



Westminster Presbyterian Church

The Rev. Dr. Laurie Brubaker Davis
August 20, 2017 Sermon

Come to Me

Matthew 11:16-19; 28-30

Introduction to Scripture reading:

What a week! It seems like almost a month since last Sunday. How good it is to be together to worship, to sing and pray, and now to hear a Word from God that will help us go beneath our surface level of response, to the deeper response in the center of ourselves.

Today's scripture lesson is found in the heart of Matthew's Gospel, chapter 11, where Jesus is teaching and proclaiming his message in the cities. This is a public word spoken from the One who is God's wisdom personified, God's wisdom in the form of a talking, walking, eating, drinking, living, breathing person named Jesus.

Picture yourself arriving a little late, standing on the edge of the crowd as Jesus has just begun speaking. He is talking in strident tones about their understanding, or misunderstanding of John the Baptist, who was in prison. All sorts of rumors were swirling in the tense air about both John the Baptist and about Jesus. People were not getting it. People were not repenting. What was true and what was false? Whom could they believe was telling the truth? Sound familiar?

We are about to hear truth telling from Christ, in verses 16-19 and then in verses 28-30; a shift in tone into a great invitation delivered to all within earshot. "Let anyone with ears, listen!"

Sermon:

Anybody feeling weary here this morning? When was the last time you had a really good night's sleep? So many sleep interruptions all around us: Crying babies, restless children, curfew-breaking teens, snoring partners. Add to that, sleep inhibitors *within* us: the heartache of loss, pain, illness, anxiety, hormonal changes, and regular old, garden-variety insomnia. After a week like we've all just lived through, a week filled with the aftermath of horrific violence and terror in Charlottesville, then in Barcelona, and beyond—how can any of us sleep? As sleep-deprived as we may be this morning, the weariness that Jesus is talking about in our scripture passage, goes deeper than that. The kind of chronic weariness that Jesus is talking about comes from a soul dilemma: The weariness of trying hard, and working harder and harder but getting nowhere; compounded by the quiet desperation of not knowing why, or what to do differently.

If you are weary in body or in soul, if you are tired of trying to swim upstream against the current: you came to the right place today. Did you hear the great invitation from Jesus in our scripture? He invited you to come to him to find rest. Rest for your soul. Jesus is saying: "Take a load off. Lighten up!" Typically, you don't hear this scripture pushed too hard from the pulpit. We are far more likely to preach about coming to Jesus and having your sins forgiven. Or coming to Jesus and becoming fishers of men and women; or coming to Jesus and going forth to make disciples of all nations, or at least to teach Sunday School, or be an usher... But come to Jesus so you can take it easy? How "unPresbyterian"!

Of course, being good Presbyterians you already know: this is *not* a proof text to begin a, “Slackers for Jesus” movement. But if that’s not it, what was he talking about? Light burdens? Easy yokes? That sounds confusing and contradictory on the literal level. What does he mean here? A helpful clue comes from the command to, “**Take my yoke upon you and learn from me...**” What’s a yoke? Literally, it’s a piece of farm-equipment—a crossbar with two U-shaped pieces that encircle the necks of a pair of oxen, mule, draft animals—horses. What do we know about draft horses? They pull heavy loads! “Yoke” in ancient Jewish tradition, also referred to teaching and instruction in the wisdom of the Torah. To be yoked to the Torah, was to be a righteous person of God. Jesus takes that traditional use and makes it personal. Christ as the personified wisdom of God invites them, invites us: “Be my yoke-mate: Side-by-side, day-by-day, together with me.”

The compelling, unforgettable image of a yoke is that it requires a two-horse team. There is no one-horse yoke. What is Jesus saying by using that word, yoke? I hear him saying, “Let’s do this together.” Just as two animals together lighten the load, making possible an otherwise impossible task, so does Jesus’ invitation to us. What seems impossible alone, becomes possible yoked to Jesus. Just as we put two animals together to lighten the load—so does the load lighten when we yoke up with the one who shows us how to be joyfully alive and awake.

