

Preaching for Lutheran Church of the Good Shepherd
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Date: July 5, 2020 Year A, 5th Sunday after Pentecost.

Text: Matthew 11:16-19, 25-30

Title: A Case of Mistaken Identity Leads to a Gracious Invitation

Focus: Even when Jesus is frustrated that people don't understand who he is, he still extends a gracious invitation to all who are weary—to come and find rest.

Matthew 11:16-19, 25-30

¹⁶ [Jesus said to them,] "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.' ¹⁸ For John came neither eating nor drinking, and they say, "He has a demon'; ¹⁹ the 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."

²⁵ At 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; ²⁶ yes, Father, for such was your gracious will. ²⁷ All 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. ²⁹ 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. ³⁰ For my yoke is easy, and my burden is light."

A Case of Mistaken Identity

I have mentioned before that I am a twin—an identical twin. My brother John lives with his family in San Francisco. Most people find twins intriguing. When people learn I'm a twin, they usually ask a question or two:

- What's it like being a twin?

I understand the question and the curiosity behind it, but, in a way, I don't know how to answer it. At least through our high school years when we were together all the time, I'd want to turn this question around and ask, "I don't know; what's it like *not* being a twin?" I wouldn't intend to be sassy, it's just that I don't have the perspective of *not* being a twin.

Now that we're older and have lived many years physically apart from one another, I'm better able, I suppose, to view myself as a single-born person would. I think it's cool being a twin, and, in some ways, I still can't imagine *not* being a twin.

- Do you really look alike? Are you really identical?
 - Here, see for yourself: Here's a picture of the two of us taken 2 years ago at my nephew's high school graduation. (June 9, 2018)
 - Who is Scott and who is John?
 - That's me on the left and John on the right. Especially as seen here with similar dress shirts, we do look alike.



When we went away to college, we chose different schools in keeping with our own unique interests and goals. One funny thing was that my freshman year roommate in the dorms was also named John, like my brother. I remember that during the first quarter of the year, when people were still getting to know each other, now and then people around the dorm would mistakenly call me "John" because my roommate and I would hang out together a lot and people would confuse us.

On the one hand, I was of course used to being called John, but on the other, it was weird being called that because of my roommate John--who looked nothing like me—and not because of my brother John.

A Case of Mistaken Identity in the Gospel

I've experienced a Case of Mistaken Identity, both as a twin and as a college freshman with my roommate. There's a Case of Mistaken Identity going on in this Gospel story from Matthew as well. It starts earlier in chapter 11 before today's Lectionary-designated text begins at verse 16. First Matthew as narrator describes a shift in setting from Jesus talking with the twelve disciples, as we've been reading about for the last three weeks, to Jesus teaching and proclaiming in the cities. He's now teaching large groups of people rather than just with the twelve:

"¹Now when Jesus had finished instructing his twelve disciples, he went on from there to teach and proclaim his message in their cities."

Then John the Baptist, who was at the time being held in prison by order of Herod Antipas, sends word to Jesus:

"²When John heard in prison what the Messiah was doing, he sent word by his disciples ³and said to him, 'Are you the one who is to come, or are we to wait for another?'" (Matthew 11)

Frankly, this strikes me as an odd question coming from John, because he was the one who announced Jesus coming as the fulfillment of the hope and longing for a Messiah. From earlier in Matthew's gospel (as well as others' accounts), John's role as the prophet was to prepare the way for Jesus. Here's how that's described in Matthew chapter 3:

"In those days John the Baptist appeared in the wilderness of Judea, proclaiming, ²Repent, for the kingdom of heaven has come near.' ³This is the one of whom the prophet Isaiah spoke when he said, 'The voice of one crying out in the wilderness: 'Prepare the way of the Lord, make his paths straight.'"" (Matthew 3:1-3)

So, it seems odd for John, in today's text from Matthew 11, wondering if Jesus is the One, the promised Messiah, when he himself has declared Jesus to be the One. Maybe it's the disorienting, upending experience of being in prison that causes him to be "out of sorts" and to ask the question. He's looking for reassurance.

Maybe this Case of Mistaken Identity could be understood as a difference of expectation. Maybe from the perspective of his imprisonment, John was wanting a powerful Messiah to bust some heads and dispense judgment and establish justice. Maybe every day John sat in that awful jail, he wondered about the power of Jesus.

- Would Jesus come to save him?
- Did he have the power to do so, or was he not really who he said he was?
- Jesus' appearance as a non-violent teacher of peace did not match the picture--the identification—John had in his mind.

And Jesus responds to the disciples of John who come to him by saying that he was living out the description of the Messiah who was to come:

⁴"Go and tell John what you hear and see: ⁵the blind receive their sight, the lame walk, the lepers are cleansed, the deaf hear, the dead are raised, and the poor have good news brought to them. ⁶And blessed is anyone who takes no offense at me" (Matthew 11).

And this Case of Mistaken Identity continues in the part of the passage specifically designated for today's reading. Jesus begins. . .

- ¹⁶ "But to what will I compare this generation?"

I think this is an expression of frustration; Jesus is saying something like, “The Messiah, the one for whom people have longed and hoped is here right in front of them and they don’t see him; they don’t ‘get it.’”

Their expectations or their perception is off: The crowds appear ready to judge only on the basis of the company that John or Jesus keep. They fail to see beyond the outward appearances of John as the prophet and Jesus as the Son of Man.

- John played the part of social misfit, a throwback prophet whom many supposed was demon-possessed (verse 18).
 - Jesus described it in this way: ¹⁸For John came neither eating nor drinking, and they say, "He has a demon"
- Jesus, on the other hand, associated himself with sinners and tax collectors. Therefore, the crowds concluded, he must be "a glutton and a drunkard" (verse 19).

