

Sermon: The Relief of Frustration

Psalm 145: 8-14, Matthew 11: 16-30, July 9, 2023

A study was done recently of the things that frustrate us. One is going to the clothing store to buy a pair of socks. That's all you need, say, one pair of dark socks. You haven't bought socks in a long while, which is why you need a pair, but when you get there, you find out that stores no longer sell just one pair of socks. Now they sell socks by the bale. Methuselah, who lived to be 969, didn't live long enough to use a bale of socks. Why would anyone want to buy that many?

Add to our list of frustrations intermittent WIFI connections. Forgetting passwords. Running out of phone battery. Not being able to fast forward live TV. It causes me to wonder if coming generations will truly realize how hard we've had it. But I, for one will tell them. "I used to have to walk ten miles through the snow to the Senior Citizen Center for WIFI. I had no shoes because I spent all my money on socks. And I had to wrap my socking feet in barbed wire to get enough traction to get up that hill. And when I got there, the Senior Citizen Center was closed. Due to something called 'reduced hours.'"

Jesus also had his frustrations. Not so much with things, of which there weren't that many things in his day, as he was frustrated with certain people. "But to what will I compare this generation?" he says. "It is like children sitting in the marketplaces and calling to one another, 'We played the flute for you, and you did

not dance; we wailed, and you did not mourn.’ For John came neither eating nor drinking, and they say, ‘He has a demon’: 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.”

Since long before Jesus’ birth, there had been the expectation amongst his people that God was going to save them by raising up a king or messiah. Jesus hasn’t exactly thrown his hat in the ring in today’s Matthew reading – to do so would have been dangerous to his health, and he had more ministry to conduct – but in effect both he and John the Baptist are preparing the populace to recognize, at a later point in time, that he’s the One sent by God.

John is active in the Judean wilderness, proclaiming to his countrymen and women that the rule of God has drawn near. Turn away from your sins. And he has attracted the interest of people as far away as Jerusalem. They are coming to him to confess their sins and be baptized in the Jordan River. Sounds good, but as time goes by the buzz that Jesus is hearing seems to be no different from what you might hear from children criticizing one another, “We played the flute for you, and you did not dance.”

E.g., instead of focusing on John’s message, “One who is more powerful than I is coming. I baptize with water; He baptizes with the Holy Spirit and fire,” the influencers of religion, especially in Jerusalem, are saying that John has a demon

because he's so dour and sour, severe in demeanor. "We played the flute for you, and you did not dance." True, John was about as much fun at a party as John Calvin fourteen centuries later, but so what if he doesn't dance when they play the flute. So what he doesn't have a drink at the baptismal brunch. He's Baptist. They don't drink or dance, and that is okay. His demeanor is not the message. His message is that the Messiah is coming.

And regarding Jesus, the message is also getting lost. At that point, he has taught the entire Sermon on the Mount, and much more. And he has performed what he calls "deeds of power" with abandon. He healed a Roman centurion's servant, cured Simon Peter's mother-in-law, and while at her house cast out demons from many who were sick. He restored two demoniacs to their right minds, cured a paralytic, and raised a young girl from the dead. Then he topped it all off by healing two blind men and a mute.

He has done all this and no telling how much more that never made it into the gospels, yet, what are the influencers of religious opinion saying about him? "We wailed and you did not mourn." No comment about Jesus' mighty deeds, this in spite of the fact that his deeds fulfilled prophetic expectations of the messiah. "He will take on our infirmities and bear our diseases," prophesied Isaiah, for one. No, the critics accuse Jesus of being a party animal and a friend of low lifes, tax collectors and sinners, that group of people that good religious folk had no dealings

with. And they can say this because in Jesus' opinion, the reality that God's rule is at hand called for celebration not mourning. As he told John the Baptist's disciples when they asked why Jesus' disciples didn't fast. "The wedding guests cannot fast while the bridegroom is with them. The days will come when the bridegroom is taken away, and then they will fast." Also, to whom was Jesus to take the good news if not sinners and tax collectors? To change the system, he goes to those who were excluded from the system.

All this failure or refusal to understand his message frustrates Jesus. He then goes on to "reproach the cities in which most of his deeds of power had been done because they did not repent. 'Woe to you Chorazin and Bethsaida! For if the deeds of power done in you had been done in Tyre and Sidon – which along with Sodom are symbolic of gentile evil – they would have repented in sackcloth and ashes.'"

