

Rest for the Weary

Matthew 11:16-19, 25-30 (Psalm 145:8-14)

June 26, 2011

This morning we are returning to the Gospel of Matthew as we follow along with the readings from the Revised Common Lectionary for the year. Actually Alex returned to it a couple of weeks ago as he looked at The Great Commission from Matthew, chapter 28. This morning we have two passages from Matthew 11, v. 16-19 and 25-30. The two passages are split, which is actually pretty common in the readings, but I think it is important that when we look at any particular verses, we look at them in their entire context: what comes before; as is the case today, what comes in between; and what comes after.

At the beginning of chapter 11 Matthew tells us about John the Baptist, who was now in prison, starting to doubt just a little if Jesus was who had claimed to be. After all, if Jesus really was the Messiah who was to come, why should John be sitting in prison? In verses 2-3 Matthew tells us that John sent some of his disciples to ask Jesus: “Are you the one who was to come, or should we expect someone else?”

*Jesus replied, “Go back and report to John what you hear and see: The blind receive sight, the lame walk, those who have leprosy are cured, the deaf hear, the dead are raised, and the good news is preached to the poor. **Blessed is the man who does not fall away on account of me.**”*
Matthew 11:4-6 (NIV)

Jesus never frees John the Baptist from prison, in fact John will eventually be executed, beheaded, but Jesus does go on to defend him:

*I tell you the truth: Among those born of women there has not risen anyone greater than John the Baptist; yet he who is least in the kingdom of heaven is greater than he. From the days of John the Baptist until now, the kingdom of heaven has been forcefully advancing, and forceful men lay hold of it. For all the Prophets and the Law prophesied until John. And if you are willing to accept it, he is the Elijah who was to come. **He who has ears, let him hear.***
Matthew 11:11-15 (NIV)

Then we get to our first passage this morning, verses 16-19:

“To what can I compare this generation? They are like children sitting in the marketplace and calling out to others: ‘We played the flute for you, and you did not dance; we sang a dirge, and you did not mourn.’ For John came neither eating or drinking, and they say, ‘He was a demon.’ The son of man came eating and drinking, and they say, ‘Here is a glutton and a drunkard, a friend of tax collectors and “sinners.”’ But wisdom is proved right by her actions.”
Matthew 11:16-19 (NIV)

Then verses 20-24:

Then Jesus began to denounce the cities in which most of the miracles had been performed, because they did not repent. “Woe to you, Korazin! Woe to you, Bethsaida! If the miracles that were performed in you had been performed in Tyre and Sidon, they would have repented long ago in sackcloth and ashes. But I tell you, it would be more bearable for Tyre and Sidon on the day of judgment than for you. And you, Capernaum,

will you be lifted up to the skies? No, you will go down to the depths. If the miracles that were performed in you had been performed in Sodom, it would have remained to this day. But I tell you it will be more bearable for Sodom on the day of judgment than for you.

Then our other passage this morning as Jesus breaks out into prayer:

At that time Jesus said, "I praise you, Father, Lord of heaven and earth, because you have hidden these things from the wise and learned, and revealed them to little children. Yes, Father, for this was for your good pleasure.

"All things have been committed to me by my Father. No one knows the Son except the Father, and no one knows the Father except the Son and those to whom the Son chooses to reveal him.

"Come to me all you who are weary and burdened, 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."

Matthew 11:25-30 (NIV)

One might ask, is there a common theme throughout Matthew 11 or is it just a bunch of Jesus' sayings to different groups of people put together? That is a good question. Jesus was saddened by the lack of response to the Good News that he had brought. Saddened by the perversity of his generation. Saddened by the spiritual blindness of so many people. Even when he himself was right there before their eyes, doing the things that the prophets had predicted for many generations before that the coming Messiah would do: Giving sight to the blind, driving out demons, healing, raising the dead, and preaching good news to the poor.

"To what can I compare this generation?" They are like children sitting in the marketplace that cannot be pleased. All kinds of upbeat music to make them dance, the type that they usually play at weddings, no response. Fine, how about the type that they play at funerals, the type that makes one mourn? "No, they don't like that either."

John the Baptist came, living in the desert, fasting and despising food, isolated from society and others, preaching a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins; and they said to him: "This man is mad to cut himself off from society and human pleasures like that." Jesus came, mixing with all kinds of people, sharing in their sorrows and their joys, keeping company with them; and they said of him: "This man is a socialite; a party-goer; he is the friend of outsiders and sinners with whom no decent person should have anything to do with." They called John's self-denial madness and they called Jesus' sociability laxness of morals. They found grounds for criticism either way. The plain fact is that when people do not want to listen to the truth, they will always find an excuse for not listening to it.

