

“All You That Are Weary”
Matthew 11:16-30
Rev. Liz Kearny
Longview Presbyterian Church
July 5th, 2020

16“But to what will I compare this generation? It is like children sitting in the marketplaces and calling to one another, 17‘We played the flute for you, and you did not dance; we wailed, and you did not mourn.’ 18For John came neither eating nor drinking, and they say, ‘He has a demon’; 19the Son of Man came eating and drinking, and they say, ‘Look, a glutton and a drunkard, a friend of tax collectors and sinners!’ Yet wisdom is vindicated by her deeds.” 20Then he began to reproach the cities in which most of his deeds of power had been done, because they did not repent. 21“Woe to you, Chorazin! Woe to you, Bethsaida! For if the deeds of power done in you had been done in Tyre and Sidon, they would have repented long ago in sackcloth and ashes. 22But I tell you, on the day of judgment it will be more tolerable for Tyre and Sidon than for you. 23And you, Capernaum, will you be exalted to heaven? No, you will be brought down to Hades. For if the deeds of power done in you had been done in Sodom, it would have remained until this day. 24But I tell you that on the day of judgment it will be more tolerable for the land of Sodom than for you.” 25At that time Jesus said, “I thank you, Father, Lord of heaven and earth, because you have hidden these things from the wise and the intelligent and have revealed them to infants; 26yes, Father, for such was your gracious will. 27All things have been

handed over to me by my Father; and no one knows the Son except the Father, and no one knows the Father except the Son and anyone to whom the Son chooses to reveal him. 28“Come to me, all you that are weary and are carrying heavy burdens, and I will give you rest. 29Take my yoke upon you, and learn from me; for I am gentle and humble in heart, and you will find rest for your souls. 30For my yoke is easy, and my burden is light.”

This is the Word of the Lord. **Thanks be to God.**

This text gave me whiplash. Jesus speaks first of “this generation”, people who are like kids completely missing the person who has come to save them. They can’t hear John the Baptist’s truth because they are busy criticizing his sharp, extreme path of repentance. They can’t hear Jesus because they are busy judging him for hanging out with folks they consider to be low-lives in society. Jesus then cries out with woes for the cities who have witnessed God’s deeds of power and have refused to repent. It’s a bleak picture. Jesus laments that so many in this generation are completely missing God in their midst.

But then the tone changes so quickly that I wondered at first what I was missing. Jesus speaks tenderly of hidden things being revealed not to the intelligent and wise, but instead to babies. And then, in verse 28, we hear one of the most beautiful invitations in all the Gospels: “Come to me, all you that are weary and are carrying heavy burdens, and I will give you rest.”

How is the bleak picture of the first half of this text connected to the generous invitation of the last half?

Here’s what I learned as I read more about this text: the folks Jesus speaks to in the first half of the passage are content to

believe that they have everything they need for life within themselves. They are the ones who want God's messengers to be less truthful than John the Baptist and more dignified than Jesus. They are Chorazin and Bethsaida, those cities that have witnessed God's deeds of power and have decided that they don't need any help, thank you very much. They have heard the call to repent, but they've decided that they are actually pretty good people all on their own.

I've seen so much of myself in those people to whom Jesus is speaking. In the last month of my life in particular, I've clung ferociously to the myth of my own self-sufficiency and goodness. The murders of George Floyd, Breonna Taylor, and Ahmaud Arbery at the hands of white supremacy, which are only some of the most recent horrifying incidents of the status quo in America, have brought with them a constant confrontation with the racism that has infected every institution of our country. And for the last few weeks, I confess that so often my response has been to try chasing away my feelings of shame by trying to do as many "good white people" things as I can. I am overwhelmed by the suffering I have been silent about and complicit in for decades, so I take time to read that article about white privilege or I call that number to demand that the cops who murdered Breonna in her own bed at home be arrested and convicted or I scroll endlessly through my Facebook feed anxiously wondering what else I can do to run the despair of all of it out of my life. Because maybe then I can be done with these feelings. I have been confronted with the tiniest fraction of overwhelm and despair, which cannot even be compared to what our siblings of color experience, and if I am honest, I would rather go back to believing that I'm a pretty good

person who does the right thing most of the time. The Spirit is at work in this uprising of our Black siblings, telling us the truth, embodying God's justice on the streets of our cities and towns, but I'm like those kids asking that voice to say something that makes me feel more comfortable. I reach for anti-racist activities not because I'm feeling compelled to follow Jesus in paths of justice, but because I want to go the way of Chorazin and Bethsaida, doing whatever I can to return to feeling like I'm a good person who doesn't need to undergo a radical transformation.

