

THE GREAT INVITATION!

(10/06/2024)

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)

This past week, I have been thinking about one of the scriptural quotes, one of the teachings of Jesus that I reference when, on the first Sunday of every month, we receive the Sacrament of Holy Communion. The quote, the teaching, is actually an invitation.

The sign in front of our church invites people to join us in worship. We don't have room to put this on our sign, but our church invites them to do more than attend Sunday morning worship; it invites them to become a member of our church family. It invites them to become one of us.

Whether passersby realize it or not, Jesus goes a step further. Jesus extends an invitation to us and through us. He invites us to become his followers, his disciples, his apostles, and his friends as we walk with him on our spiritual journey through the twisted maze of this earthly life.

The scripture readings this morning from the Gospel of Matthew speak to the matter of invitation. We hear how Jesus calls the first disciples. He just invites them to follow him, and they do. Note that Jesus does not demand that people follow him, as in, if you don't follow me, you will go to hell; he calls them; he *invites* them to follow him. He promises to those who follow him that they will experience the kingdom of heaven both in this life and the next. This is the “good news” that he shares with us.

The four gospels that appear in our Bible are the books that contain the earliest memories of Jesus, the memories of those who walked with him, talked with him, listened to his teachings, and witnessed his healing miracles. These four are not the only gospels that were written; there were many, some of which we have read and discussed in our Sunday morning Bible study. The gospels of Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John were the four selected by the leaders of the early church for inclusion in the canon, in our Bible.

These four gospels are gospels in that they proclaim the good news preached *by* Jesus and also the good news preached *about* Jesus. I find the relationship and the congruence between these two dimensions of the gospel to be deeply meaningful. In this

case, as the Canadian communication theorist Marshall McLuhan suggested, “the medium is the message.”

Matthew describes the ministry of John the Baptist. John, who is Jesus’ cousin, preaches a message of repentance. He invites people to repent and be baptized as a symbol of their repentance, their baptism serving as a sign that they have experienced a *metanoia*, that they have turned their life around, that they have been reborn in such a way that God is now in the center of their lives.

John’s invitation is an important part of the Christian message, but it is not the whole message. John, while imprisoned, sends several of his disciples to ask Jesus if he is “the one who is to come,” i.e., the Messiah, the Christ. Jesus tells them 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, the dead are raised up, and the poor have good news preached to them.” I love this passage!

John and Jesus are different. John focuses his preaching on sin and repentance. He calls us to a life of austerity. Jesus focuses his preaching and teaching on healing and wholeness, on a relationship with God that is grounded in love. He calls us to a life of abundance. Jesus compares himself to John when 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! However, it just might be that John and Jesus are two sides of the same coin.

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 a Middle Eastern restaurant. His life is not driven by Freud’s pleasure principle, the belief that everything we do in life is designed to increase our pleasure and decrease our pain. John reminds us that there is something much more important than pleasure and comfort. He invites us to the spiritual journey that is offered to us by Jesus.

John extends an invitation to self-examination. He invites us to engage in what Ignatius of Loyola called an “examination of conscience.” John invites us to view our life and life itself as Jesus views them; he invites us to view our life and life itself as God views them. He calls us to become 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.

If we take John's message to heart, we will experience humility, sadness, and remorse for the hurt and pain that we have inflicted upon others. Some of this hurt and pain was direct; some was 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, the larger part, are unconscious. However, we are responsible for both. This is because the suffering we inflict upon others arises from our self-absorption, from our self-centeredness, from our living some variation of the life that John renounced in his life and in his preaching.

John 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, with our *attachment* to material possessions. There is nothing wrong with living comfortably, but when this becomes our primary, our only 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 restaurants and take vacations in Europe. It is not clear 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 who are hurting, who have lost loved ones or whose lives have been upended by Hurricane Helene, by Russia's invasion of Ukraine, by the expending war in the Middle East, and by the famine in Sudan, when we realize that they *are* us, that we are all connected in God, that we are all one in God, we have to ask how we can spend more money going out to eat every week than we give in our pledge to our church or in support of its mission outreach.

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. However, this is not the whole story.

Jesus' invitation does not nullify John's; it simply adds another dimension. In one of his parables, Jesus tells us that the kingdom of heaven could be compared to a wedding banquet to which we are invited as special, as honored guests. In the parable, one invited

guest after another comes up with one excuse after another for why he/she is unable to attend. So, the king tells his servants to forget about the honored guests. He tells them to go out into the streets and invite everyone, both good people and bad people, both worthy and unworthy. The banquet is offered to all of us! All we have to do is attend!

John teaches us that there are times when more is actually less, and less is actually more. Jesus teaches us that we are invited to a banquet, a feast. In the Gospel of John, Jesus says, "I have come that you might have life and have it more abundantly." This is the invitation that Jesus extends to us. He calls us to the experience of abundance, to a life that is full to overflowing not with material possessions, but with care, compassion, love, and service.

In the opening words of our communion service, I always 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.

Many of us, probably all of us here this morning carry 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, of trauma from our past, from our childhood. 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, perhaps even how we can keep our house. Many of us, probably all of us here this morning carry heavy burdens.

Jesus does not promise to remove these burdens from our shoulders. He does not promise us a life free from conflict, from pain, from struggles. He does not promise us physical and emotional healing, though this often attends a deepened prayer life. He does not offer to miraculously remove our anxiety, our depression from us. What he does promise is that when we share our burdens with him, when we walk with him, we will find rest, we will find peace, and we will even find joy *because we will be carrying our burdens together*. Then the burdens, which we were carrying like a cross to which we were nailed, becomes the *prima materia* for our personal and spiritual growth.

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, carrying our cross with him, 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. No one in this church is walking the

path alone, or at least none of us needs to do so. The members of this church have vowed, to the best of their ability and with the help of God, to walk this path with you. When we yoke ourselves to each other, we create true Christian community.

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 may have crosses that we need to carry in this life; there may be deaths that we need to undergo to experience resurrection, rebirth, new life, but we do not have to carry them 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 the spiritual journey, a pilgrimage with him as both our companion and our guide.

When we experience this, we will be moved in our heart to step into the yoke that connects us with our brothers and sisters who are hurting that we might help them carry their burdens and experience the life of abundance that Jesus offers to all of us.

*A sermon preached by the Reverend Paul D. Sanderson
The First Community Church of Southborough
www.firstcommunitychurch.com
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An audio version of this sermon will be posted on our church website later this week.