A Gracious Invitation

Jesus expresses his frustration when he says, “But to what will I compare this generation?” (v. 16). He’s of course talking about the generation in which he lived, but don’t you think that frustration could describe any time in which people don’t clearly see what’s right in front of them?

In the next movement of the passage (v. 25-f), Jesus offers a prayer in which he suggests that understanding comes to those whose vulnerability and humility make it possible for them both to see and to respond faithfully to God’s presence and power.

The passage concludes with the most gracious of invitations—particularly gracious when you see this repeated “Case of Mistaken Identity” and grasp how slow people are to understand or to recognize Jesus. However slow we ourselves are to see Jesus clearly, God’s grace is shown in that it is Jesus who moves first as the one seeking us. God embraces us before we can even respond.

Jesus says,

²⁸ "Come to me, all you that are weary and are carrying heavy burdens, and I will give you rest. ²⁹ 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. ³⁰ For my yoke is easy, and my burden is light."

I hear this as so comforting, especially when, as I said, it comes after repeated instances of failure to recognize Jesus as Messiah in their midst.

Let's look at 3 words in this invitation that seem key:

Come: “*Come* to me. . .”

- It's an invitation—come
- I picture Jesus as arms wide open, ready to embrace us.
 - The other day, I met with someone whom I had not seen in a while. (Imagine that—not physically seeing someone in a time of physical isolation). We kept our physical distance as she greeted, “Air hug” and we held our arms out as we greeted each other from 8 or so feet apart.
- “Come” is the relentless invitation of God, who is always reaching out, always welcoming with open arms.
 - Today's Psalm reading describes God as being “slow to anger and abounding in steadfast love” (Psalm 145:8).
- “Come” is a word spoken by God throughout Scripture:
 - “Come and see. . .,” which is an invitation to see the goodness of Jesus or to *abide* or be in relationship with Jesus. (John 1:39, John 1:46, John 4:29)

This invitation in scripture continues all the way to Bible's final paragraph: "The Spirit and the bride say, 'Come.' And let everyone who hears say, 'Come.' And let everyone who is thirsty come . . . [and] take the water of life as a gift" (Revelation 22:17).

- Come, let everyone come. Whoever we are, wherever we are, however we are, come.
- Come, even as we yearn to live responsibly in this moment.
- Come, even as we try to pay attention to what these days hold.
- Come, even as we admit our limitations.
- Come, even though our sins are many.
- Come, even as we attempt to open our hearts.
- The welcome of Jesus Christ is ever-extended. Come.

All: ²⁸ "Come to me, **all** you who are weary and are carrying heavy burdens . . .”

- Not just some. Not just a few.
- Not just the qualified or the capable or the knowledgeable. But all.
- “Come,” the Apostle Paul would say from today's reading from Romans, even “Those who do not do the good they want to do,”. (Romans 7:2)
- “All” includes those with scars; those with baggage.
- “All” includes those with questions; those with doubts; those with fears.
- Everyone is invited. Everyone is welcome. All.

When Jesus is host at the table and shares the cup with us, he says, "Drink from it *all* of you" (26:27).

"Come to me, all of you," Jesus says, looking at us with love. All. It is the inclusive vision of the gospel. It is the small word that speaks to the bigness of the gospel and God's ability to hold all of who we are. Come. All.¹

Rest: ²⁸ "Come to me, all you that are weary and are carrying heavy burdens, and I will give you *rest*."

Rest is the final word in this sequence. Rest. It's what Jesus offers in the end. Rest from the storms, from the stress, from the hazards and the hardships and the harrowing circumstances that are before us every day.

- When working from home or when having no work . . .
- When being physically and relationally separated . . .
- When facing health uncertainty and wondering what may happen next . . .
- When struggling to find one's place in a world full in inequity . . .

Here is someone who seeks our good, who comforts our weariness and bears our burdens, who gives us shelter and safety. This one is companion and friend, Savior and Lord.

There is some irony in this invitation to find rest: Jesus says,

- ³⁰ "For my yoke is easy, and my burden is light."

A "yoke" is most commonly the wooden crossbeam that goes across the shoulders of a team of oxen to harness their power to get work done—to pull a cart or plow a field, for instance.

- How could shouldering a yoke be restful?

First of all, "easy" may not be the best translation to English for the phrase ". . . my yoke is easy. . ." (Matthew 11:30).

The word for *easy* (Greek **chréstos**, phonetically "khrase-tos") can also mean useful, good, serviceable, or even kind.

So, in Jesus' invitation and by using the metaphor of the yoke, Jesus does not offer us an exemption from pain and sorrow. But in the midst of hardship, we are not left to pull heavy burdens by ourselves, but we are yoked to Jesus, whose yoke is good, kind, and useful. He offers us himself, he offers us a presence, a knowing presence. For in him, in Jesus as Emmanuel, God-with-us, God knows what it is like to live and to love

¹¹ Thanks for *Presbyterian Outlook* guest columnist John Wurster, pastor of St. Philip Presbyterian Church in Houston, for insights in this section on "Come, All, Rest."

and to laugh and to weep and to ache and to die. We can't forget who is pulling the burden with us, with his head through the other oxbow.

Rest. Rest, knowing that God has overcome all things that would hurt or destroy. Rest, knowing we are loved. Rest, knowing, believing, trusting that in life and in death we belong to God. Rest. Be restored and renewed for what's ahead as the journey continues. Come. All. Rest.

Thanks be to God for this gracious invitation.