

THE GREAT INVITATION!

(11/25/18)

Scripture Lesson: Matthew 3:1-6; 4:18-25; 11:28-30

“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.” (Mt. 11:25-26)

Every Sunday the sign in front of our church invites people to join us in worship. This morning, in response to a second or deeper invitation, two members of our church family have stepped forward and declared their desire to become full members of our church. We are thrilled at their decision, and we welcome them to this community of faith, a community of faith that has carried out its ministry of this spot for the past 153 years! Their response to our invitation to be a part of us calls to mind an even bigger invitation, an invitation that is extended to all of us, in fact to absolutely everyone: Jesus invites us to become his followers, his disciples, his apostles, his friends.

The scripture readings this morning from the Gospel of Matthew speak to this matter of invitation. The word “gospel” is taken from the Anglo-Saxon “godspell,” meaning good news.

The four gospels that appear in our Bible are the books that contain the memories of Jesus. They are not the only gospels that were written, for there were many, but these were the four selected for inclusion in our Bible. They are gospels in that they proclaim the good news preached *by* Jesus, the good news preached *about* Jesus, or both. It took me a while to understand that the good news preached *by* Jesus is not necessarily the same as the good news preached *about* him. I find the relationship between these two dimensions of the gospel to be a fascinating part of the Christian message!

The scripture passage that we heard this morning is an articulation of the good news preached *by* Jesus to the crowds. The good news is actually an invitation.

Earlier in the 11th chapter of Matthew, we read about the relationship between Jesus and his cousin, John. John, who is imprisoned, sends several of his disciples to ask Jesus if he is “the one who is to come,” i.e., the Messiah. Jesus tells John’s disciples to return to John and report what they have heard and seen, specifically how “the blind receive their sight and the lame walk, lepers are cleansed and the deaf hear, and the dead are raised up, and the poor have good news preached to them.” I love this passage!

Jesus then testifies to the importance of John. Jesus tells his followers that John is a prophet, but he is more than a prophet. John has come to prepare people for the kingdom of God, which is the primary focus of Jesus’ teaching and preaching. Jesus says, “Truly, I say to

you, among those born of women there has risen no one greater than John the Baptist.” He tells his disciples that John extended an invitation to people, but the people did not respond.

Jesus then compares himself and his invitation with John and John’s invitation. He says, *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, “Behold, a glutton and a drunkard, a friend of tax collectors and sinners!”*

Apparently even in the church of Jesus’ day, there was just no pleasing some people!

John is an ascetic. He lives in the desert. He wears coarse garments, not comfortable clothes. He eats grasshoppers and wild honey, not the tasty dishes that are served in the average home. His life is not lived according to Freud’s pleasure principle, the belief that everything we do in life is designed to increase pleasure and decrease pain. John reminds us that there is something much more important than pleasure and comfort. This is true of our physical and also our psychological or spiritual life.

John extends an invitation. It is an invitation to self-examination. It is an invitation to engage in what Ignatius of Loyola called an “examination of conscience.” John invites us to view our life as Jesus views it, to view our life as God views it. He calls us to become more conscious of where we have fallen short of the life God would have us live, to acknowledge those areas of our life where we are missing the mark.

John not only *invites* us to repent, he *calls* us to repent. He calls us to experience remorse for the hurt and pain that we have inflicted upon others. Some of this pain is direct; some is indirect. Some of this pain was inflicted intentionally; some was unintentional. Another way of saying this is that some of our actions are conscious and some, probably the larger part, are unconscious.

There is the hurt and pain we have directly inflicted on those who are part of our daily life, even (or especially) those whom we love. This pain may have been intentional, or it may have been unintentional. This suffering usually arises from our self-absorption, from our self-centeredness, from our living some variation of the life that John both preached against and personally renounced in his own life.

There is also the pain experienced by exploited people around the world who grow our food and make our clothes. We have not hurt these people directly, but they suffer from the excesses of our life style, from our greed, and from our abuse of economic power. They experience the pain of neglect, the realization that good people, even good Christian people, do not seem to care about their plight.

John not only invites us to a life of austerity, he calls us to a life of austerity. For most of us, a call to a life of simplicity would be enough of a challenge. By serving as a living example of one who does not need much in the way of material possessions and creature comforts, John challenges us to look at how much or how little we truly need. He calls us to acknowledge our addiction to comfort and how this affects others.

There is nothing wrong with material possessions, but there may be something wrong with our *relationship* with material possessions. There is nothing wrong with living comfortably, but when this becomes our primary goal in life, we are missing something important. At some point, what we do with our money becomes a moral issue.