There is one big catch here. Saying “yes” to this great invitation requires a deep humility. It calls forth a radical de-centering, a move toward “unselfing.” We can only say “yes” when we realize, that we are not self-made people. We can say “yes” only when we say “no” to the lie that we can make it on our own without help. Or that we have all the answers. The call to be yoked with Jesus is first, and every day, a call to deep humility: A decentering, a displacing of ourselves from the center of our personal universe.

“Take my yoke and **Learn from me.**” The Greek word translated as “learn from me” is also the word for disciple or apprentice. We find this word 250 times in the New Testament! Must be pretty central to the Gospel message. This time, Jesus is inviting us to “be my apprentice.” Let’s think about that word for a minute. An apprentice is a particular kind of teaching relationship. It is an ongoing one, where there is a rhythm of teaching and doing, trying, making mistakes, learning from mistakes, building on successes. It takes a long time, it’s uneven. It’s not showy. Always, always front and center, more than any particular technique, is the relationship.

“Learn from me.”... “Be my apprentice.” When I was in seminary in California, learning to become a pastor, I took an internship at Marin General Hospital where I learned from a man named Bruce Murphy, how to be a hospital chaplain. You might say I was apprenticed to him, and indeed I learned more than I could ever say from watching him, trying, making mistakes, building on successes. Hoping I wouldn’t mess up, when he determined I was ready to be “on call” on my own saying wryly, “I’m sure you know enough at least not to cause further harm.” I prayed he was right. I had to trust his trust in me.

I still remember my first day on the job, maybe the second hospital room I’d ever entered as a chaplain in training (these are strangers when you’re a chaplain, cold calls, and I was very nervous). In this room we came upon a man who appeared to be asleep. We entered slowly, Bruce took his hand...absolutely no response—I’m thinking, “OK, we’re done here,” but then Bruce goes on to offer him a few words of scripture, a heartfelt, original prayer—all this to a man in a coma. After we left the room, he explained why he did this. And I have never forgotten.

Jesus is inviting us into an apprentice relationship, a very close one, working side-by side, daily, steadily sharing the load and the burden. Jesus is trusting us not to mess up. Trust Jesus’ trust in

us. You can see here, the key is the ongoing, up close relationship. Picture the proximity a yoke requires. This was a shift for the religious folk in his time, who had become burdened by following the multiplication of Jewish laws that had taken precedence over the very relationship with God those laws were intended to nurture and strengthen. He could see how their practice of the faith was burning them out on religion! Jesus says, “don’t get hung up on all of that, just come to me and learn the ropes of plowing the fertile soil of faithful living.”

You may be thinking, “but plowing soil yoked to Christ sounds like anything but restful. That’s crazy talk.” Yet in his short three sentence invitation he mentions rest, not once but twice. The Greek helps us here: “rest” in the Greek, means more than just physical rest, like a good night’s sleep. It also means refreshment of the inner person. And not only that, it expands to mean the whole saving work of Jesus. Have you ever thought of Jesus’ saving work as rest? As refreshment?

Let’s think about what really makes us weary. As Walter Bruggemann wrote in his book, *Mandate to Difference*, “It is not working too hard that makes us weary. It is rather, I submit, living a life that is *against the grain of our true creatureliness*, living a ministry that is *against the grain of our true vocation*, being placed in a false position so that our day-to-day operation requires us to contradict what we know best about ourselves and what we love most about our life as children of God.”ⁱⁱ Jesus is offering a great invitation to shift the heavy burden of constantly going against the grain of whom God has created us to be. If we do it long enough, we may not even realize the weight-load of pretending to be someone or something we are not.

