

Fifth Sunday After Pentecost  
Year A, RCL  
July 5, 2020  
Return to church – Meeting outdoors  
North Fork Ministries  
Gospel:  
**Matthew 11:16-19, 25-30**

Jesus said to the crowd, "To what will I compare this generation? 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."

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; yes, Father, for such was your gracious will. 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.

"Come to me, all you that are weary and are 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 is light."

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“Come to me, all you that are weary and are heavy-laden, and I will give you rest.” In the Book of Common Prayer you will find this phrase repeated at Compline, the prayers offered at the close of day, where this offer of comfort is extended to those who work, or watch, or weep at night. Praying Compline can be especially strengthening on those days when we find our burdens to be more than we can bear.

“For my yoke is easy, and my burden is light.” Like much of what Jesus had to say, the Gospel reading this morning is full of paradox. And perhaps more than

paradoxical for those among us who find their yoke right now to be anything but easy, and their burden far from light. It's sometimes helpful for me to remember, Bill Adams, my seminary liturgics professor saying that if he ever decided to get a tattoo (an idea that I could scarcely imagine occurring to this gentle white-haired soul) it would read, "If you can bear the Lord's full yoke, then do it. If you can't, then do what you can."

I have a confession to make. I sometimes ask parishioners to do too much. I think it's because I find the work we are doing here on the North Fork so thrilling, and so important, that I forget about the demands of family and jobs and community that can make your burden already seem more than you can bear. When I first came here just over three years ago I found that many of you were already overburdened, just with the responsibility of keeping this church alive. We're learning a lot of lessons during the season of Corona. One I've learned is that it sometimes makes more sense, in the long run, for us to not do too much, but to do just what we can – and to do what we can, with joy.

The first part of the Gospel reading may seem a little obscure; so let's take a closer look at it.

'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."

Matthew is contrasting the ministries of John the Baptist, with the ministry of Jesus and illustrating how the people received each style of ministry. John the Baptist, you will remember, emerged from the wilderness, wore animal skins and ate locust and wild honey. He was a disciplined ascetic – loudly proclaiming a radical message of repentance. It's perhaps no wonder that people thought him a madman.

Jesus, on the other hand, had a more gentle style, spoke more often about peace and love, and didn't shy away from a celebration – often eating and drinking, even in the company of disreputable types. But the people found this style of ministry to be suspect as well. They did not respond to Jesus' flute, with dancing, nor did they mourn along with the wailing of John the Baptist.

I personally resonate with these contrasting images. My own heritage is a mixture of German and Irish – and each exerts its tug on my personality. The German side, Heinrich, I call him, is constantly nagging me to do the right, proper, and orderly thing – take care of the tasks at hand, accomplish something, and be neat about it. Sean, on the other hand, thinks we should have a good

time, work can wait, there is fun to be had, and perhaps a wee bit of whiskey wouldn't hurt.

It is the paradoxical sense of the Christian life. A life that demands much - everything really - but at the same time is filled with grace and forgiveness. It's a life that calls for discipline and order, but has abundant room for celebration and joy.

But how do we live into these two sides of our faith? That is the question generations of Christians have grappled with. How can it be that a tradition that values discipline in all areas of life, private and public, is also rooted in a vigorous defense of salvation by grace through faith?

It may help to recognize that woven into these contrasting messages of asceticism and celebration is Wisdom – Wisdom, as Matthew says, vindicated by her deeds.

Matthew's community and the community in which Jesus was reared were steeped in something we now call the Wisdom Literature. The Wisdom Literature was found in the books of Proverbs and Job and the Song of Solomon and in other books that are a part of the Apocrypha – books not included in the canon of scripture designated by early church leaders. Wisdom wasn't just a collection of proverbs and pithy advice. Wisdom was thought of as a kind of spiritual being,

perhaps divine, typically feminine, part of the creation process, and always bringing us into God's presence. Think of the "my yoke is easy, and my burden light" passage while I read a few verses from a book from the Apocrypha – the book of Sirach:

Put your feet into [Wisdom's] fetters, and your neck under her yoke. Stoop your shoulders and carry her and be not irked at her bonds. With all your soul draw close to her; with all your strength keep her ways. Search her out, discover her; seek her and you will find her. Then when you have her, do not let her go; thus will you afterward find rest in her, and she will become your joy. (2Sirach 6:25-29 NAB. 3Sirach 6:30NRSV)

And listen to this from the book of Wisdom:

"For Wisdom is more mobile than any motion; because of her pureness she pervades and penetrates all things ... Although she is but one, she can do all things, and while remaining in herself, she renews all things; in every generation she passes into holy souls and makes them friends of God, and prophets." Wisdom 7:24,27 NRSV.

Jesus would have listened to these scriptures read to him as a child. And their truth is reflected in his teaching and preaching and practice. Throughout the New Testament, Jesus is revealed to be both a teacher of Wisdom and Wisdom incarnate, the Word made flesh.

It's not by accident, I think, that Wisdom in scripture is generally portrayed as feminine. The practice of Wisdom seems most evidently passed from mother to daughter, or perhaps women acquire wisdom through their passage into motherhood. In any case, how else but through the feminine, could this precarious balance of dancing and discipline be depicted?

It's what I imagine for us here at Holy Trinity and Redeemer, not just after the season of Corona has passed, but now - seeking the discipline it takes to fully follow Christ, and all the while, dancing in the aisles with Lady Wisdom.