

St. Mark's Episcopal Church
Albuquerque, New Mexico
Sunday Oct. 3, 2021 The Feast of St. Francis
Matthew 11: 25-30
Preacher: Christopher McLaren
Sermon: The Great Invitation: Come find rest for your souls

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. For my yoke is easy, and my burden is light.

NRSV Matthew 11: 28-30

The invitation Jesus speaks is deeply attractive. We may hear it as a welcome relief from the struggle and demands of modern life. There is so much to do, our tasks are so many, our expectations always expanding. And while it may in fact be an invitation that will relieve some of our day-to-day struggles it is not an invitation to inactivity. This is an invitation into spiritual intimacy with Christ. It is issued not to the work-burdened or the sin-burdened so much as it is to the spiritually-burdened. It is an invitation that is saying something like this in the words of Eugene Peterson's *The Message*.

*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 the live freely and lightly. (*The Message*, Matthew 11:28-30)*

Jesus is inviting each of us into a relationship that is meant to be life-giving, life-affirming, freeing and joyful. I wonder if that is how people would describe their life in Christ or the Christians they meet? My sponsoring priest was fond of saying, "have enough Christianity to make you joyful and not just enough to make you miserable." I do not believe that Jesus is saying anything goes, just be yourself and exercise your freedom and you will find the kingdom. Rather I believe that Jesus is saying something more like don't try to make everything so hard on yourself, don't keep making up reasons you can't be joyful, start trying to forgive yourself, hear the allure of my beautiful invitation to you. I love you and I want to walk with you through life: the tough things, the losses, the joys, the victories, the tensions, the challenges, the ambiguities, the passionate actions, the cold anger of injustice. I want to be your partner in it all and so does God. You are invited to follow me, to work with me, to be yoked to me, like two oxen working the field together.

The rest that is possible in life is found in the quality of the yoke one accepts. Jesus' yoke is called easy which is another way of saying kind. A good yoke or harness is something that is carefully shaped so that there will be a minimum of chafing and discomfort in the work. I believe that in saying "learn from me" Jesus means not only listen to my teaching but also join me, become yoked to me and learn how to pull your load differently by working beside me and watching how I do it. The heavy labor of your life will seem lighter, more possible when you allow me to help you with it.

For us Jesus is wisdom, the one who shows us the good way, where the restless can find rest for their souls. This good way is not devoid of hard work or obedience for that would not be life at all. Jesus demonstrated in his teaching and life the joyful obedience to God rather than a slavish devotion to rules and the exclusion of others. It is the quality of the relationship with Christ that makes our life and work well, the rest for our souls possible and a sense that one is alive and participating in the emerging way of God. "Come to me," is an invitation by a humble and gentle Jesus to follow in a new way.

In following Jesus, we become part of a people who know that it is not we ourselves who are in control but rather it is this gentle and humble Jesus who holds the future. Knowing that Christ holds the future we can be patient in the midst of struggle and with ourselves. In the practice of knowing Christ, we are drawn into a relationship that teaches us where true freedom lies, not in a nation, or an economy, or a career but in learning how to live and love, how to forgive and heal, how to give and nurture and how to grow and serve like Jesus who is with us in it all. It is not that the struggles of life, the dangers of the world or the roaring lions cease to exist or affect us, it is rather that we are not alone in the struggle, for we are yoked to the source of life itself in our acceptance of the Great Invitation.

On this feast of St. Francis, I think that this is a beautiful message. Francis walked away from the privilege and wealth that surrounded him in Assisi, Italy into a life of service and poverty. In yoking himself to Jesus, Francis found the perfect freedom he was looking for. The burden of wealth, the strictures of the ruling class, the expectations of his family were not the yoke he was looking for. Francis heard the voice of God calling him to rebuild his church, one soul at a time, one generous and kind act at a time, one act of radical welcome and sharing at a time. As one commentator said, "Francis represents an audacious and outrageous challenge; he preaches the gospel not in words, but in images too bold to dismiss and a life that was itself a parable. That is why we both revere and fear him." (Portaro)

Francis is famous for saying, "Preach the gospel wherever you go, use words if necessary!" I love this saying, it's so surprising in our culture of talking heads and toxic religious rhetoric. Francis was basically saying, you are the gospel that people will see and experience. You are the biblical narrative that people will learn. It is your life, your loving, your forgiving, your

compassion, your acceptance, your welcome, your sacrifice, your patience that will help people to understand the good news of the gospel. You cannot expect people to experience a loving God without experiencing your loving behavior first. You cannot expect people to think that God forgives with reckless abandon if you are busy holding grudges and clinging to resentments.

This past week we celebrated the Feast of St. Jerome, an irascible saint who was seldom pleasant but never dull. He was not a friendly nice guy but he is a saint because he was wicked smart and skilled at language and he managed to translate the entire bible out of Greek and Hebrew into Latin, the common tongue of his day. He made the stories of the bible accessible to ordinary people knowing that this is a key part to people knowing God. If you want to know God, you need to know something of God's story, to allow that story to become your story and your story to become part of God's story.

The story of Jerome and St. Francis got me thinking of something that I'd not really ever put together exactly. St. Jerome in the 5th century translated the bible into the common language so people could understand it, and St Francis in the 12th century reminded us to preach the gospel wherever we go and to use words if necessary. When I thought about these two saints together it struck me that the way we live is actually our own translation of the faith. Each of us is a living and breathing translation of the biblical story. It's one of the main reasons we are here today, to continue to learn about our own faith. To internalize the stories of our Jewish and Christian ancestors in the faith, to join our story with their story in a way that inspires us, fires our imagination, ignites our hearts, gives us energy for the work in front of us in light of being God's people in the world. It is our lives that translate and transmit the good news of God in Christ to those around us. It is our loving, our forgiving, our compassion, our service, our generosity, our hospitality, our laying down of our lives for others that proclaims the good news of Christ. We are in fact living breathing translations of God's story in the world. It's a powerful and humbling idea that you and I are living translations of the gospel. There is actually a translation of the bible called Tom and Erin and Josh and Rachel and Barry and Else. We are, for some, the only real bible that they may ever experience. We are a living breathing translation of God's Good News to the world and that is a heavy burden I suppose. That is why we are asked to share the burden, to yoke ourselves to Jesus so that we can learn the unforced rhythms of grace in our lives and share it with others. Yes, there is important work to be done and it is so much better when it is shared work.

Come to me, all you that are weary and are carrying heavy burdens, and I will give you rest.

Come learn the unforced rhythms of grace.