While many in Jesus' day did not want to listen to the truth, and many rejected him outright, just like today, others were truly seeking. Jesus also spoke to people who were trying to find God, trying to find the truth, and trying to be good, yet they were finding it very hard and they were being driven to weariness and despair. Anybody here ever feel like that?

Jesus says: “Come to me all you who are tired and weary.” To those who are struggling with the search for the truth. To those who are tired of religion as many understand religion. It is Jesus’ claim that the weary search for God ends in Jesus himself.

Jesus says: “Come to me all who are weighted down beneath your burdens.” For orthodox Jews, religion was a thing of burdens. They had laws for anything and everything. Some 600+, added on to all the commandments that we find in the O.T.. Jesus said of the scribes and Pharisees, recorded a little later in Matthew (23:4): “They tie up heavy loads (burdens) and put them on men’s shoulders”

Jesus invites us to take his yoke upon our shoulders. The Jews used the phrase “the yoke” for entering into submission to. They spoke of “the yoke of the law,” “the yoke of the commandments,” “the yoke of the kingdom,” and “the yoke of God.” The yoke could be good or bad, easy or hard.

Jesus said, “My yoke is easy.” The word used there for easy in Greek, also means “well-fitting.” In Palestine, ox-yokes were made of wood. The ox was actually brought into the carpenter shop to be measured. The yoke was then roughed out, and the ox was brought back to have the yoke tried on. The yoke was carefully adjusted, so that it would fit well, and not chafe the neck of the animal. The yoke was tailor made to fit the ox. . God has a specific task tailor made for each of us which is made to measure to fit us exactly. In Jesus’ day they had single yokes and double yokes. The yoke that God gives us is meant to be shared with Jesus. In fact we are supposed to exchange our yoke for his. “Take my yoke upon you and learn from me.”

Jesus says: “My yoke fits well.” What he means is “The life I give you is not meant to be a burden to cause you pain

When we invite people into the kingdom, into the church, is that what we really do? Do we lighten the load and remove the burdens? Or do we just add more? We live in a time when people have more loads to bear and burdens to carry than ever before. Most of it is our own doing. We live just such busy lives and we try and pile more and more on.

If Jesus was here today I wonder what he would be saying: *To what can I compare this generation?*

Well, in some ways we’re not that different than the generation Jesus was speaking to in Matthew 11. We’re still very hard to please. In fact we’re impossible to please if our eyes have not been opened to who Jesus is.

I can imagine Jesus questioning us about all our busyness? “What’s that all about? Remember the story about Mary and Martha. ‘Martha was distracted by all the preparations that had to be made.’ She came to me and asked, ‘Lord, don’t you care that my sister has left me to the work by myself? Tell her to help me!’ And my words to her:

'Martha, Martha, you are worried and upset about many, many things, but only one thing is needed. Mary has chosen what is better, and it will not be taken from her.' Luke 10:41-42 (NIV)

What was it that Mary had chosen? Just to sit at Jesus' feet. How often do you spend time just sitting at Jesus' feet, reading the Bible and in prayer? I think of the words of the writer of the great Book of Hebrews:

Therefore, since we are surrounded by such a great cloud of witnesses, let us throw off everything that hinders and the sin that so easily entangles, and let us run with perseverance the race marked out for us. Let us fix our eyes on Jesus, the author and perfecter of our faith, who for the joy set before him endured the cross, scorning its shame, and sat down at the right hand of the throne of God. Consider him who endured such opposition from sinful men, so that you will not grow weary and lose heart. Hebrews 12:1-3 (NIV)

Jesus said, *"Take my yoke upon you and learn from me, . . ."* Matthew 11:29 (NIV)

What Jesus was basically saying is that he is the answer to all our questions. He was comparing himself to all of wisdom. We know that Jesus was quite familiar with the O.T. Scriptures, the Torah. Part of the Torah was a wisdom book called The Book of Sirach , similar to Ecclesiastes and Proverbs. It is in the Apocrypha because it was never carried over into the official Canon of the church. But Jesus was most likely familiar with it. And scholars believe he is most likely quoting there from the Book of Sirach, recorded there in Matthew 11:25-30:

Draw near to me, you who are uneducated, and lodge in the house of instruction. Why do you say you are lacking in these things, and why do you endure such great thirst? I opened my mouth and said, Acquire wisdom for yourselves without money.

Put your neck under her yoke, and let your souls receive instruction; it is to be found close by. See with your own eyes that I have labored but little and found for myself much serenity. Hear but a little of my instruction, and through me you will acquire silver and gold.

