

Finding Rest

Matthew 11:16-19, 25-30

There is an old hymn that most of us learned in our childhood - Judson W. Van DeVenter's "I Surrender All," written in 1896. The hymn's refrain is apt for today's passage from Matthew: I surrender all, I surrender all; All to Thee, my blessed Savior, I surrender all.

This is the response I imagine Jesus hopes to hear from us following his invitation to discipleship in Matthew 11:28-30.

In the verses before this, Jesus had been clear that divine wisdom is proved right by its results (v. 19) and that he has a special relationship with God that he could choose to share with others. **Emilie M. Townes**

Jesus also spoke to his generation about how they failed to respond appropriately. How can we fail to reflect on the ways in which our own generation understands—and fails to understand—the reasons for dancing and the reasons for weeping. We are so often and so easily lulled by the other songs and voices of our culture. Not only do we miss the moments that matter; we regularly dance when we ought to mourn for a world whose burden is heavy and for a people who need rest.

When Jesus turned away from the people gathered and lifted a prayer to God, we begin to realize just how clearly his focus was centered, not on the powerful, wise, and intelligent ones who so often attract our attention, but on the "infants" (v. 25), on those who are far from the places of influence that we so yearn for. We spend our lives seeking wisdom and intelligence, and now it seems that those are the very attributes that Jesus dismisses. In God's realm, it seems, the things that attract our very human attention are barely

noticed. Worse yet, the blessings of God are intentionally hidden from those who are filled with the wisdom and wiles of this world. Instead, it is the infants of this world, the innocent and naive, who somehow understand best the ways of God.

Still, ours would not be the first voices raised on behalf of the oppressed of the earth. Karl Barth insisted that God always stands unconditionally and passionately on the side of the "threatened innocent, the oppressed poor, widow, orphans and aliens and on this side alone: against the lofty and on behalf of the lowly; against those who already enjoy right and privilege and on behalf of those who are denied and deprived of it." The saving word of the gospel is understood best when it is located in the midst of the experience of the powerless and the disenfranchised.

Jesus is inviting a significant engagement and social analysis before he offers the frequently quoted words of comfort to those who are weary and carrying heavy burdens. How does it speak to the hurting who are close by in our lives, and to the hurting who are far away? How are we engaged with those whose struggles are profound and whose needs are overwhelming? How does it speak to those of us who are the ones hurting and tired? If Jesus is in fact insisting that his blessing is known, not by the mighty and the powerful, but by the infants and the lowly, then this is a time for us too to identify with the plight of those who live on the fringes of our society and the fringes of our lives. Jesus is present more in our times of need than in times of plenty, more in times of desperation than in times of certainty.

William Goettler

It is in this spirit that his powerful invitation to discipleship is issued at the close of our passage of scripture. One of the many marks of this call to discipleship is that we understand the deep nature of our quest, found in the

context of our ministries—lay and ordained—and in the concrete ways we live out our faith. We find discipleship's harbor in the framework of struggling for faith, love, hope, and justice as we accept the challenges and rewards of the double contradiction of love we noted last week in God's compassionate hospitality, our ministry of that kind of welcome and his promise of a disciple's reward to us. In this we discover God's wholeness as we seek to integrate our faith into our daily lives. This transformative discipleship is hard, necessary, and sometimes very lonely work.

As we live into our faith and ministry, we remember that we are made in God's image. It is God who weaves the very fabric of our existence by God's unconditional love, demanding that we share the rich rewards of God's grace and mercy with others. In doing so, we are called to live out of our possibilities and not our shortcomings by answering, "Yes!" to God's "What if?" As we do so, the love of God revealed in Jesus' witness moves us to grow in compassion, understanding, and acceptance of each other.

We must remain mindful that discipleship involves living our lives with integrity and faithfulness to God. As we come to a greater sense of self, finding our identity in God, we realize that we are developing the markers of our faith as we deepen our understanding of discipleship in ways great and small in our daily living. The discipleship to which Jesus calls us not only offers us rest but also guarantees us persecution. So we must live with the conviction that we are being called to live into a new vision of who we are to be and what we are to proclaim from what we have learned from Jesus' teachings.

A faith-filled understanding of discipleship includes unpacking the gospel *into* living so that our discipleship is not built on a partial gospel, producing ministries that are dying if not already dead. The vital discipleship

to which Jesus calls us in this passage means that we must not place ourselves in the role of host or hostess in the church and be concerned only with when to do the next maintenance task, rather than how to construct places of welcome and sustenance. The discipleship to which Jesus invites us in this passage requires that we stretch into our ministries by focusing on his message and realizing that we will find rest for carrying the burden of the gospel by living out the unique mission to which Jesus calls each of us.

Emilie M. Townes

Rest is not offered to the strongest and the most powerful. Rest is offered to those who have been made weary by a world that fails to comprehend the burden of injustice. The yoke is made easy by the heavenly powers coming to the aid of those whose ways this world fails to understand.

In short, any who believe that they are responsible for their own salvation, through military might or political power, through intellectual prowess or personal magnetism, have no need of the comforting arms of Jesus. Jesus will not trouble them with heaven's gifts. To those who recognize their need for a savior, however, Jesus comes with comfort enough, lifting life's burdens and offering rest even for the lonely soul.

William Goettler

The story is told of Mother Theresa who was in a gathering of kings, presidents and statesmen. They were in their fine attire and Mother Theresa wore a sari held together by a safety pin. A statesman engaged her in conversation and asked if she was discouraged in her work because there continued to be such poverty and sickness among the people she served. Her reply was: "God does not require that we be successful only that we be faithful."

Jesus says, "Come to me, all you that are weary and are carrying heavy burdens, and I will give you rest." It is then that we can sing with relief and profound gratitude, "I surrender all." **Emilie M. Townes**

Feasting on the Word: Preaching the Revised Common Lectionary - Feasting on the Word – Year A,
Volume 3: Pentecost and Season After Pentecost 1 (Propers 3-16).