I am in no position to throw stones. I live in a nice house and drive a nice car. I like to eat in nice restaurants and take vacations in Europe. It is not clear, at least to me, where the use of our money, our resources, becomes a moral issue, but I believe it does at some point. When we are conscious of our deep connection with our brothers and sisters, when we realize that they *are* us, that we are all connected in God, we have to ask how we can spend more money going out to eat every week than we give to missions or pledge to our church.

This is an important part of the invitation that is extended to us in the gospels. The kind of self-reflection, the examination of conscience to which John calls us should be an important part of our personal spirituality and also our Sunday worship.

I grew up in a Roman Catholic neighborhood in a Roman Catholic town. When my neighborhood friends and I engaged in our Saturday afternoon ritual of going to the movies, which cost twenty-five cents, my friends had to stop at St. Mary's church for confession on the way home. They "had to" go to confession, because back then if you didn't go to confession on Saturday you couldn't receive communion on Sunday.

I remember waiting for them while they went into the confessional booth. Sometimes I went into the little chapel with them and sometimes I sat on the steps outside the church. At the time I felt I was fortunate that I didn't need to go to confession. Now I'm not so sure that our Protestant de-emphasis on this important spiritual discipline is such an advantage.

John's invitation is an important part of the gospel, but it is not the only invitation. The invitation that Jesus extends to us is different. John lays a burden on our shoulders. Jesus does not remove this burden, but he helps us carry it!

In the opening words of our communion service, I quote the passage we heard this morning from the Gospel of Matthew. In this passage Jesus says,

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

The yoke is a common metaphor for the Law, for the Torah. In this passage Jesus is addressing the unbearable weight of religion, how we can be beaten down by the demands of perfectionism or the kind of self-negating austerity that was preached by John. Jesus offers us an alternative. His focus is more on deepening our relationship with God than it is about following the strictures of our religion. His articulation of the Great Commandment makes this clear. We are to love the Lord our God with all our heart, soul, mind, and strength, and we are to love our neighbor as ourselves.

Jesus invites us to experience the kingdom of God, the kingdom of heaven that is already present as a spiritual reality both within and among us. In another scriptural metaphor, he invites us to the banquet feast. He tells us that he has come that we might have life and have it abundantly.

Jesus was no John the Baptist. The Pharisees constantly complain that Jesus eats and drinks with tax collectors, prostitutes, and other sinners. In my reflections on these passages I commonly focus on the people with whom Jesus associates. What I didn't realize until this past week is that Jesus is not only in the presence of these pariahs, he actually eats and drinks with them!

According to the gospels, Jesus eats and drinks a lot. He admits as much in the passage we heard this morning. Jesus probably liked a good meal and a glass of wine as much as we do. Of course, this interpretation of scripture may be a thinly veiled rationalization for my indulgent, if not decadent, life style!

Jesus does not take the burden of morality, the weight of John's challenge from our shoulders. He tells us that the Way is narrow. He warns us that following him can be demanding, that we will probably be asked to give up something that we hold dear. While he frees us from the burden of religion, he does not free us from the burden of carrying our own cross. What he does is help us to bear it. He freely and willingly steps into the yoke with us, and by doing so makes our burden light.

Many of us here this morning *are* carrying heavy burdens. We struggle with illnesses that resist cure, with chronic conditions and limitations that beat us down and make our world smaller. We carry the emotional baggage of hurts and pains. We feel the loneliness that attends the death of a loved one, the emptiness in our life that cannot be filled. We worry about our

finances, our retirement, the economy, perhaps even how we can keep our house. Many of us here this morning are carrying heavy burdens.

Contrary to the popular gospels of prosperity, Jesus does not promise to remove these burdens from our shoulders. He does not promise us a life free from strife and from economic insecurity. He does not promise us physical and emotional healing, though this often attends a deepened prayer life. What he does promise is that when we share our burdens with him, we will find rest, we will find peace.

Jesus is with us here this morning. He is present to us in this worship service. He is present to us in this church, in this community of faith. When we yoke ourselves to him, facing in the direction that he would have us face, and taking on the burdens that he would have us bear, we discover that he is helping us carry these burdens. We are not carrying them alone. For those of you who are joining with us this morning, we hope you realize that you are *really* not alone; the members of this church are walking this path with you.

This is the great invitation! Jesus says, “Come unto me all you who are weary and carrying heavy burdens, and I will give you rest.” Then he bends down, takes on the weight of our cares, even the weight of our sins, our self-inflicted suffering, and says, “Let’s go!” We still have to carry our cross, but we do not have to carry it alone! When we are yoked to our Lord, even in the midst of the trials and tribulations of life, we might suddenly and unexpectedly experience the “peace that passes all understanding” that peace that Jesus promises to us when we embark upon a spiritual journey, a pilgrimage with him as both our companion and our guide. Thanks be to God!

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