May your soul rejoice in God's mercy, and may you never be ashamed to praise him. Do your work in good time, and in his own time God will give you your reward.
Sirach 51:23-30 (NRSV - Apocrypha)

*"Come to me, **all** you who are weary and burdened . . . 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."*
Matthew 11:28-30 (NIV)

Jesus was not getting rid of all the Law. The "yoke of the law" was all the regulations and ceremonial law that the Pharisees added on. Much like the "Christian yoke," that which just about every church has added on throughout the centuries, i.e. many of our Mennonite rules of the past and the Amish still today. The true intent of the Law is to help, not burden, God's people.

Then, I don't think it is just a coincidence that Matthew follows up Jesus' teaching here in Matthew 11, with the stories of what took place on the Sabbath, at the beginning of Matthew 12. When Jesus and the disciples were walking through the grainfield and they were hungry, so they began to pick some of the heads of grain and eat them. That which was unlawful on the Sabbath. Then the story of Jesus healing the man with the withered hand on the Sabbath. Another something which was unlawful according to the Pharisaic law. Again, Jesus was not saying that the Sabbath Law never applied. In fact it is one of the Ten Commandments - right up there with murder, adultery, stealing and lying. But Jesus says in his teaching on the Sabbath, "Do you not know what these words mean - I desire mercy over sacrifice" (Matt. 12:7) and, "The Sabbath was made for man, not man for the Sabbath. So the Son of Man is Lord even of the Sabbath" (Mark 2:27-28).

The story is told of a young boy who really struggled during his first year of kindergarten. He came home one day, about half way through the year and announced that the teacher had finally put a gold star on the board after his name. His mother was delighted because the little boy was always in trouble and had yet to receive a gold star. "Son, I'm so proud of you," she said. "What did you do to win the star?" He replied, "During the rest period I rested better than anyone else." Christians, better than anyone else, ought to know how to rest. The rest that is being talked about here is not the type of rest of doing nothing. The rest talked about here the rest of is resting in Jesus.

Is there a common theme in the passages found in Matthew 11? Yes, I think there is. It is the need to recognize Jesus for who he really is, the Son of God. The one true God who came down to earth in human form to save us from our sins.

John the Baptist doubted, just a little bit: “Are you the one who was to come or should we be expecting someone else?”

To all the people in the area of Galilee, Korazin, Bethsaida, and Capernaum, where Jesus did all the miracles and healings, and yet many people did not recognize him for who he really was. They’ll going to be held more accountable than all the evil people in Tyre, Sidon, Sodom & Gomorrah.

They rejected John the Baptist and the need to repent, that which prepares the way for the Messiah to enter into one’s heart, and they rejected Jesus Himself. God among us.

He who has ears let him hear. He who has eyes let him see.

What is eternal life? Jesus tells us in what is arguably his greatest prayer ever recorded, found in John 17:

“Now this is eternal life: that they may know you, the only true God (God the Father), and Jesus Christ whom you have sent.” John 17:3 (NIV)

How does all this apply to our visioning process? How might God be speaking to us as a church today?

- Are we trying to lighten other’s burdens?

“Carry each other’s burdens, and in this way you will fulfill the law of Christ.”
Galatians 6:2 (NIV)

- Are we trying to do too much? We can’t do everything or be everything for everybody. How has God gifted us? Where should we be putting our time, talents, and efforts? It might even mean eliminating some things.

- What are our priorities? How important is worship, because that is what Mary was doing when she chose the most important thing.

- Are we wearing Jesus’ yoke or our own yoke? My sense is that most of us are trying to live our lives wearing our own yokes. *“Take my yoke and learn from me, for I am gentle and humble in heart, and you will find rest for your souls.”*

Individual Questions to Ponder:

1. How often do I just sit at Jesus’ feet?
2. Do I need to re-arrange my priorities, or even eliminate some things from my life, to sit at Jesus’ feet?
3. How much time do I spend in God’s word and prayer?
4. Is worship a priority for me?

And I know what you are probably thinking. I just don't have time for all that at this stage of my life. Whether it be work, taking care of the children, or all the running around. But you know what I have discovered, if you are waiting for the right time of your life, it will never come.

5. Am I living my life under my own yoke or Jesus' yoke?

I really like Eugene Peterson's translation of verses 28-30 in *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.

Matthew 11:28-30 (*The Message*)

He who has ears to hear, let him hear. Jesus' voice is "heard" when Jesus' claim of who he is, is acknowledged, His promise trusted, and His call answered.

"Come to me all you who are weary and burdened, and I will give you rest."

I came across a song on the radio a couple of weeks ago. Powerful words. I am not sure it fits exactly with my message this morning but in a way it does. The song is *Blessings* by Laura Story.