Hebrew scripture was being written, the yoke had a figurative meaning as well. A yoke symbolized discipline, service, ownership and control (in the sense of slavery). To be faithful was to bear the yoke. To rebel was to break off the yoke. Bearing the yoke of God's sovereignty was a joy, an honor and a privilege. The yoke of Torah was perfect freedom and wisdom in contrast to the yoke of lawlessness which was tragedy, hardship and sorrow. The Rabbis said: "We cannot choose to serve no master at all, but can choose only which master we will serve. The yoke of the law is better than the yoke of the world, because the yoke of the law is God-inspired."¹ And ironically the word that gets translated yoke is also the term for crossbeam used for crucifixions. That would not have been lost on the followers of Jesus at the end of the first century when Matthew's account was being written.

So here are some things that I notice that I want you to think about. In Jesus' invitation to those who are weary and heavy laden, the burden is not taken away, not removed, but more easily carried, more easily shared with a yoke. Rest comes not from putting the burden down, but from redistributing the weight and sharing the load. The yoke, as it turns out, both restricts *and* facilitates movement. The yoke both limits *and* makes possible what is otherwise impossible.

Theologian Paul Tillich wrote about the yoke of religion this way: "Believe me, you who are religious and Christian. It would not be worthwhile to teach Christianity, if it were for the sake of Christianity. And believe me, you who are estranged from religion and far away from Christianity, it is not our purpose to make you religious and Christian when we interpret the call of Jesus for our time. We call Jesus the Christ not because He brought a new religion, but because He is the end of religion, above religion and irreligion, above Christianity and non-Christianity. We spread His call because it is the call to every [one] in every period to receive the New Being, that hidden saving power in our existence, which takes from us labor and burden, and gives rest to our souls."²

It occurs to me as I hear the words "come home," that Jesus is not saying, softly and tenderly, "go home." Jesus knows that what used to be home is no home at all. This homeless rabbi

¹Source unknown.

² Paul Tillich "The Yoke of Religion" in *The Shaking of the Foundations* (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1940) on www.religion-online/showchapter.asp?title=378&C=76

is saying, “come to me and make a home.” It’s when (and perhaps even because) he has paused to give thanks to God for God’s gracious will, that he realizes that he *is* home and that he can *be* home for others: *he* is home. What might Jesus’ yoke have to do with home-making?

Perhaps you arrived in this place this morning weary and carrying a heavy load. Perhaps that is not the case but you know others who are tired and weighed down. What is it that the yoke – the discipline – that Jesus is talking about offers to you or to them? What is the discipline that makes the burdens of life easier to carry? It is, I believe, the discipline of community. The exercising the discipline of community is the difference between *going to church* and *being the church*. We have a call – an invitation – to *be* the church. It’s about submitting to the practice of supporting one another, of learning how to disagree in love, of developing trust in one another and holding ourselves and one another accountable, of forgiving (and forgiving and forgiving), and of celebrating one another’s gifts. It’s about responding when called upon to laugh and dance or to weep or fast. It’s about listening to and honoring other people’s ideas, especially when they’re not what you are expecting, and when they are very different from yours.

Henri Nouwen wrote about the discipline of community saying, “Community is the place where the person you least want to live with always lives...[and] in the eyes of others, you might be that person.”³ And yet putting on the yoke of community is about the difference between being a spectator and experiencing the joy, the honor, and the privilege of making burdens light for other folks and realizing in the process that one’s own burden has been lightened at the same time -- that one’s own weariness has somehow eased a little bit. And it’s certainly about pausing to give thanks for the grace of God.

Walter Wink says it in this prayer that came across my desk yesterday:

God, help me
to refuse ever to accept evil.
By your Spirit, empower me
to work for change
precisely where and how you call me.
And free me, from thinking
I have to do everything. Amen⁴

³Henri Nouwen, “Moving from Solitude to Community to Ministry,” *Leadership*, Spring 1995.

⁴ Walter Wink, “A Prayer for the Saints” at <http://www.rockies.net/~spirit/sermons/a-or14-keeping.php>