And these aren't just any towns. Jesus didn't just close his eyes and put his finger on a map and come up with something like, "Woe to you Albuquerque." No. In this reproach Capernaum comes in for the greatest condemnation because early in his ministry, according to Matthew, Jesus left Nazareth and made Capernaum by the Sea of Galilee his home base. Chorazin and Bethsaida are neighboring towns along the northern coast of Lake Galilee, but it makes sense that it would have been in the town that served as his base, Capernaum, that he performed more healings than elsewhere.

Last century Cheri and I went on a tour of Israel that spent a few hours in Capernaum. It's very close to the town of Magdala, as in Mary Magdalene. And Capernaum was where millstones were made from local basalt rock. Do you remember Jesus warning his followers not to be stumbling blocks to little ones? "It would be better for you if a great millstone were fastened about your neck, and you swam with the fishes." Capernaum is where he got the millstone and the lake for the illustration.

A Roman Catholic Church was built in Capernaum, centuries after Jesus' time, on the alleged site of Simon Peter's house. This church has a glass floor, and you can look down and see basalt stones outlining the walls of the house where Simon Peter lived, no roof of course. His house was used as a house church in the years after Jesus' crucifixion. And then it was enlarged over the centuries into a couple of increasingly larger church buildings. So, Capernaum did pay attention to Jesus, although not necessarily during his lifetime. In his lifetime the residents of Capernaum frustrated him by their refusal to turn to God.

Jesus does not persist, though, with his frustration. By verse 25 he feels that it is time to move on, and so he prays, "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," *These things* referring to the revelation of God conveyed

by Jesus' deeds. The *wise and the intelligent*, who don't understand Jesus, refers to those who are worldly wise and sophisticated, including the religious influencers of his day of this day, who are happy to mislead some of the people all of the time, and all of the people some of the time, but who cannot mislead all the people all the time, which gives Jesus an audience of "little ones," referring to the insignificance in the eyes of the world of his followers of any age. Compared to the puffed-up arrogance of others, they are but little ones.

And then Jesus says, "Come to me, all you who are weary from carrying heavy burdens, 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 light."

How, though is Jesus' yoke easy? This is the guy who says, "Blessed are you when you are persecuted for righteousness' sake." He also tells us to pray for our enemies. Or how about "take up your cross and follow me." In no way does Jesus' message sound like Christian-lite to me. He expects a lot from us followers, so how is "his yoke easy and his burden light?"

It would seem that by being yoked to Jesus in loyalty and faith, what we do not have to lug around is the hypocrisy, arrogance, excessive legalism, and the missing of the mark entirely of the religious influencers of his day or of any day, including the ones who attacked John's and Jesus's demeanor as opposed to addressing their

message or having one of their own. I think the best explanation of “Come to me, all you who are weary from carrying heavy burdens, and I will give you rest” comes from Matthew 23. Listen to just a bit of what Jesus says there.

“The scribes and Pharisees tie up heavy burdens, hard to bear, and lay them on the shoulders of others: but they themselves are unwilling to lift a finger to move them.... Woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! For you tithe mint, dill, and cummin from the garden and have neglected the weightier matters of the law: justice and mercy and faith.... You strain out a gnat but swallow a camel!”

Have you ever considered that what is exhausting when it comes to one’s religious life, or life in general, is spending one’s time and energy straining out gnats while ignoring what’s truly important? It’s exhausting living up to expectations that aren’t those of God. Exhausting spending time verbally attacking the appearance and behavior of others as opposed to promoting your own message. And as you well know, it would be hard for some religious groups to exist apart from criticizing others. They seem to have no message of their own. It is also exhausting keeping up appearances of respectability. Exhausting participating in a religious life that is irrelevant to one’s circumstances and the world in which we live.

Psalm 145, today’s first reading, says, “The Lord upholds all who are falling and raises up all who are bowed down.” God raises up those who are bent over

with the burdens of life, certainly those burdens that God didn't place on them to begin with. If Jesus says, "I will give you rest for your soul," is it not good news that Jesus provides his followers with the satisfaction that we are part of something good, that we're helping make a needed difference, and that we're dealing with the essence of what makes for a good life. Therein, the easy yoke, the light burden.

Amen