And ironically, in running away from this opportunity to grapple with my own sin - the sin of white supremacy that compels me to value my feelings of stability over Black lives - I have built a fence around me to keep out the life-giving grace of God. Because Jesus' words are NOT "come to me you who are ready to save the world and have it all together". They are NOT "come to me you who are ready to fix all the world's problems and feel confident in your ability to do so on your own." But rather "Come to me, all you that are *weary* and are *carrying heavy burdens*, and I will give you rest." I love how theologian Debie Thomas puts it: "What does being a Christian give me that being a "good person" does not? It gives me my sinfulness... As ironic as it may sound, Christianity liberates me with a truth that cuts before it heals: the truth that Sin is a deadly, destructive force against which I am helpless and powerless — apart from the death and resurrection of Jesus."¹

¹ Debie Thomas, "A Lighter Burden," *JOURNEY WITH JESUS*
A WEEKLY WEBZINE FOR THE GLOBAL CHURCH, SINCE 2004, June 28, 2020,
https://www.journeywithjesus.net/lectionary-essays/current-essay?fbclid=IwAR3fq8Hrdgl5VVvRAGDGJtHQQGyJshTpJlvGgfgHQs4tPzIG0HQ_xkO80bzk

There may be folks in worship today who have been harmed by the church's abuse of the word "sin" to convince people they are not welcome in God's family. That abuse weaponizes the word "sin" to create human-made boundaries that keep people out. That abuse is very real and *not* from the heart of God. That is not what we speak of here. Because to throw out conversations about sin completely is to walk away from the pathway to grace. Until we can admit that we are riddled with the sin of this world in ways we cannot even fully see or understand, sin like white supremacy will continue to dominate our ways of thinking, our ways of being, and every last one of our American institutions. When we refuse to face up to our sin directly and name it for what it is, we resist the very death of self that would give way to resurrection life. The way forward begins by our saying, "Yes, Jesus, I am weary. This burden really is too heavy for me. I am broken and infected in ways I can't even see or understand. And I'm not enough to heal myself." The way forward begins by witnessing the deeds of God's power unfolding in the streets of our nation and letting the full weight of our complicity in white supremacy lead us into lament - a daily lament of repentance, the Greek word that means literally "to turn around", admitting that this wave of sin has pulled us under and we cannot swim out on our own.

Because when we finally confess that we are helpless to sin's power, we put off an old kind of work that takes us nowhere, the kind that only serves to exhaust us and center our feelings of comfort instead of the lives of those being harmed by systems of sin. When we finally confess sin's hold on us, we take the first step into a new kind of work, a yoke, if you will - the kind that puts

us shoulder to shoulder with Jesus, the kind that flows freely out of a relationship with the One who embodies perfect compassion, justice, truth-telling, and grace and who will teach us the next right step on every inch of this journey. As theologian Elisabeth Johnson puts it, “To take his yoke upon oneself is to be yoked to the one in whom God's [kin-dom] of justice, mercy, and compassion is breaking into this world, and to find the rest for which the soul longs.”²

People of God, may we stop chasing away the reality of our sin. Let us instead name it. Speak it out loud. Confess it. Lament it. As many times as it takes for us to really turn around. This is how we take the first steps in the real work we have to do. Practice waking up every day and saying, “Jesus, I can’t do this. I’m a mess. But you are yoked to me. Show me the very next step in following your way.” This work will be a burden, but with Jesus the burden is light. This work will be heavy, but with Jesus we can keep going together. For yoked to him, we find rest for our souls. Amen.

² Elisabeth Johnson, “Commentary on Matthew 11:16-19, 25-30,” https://www.workingpreacher.org/preaching.aspx?commentary_id=970