Bruggemann writes, “Come to me.” It is not an altar call. It is a call to an alternative existence... away from the way the world wants us to be... into the life of well-being with Jesus who is one with *the Father*.ⁱⁱⁱ Although these words of Walter’s issue a clarion call, I believe this “call to an alternative existence” is indeed an altar call, in the deepest sense. We may not realize initially that a “yes” to Jesus is a “yes” to going against the grain of the world. However the longer we walk with Jesus, we learn that our yoke mate is the One who came to alter this world so fractured by lies, ignorance and hate.

If we say “yes” to Jesus, then we are saying, “yes” to the challenge to tell the truth. We are saying, “no” to pretending things are fine when they are not. Things in our own life, the lives of those we love, the life of our church, our community, our nation. Some of us have been keeping silent for a very long time. We have pain we push down. We may be aware of the suffering of others, but we are afraid to speak up. So we just keep going and wonder why things aren’t getting better. Learning to speak our pain and to share our truth is hard work. It may feel “unPresbyterian.” A trusted listener, a Stephen Minister, can be the ear of God for us. We are blessed here at Westminster with trained and ready Stephen Ministers. They are ready to listen, to give you the time and space to discover and share whatever questions or pain, whatever truth you need to tell: No matter how recent or how long that core truth may have been lying or festering under the surface.

As a church, we are also called to, “Tell the truth, free of ideological rancor, about the pain of the world for it is the truth of pain on the cross through which the world is saved.” Again I am quoting from Bruggemann’s book. He offers this vision: “Imagine a Sabbath church filled with truth-tellers that are neither red nor blue. But stay close to the one of whom we say, “And him crucified.”ⁱⁱⁱⁱ That sounds like the kind of church we want Westminster to be. But it’s not easy.

We can learn something about truth telling from our children. It comes easier for children than for grown ups, I think. Walking down the jet bridge approaching customs at JFK International Airport, as we were deplaning in July off our direct flight from Glasgow, Scotland, a sudden cloud of heat shrouded us all. Weary from the long journey, heavily laden with carry-ons and duty free purchases,

the the shock of hot, humid stifling New York City summer air was almost unbearable. Yet we were all were walking in silence until a small, young voice behind us, from a boy about six-years old lamented loudly and clearly to his mum in his melodic British English: "It's so hot here!!" And we all started laughing. Stating the obvious shared discomfort or breaking the silence about our deep soul pain: this truth telling is truly healing and life-giving.

I will conclude with *my* invitation: Let's learn with Jesus, let's practice with one another. Quietly. Humbly. Let's become tellers of truth and tellers of hope. Let's break the silence; Telling the truth, in love: This is who we are, yes... And this is who Christ would have us become. Seeing this gap places us in the holy-yoked zone.

To whom or to what will we yoke ourselves to? We can't choose what family or what generation we are born into. We can't choose our race or our gender identity. But ***we can choose*** to whom we will yoke ourselves. ***We can choose*** in deep humility to acknowledge that we are not self-made. None of us. Nor does any one of us have all the answers. That is a good starting place for hard conversations.

We can choose to do our best to go *with* the grain of the gospel. ***We can choose*** to seek help from one another, as we try to live a life that goes with the grain of our true vocation as children of God, created in God's image. ***We can choose*** to say "no" to being placed in a false position that requires us to contradict what we know best about ourselves, as children of God.

This is the choice we are given every day. Jesus stands before us, arm outstretched, beckoning: "Come to me, all you that are weary and are carrying heavy burdens."

How long will we hear God's flute and refuse to dance?
How long will we hear the wailing of God's children and refuse to mourn... or to mobilize?
How long will we hear the call of our crucified and resurrected Lord, and refuse to share the load
and the lift?

i Elaine Scarry, *On Beauty and Being Just*. (Princeton University Press: Princeton, NJ: 1999), p. 113.

ii Walter Brueggemann, *Mandate to Difference: An Invitation to the Contemporary Church*, (Westminster John Knox Press: Louisville, KY: 2007), p. 42.

iii Ibid., 42.

iv Ibid., 44.