

The Fifth Sunday after Pentecost
July 9, 2017
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Genesis 24:34-38, 42-49, 58-67
Psalm 45:11-18
Romans 7:15-25a
Matthew 11:16-19, 25-30

Come unto me, all ye that travail and are heavy laden, and I will refresh you.

That's Jesus' invitation to all of us in this morning's gospel. They are precisely the same words we just heard in our gospel this morning, though I repeated them using an older translation.

I have a fondness for the older translation. I recite this verse precisely this way every other week at Trinity, according to the pattern we follow here at the early service, alternating between a Rite I liturgy one week and a Rite II liturgy the next. These are the very words the priest says after the Confession and just before the Peace – the first of four verses said there (BCP, p. 332).

Liturgically, they're called "the comfortable words." And that is what they are ... comfortable. We've been reminding the people with these words for many, many years – and decades – so they have become comfortable for us. And they're not only comfortable; they're comforting, as well. When life imposes burdens too heavy to carry, these are words that reassure us:

Come unto me, all ye that travail and are heavy laden, and I will refresh you.

I'm reminded of some old lines, framed as if they were a "letter from God":

"I am God. Today I will be handling all of your problems. Please remember that I do not need your help. If life happens to deliver a situation to you that you cannot handle, do not attempt to resolve it. Kindly put it in the SFGTD (something for God to do) box. It will be addressed in My time, not yours.

"Once the matter is placed into the box, do not hold on to it or remove it. Holding on or removal will delay the resolution of your problem. If it is a situation that you think you are capable of handling, please consult me in prayer to be sure that it is the proper resolution.

"Because I do not sleep nor do I slumber, there is no need for you to lose any sleep. Rest my child. If you need to contact me, I am only a prayer away."

I think this must be part of what Jesus means for us to hear this morning. When life gives us more than we can carry ourselves, Jesus offers relief:

Come unto me, all ye that travail and are heavy laden, and I will refresh you.

That's all well and good. But I'm not quite sure that's all that Jesus has in mind for us this morning. Jesus isn't promising merely to take our problems away; he's offering something more than an escape from life and its demands.

Liturgically, as I've said, we sometimes refer to this verse as "comfortable words," but we should take note that, at least as it's usually used in the Bible, "comfort" means more than being told we can "lay our burdens down." Comfort is *com-forte*, and literally it means "with strength." To be comforted, then, is to be strengthened to do what falls to us to do.

Jesus' very next words, then, are the necessary counterpart. "Take my yoke upon you, and learn from me ..." he goes on to say. The point, of course, is that Jesus offers to share our burden with us, not merely take it away, though it's a point we might miss by the way our reading translates the very last lines for us this morning: "For my yoke is easy, and my burden is light." It's not a very apt way of putting it; the New English Bible is closer: "My yoke is good to bear." Jesus' point, I think, really is that he wants us to learn what's ours to bear and let go of what's not. He wants us to learn how to live in the midst of burdens that seem too heavy to bear.

And Jesus knows it's not just "life" (in some amorphous way) that can give us too much to bear. The people around us do so, as well.

Jesus knows whereof he speaks. He's been on the receiving end of the unfair expectations of others. "This generation," as he refers to them, are quick to complain. John the Baptist comes along and he doesn't measure up. They say he's too somber and serious, that he holds himself apart from regular folk. He should eat and drink more, they say. But then Jesus comes along and he's too much the opposite. They say he drinks and eats too much ... and with the wrong sort of people.

But Jesus isn't just whining about being misunderstood. He's really drawing attention to the fact that there are always people who think they know what God expects of others. Jesus knows it first-hand. And he sees it all around. The teachers of the Law in his day devised all sorts of rules and regulations to govern every moment of every day to keep the faithful from breaking the Law even by accident. Maybe it was even with the best of intentions, but it was too much for ordinary folk to bear.

And even today, even if most folks could care less what any religious authority has to say to them about what they're supposed to do – or not do – there are still expectations heaped upon us by others. Friends and family all-too-often are all-too-happy to lay guilt trips on each other. And even as adults, peer pressure still imposes expectations about what it means to be good or successful or attractive ... burdens that may seem too heavy to bear. Jesus offers an alternative:

Come unto me, all ye that travail and are heavy laden, and I will refresh you.

And that, I think, is a pretty good paraphrase of that last verse this morning from Paul's letter to the Romans. He sees the irony of how God's Law was given for the benefit of God's People, intended to give us life. But it was, in his estimation, killing us instead.

One way of making sense of those words is to read them as a description of a psychological struggle, an inner conflict that afflicts a person who earnestly desires to do the right thing but

ends up falling short. I've seen it compared to a person who resolves to lose weight – to eat right and get fit – only to succumb to temptation the first time it's offered. It's as if there is something inside perversely at war within you, doing the very thing you don't want to do:

Later, the guilty deed done, you sit down for an earnest talk with yourself.

“Look, self,” you say, “you were supposed to be done with all that. Why did you do it again?”ⁱ

I don't think that's an entirely wrong way to hear this passage. And maybe it's helpful to hear Paul – SAINT Paul, one of the heroes of the Christian faith, no less ... admit that he messed up over and over again, and found it hard to do the right thing.

What Paul is actually trying to explain, however, is a bit more philosophical and theological ... and significant. He's really lamenting the pervasive power of what he deems a force at work in the world and in each of us; that's what he means by “sin.” It's so subtle and pervasive that it creeps both into following the rules and neglecting them. You see, Paul isn't particularly preoccupied with something as trivial as cheating on a diet. Worse, in his estimation, is this thing that is *in* us – a thing that also bigger than any *of* us ... that has the capacity to twist even our noblest intentions into something ignoble.

As an example from his own life, he talks about how shocked he was to realize that his very zeal and success in following the Law, as he understood it, was precisely what was so wrong with him. It's what justified and encouraged him to persecute the early Church. For Paul, sin is what twists our best intentions and highest aspirations into something that strangles love, something that kills. “Who will rescue me?” he asks, and then answers his own question: “Thanks be to God through Jesus Christ our Lord.” It's almost a paraphrase of those comfortable and comforting words of Jesus:

Come unto me, all ye that travail and are heavy laden, and I will refresh you.

From the start this morning, I've allowed that I have a fondness for that older translation. Those are the “comfortable words” ... and they are comforting. And I think they are words to recall whenever we are too heavily-laden – by the burdens of life, by the expectations of others, by the hurts we inflict on ourselves and by the realization that we will never be good enough.

I've told you I have a fondness for the older translation – and I do. But some of the newer translations have a freshness we also need. So let me Eugene Peterson's take on the old words:

Are you tired? Worn out? Burned out on religion? Come to me. Get away with me and you'll recover your life. I'll show you how to take a real rest. Walk with me and work with me—watch how I do it. Learn the unforced rhythms of grace. I won't lay anything heavy or ill-fitting on you. Keep company with me and you'll learn to live freely and lightly.

ⁱ Cornelius Plantinga, Jr., in *Beyond Doubt* (W. B. Eerdmans Publishing, 2001), p. 90.