

Rest for the Soul

Matthew 11:16-19, 25-30

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.'

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."

Commentator Emilie Townes says one of her favorite hymns from childhood is Judson W. Van DeVenter's "I Surrender All," written in 1896. Actually, as a child, she confesses, she was drawn more to the refrains of hymns than to the stanzas. 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 we imagine Jesus hopes to hear from us following his invitation to discipleship in Matthew 11:28-30.

In the verses before this, Jesus has been clear that divine wisdom is proved right by its results (v. 19) and that he has a special relationship with God that he can choose to share with others. It is in this spirit that his powerful invitation to discipleship is issued at the close of our passage from Matthew.

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—whether lay and

ordained—and in the concrete ways we live out our faith. We find discipleship's moorings in the context of struggling for faith, love, hope, and justice as we accept the challenges and rewards of what we talked about last week, just because we give love doesn't meant we get love in return as we noted last week from Matthew 10. In this ripening and ripening once again 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 it, we need to remember that we are made in God's image. It is God who weaves the very fabric of our existence through 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 are to 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 persecution as well. 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 understanding of 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 churches whose ministries are 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**

In our scripture, the people, the nations, the whole generation, Jesus claims, have come up short. While we might try to distance ourselves from those ways that Jesus describes, too much sounds familiar; too much rings true.

The passage begins with the children of the land whose song is never quite understood. When they played a glad song, no one danced; when the song became a dirge, no one was moved to tears. They were no better understood than John the Baptist, no better understood than Jesus.

Jesus is not addressing the failure of individuals to respond, but of the society as a whole, indeed of the entire generation, a people who somehow fail to respond as they might to a song that is utterly clear. Do 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 turns away from the people gathered and lifts a prayer to God, we begin to realize just how clearly his focus is 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.

Ours would not be the first voices raised on behalf of the oppressed of the earth. Karl Barth insisted that righteousness always requires favoring the "threatened innocent, the oppressed poor, widow, orphans and aliens.... God always stands unconditionally and passionately on this side 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 we experience powerlessness and disenfranchisement. A number of emergent church models are now being attempted that reject the old ways of doing worship and building community and seek instead to live the faith at the margins, without the encumbrances of physical property or established power.

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. Do we share this word with 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? 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.

Have you noticed in your own life that Jesus' presence is felt more in times of need than in times of plenty, more in times of desperation than in times of certainty. 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.

Those 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**

We do our best in a community of discipleship that challenges us as it tells us the plain truth of our acts and how they affect those around us like ripples on a pond—or sometimes like tidal waves after an earthquake.

In Dietrich Bonhoeffer's timeless book *The Cost of Discipleship*, the relationship between the teacher and student of discipleship must mature into helping the student understand how to apply her or his learning by sharing the good news of the demands and comforts of the gospel.

As Bonhoeffer led readers through the dangers of cheap grace and reflection on the cross, he focused on our formation as individuals, the power of the Beatitudes, and righteousness. We are the people to whom 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

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