



The Episcopal Church of  
St. John the Baptist

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The mission of St. John's is to love God and love neighbor  
as Jesus did: welcoming all, serving humbly, teaching  
compassion, and making no peace with injustice.

## **Let go of the burden of judgement and let Jesus give you rest**

Sermon for Sunday, July 5, 2020 (5th Sunday After Pentecost, Proper 9A, Track 2)  
Mtr. Tracy J. Wells Miller, Rector

“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.” Matthew 11:28-30

Those words from today's Gospel reading were read every week at the outdoor church for people experiencing homelessness that I attended in Cambridge, Massachusetts while in graduate school. The Outdoor Church was the place where my call to the priesthood first began to emerge.

This passage was read and heard as words of comfort to those living on the streets, who were often physically weary from carrying all their belongings everywhere they went, and emotionally weary from carrying the psychological burdens of whatever struggles led to their homelessness in the first place. Jesus's promise to give us rest seemed written specifically for this community, and resonated deeply.

But a closer reading of the text reveals that the poor and downtrodden may not have been who Jesus had in mind when he spoke these words, however much they might resonate with homeless people on the street.

Our Gospel reading today gives us a larger picture of the context of these words. Jesus is speaking to his critics and those who do not listen to his message.

Jesus's exasperation in this passage, as he vents about "to what will I compare this generation?" centers on those who think they already have everything figured out and their general posture toward the world is only to criticize others.

‘We played the flute for you and you didn’t dance.  
We sang a funeral song and you didn’t mourn.’

These critics have a particular idea in their heads about what other people should say or do in response to their actions. When someone like Jesus doesn't respond in the way they think he should, they criticize. "You didn't react like we wanted you to react to what we did."

They also are never satisfied, no matter what a person does.

“For John came neither eating nor drinking, and they say, ‘He has a demon.’ Yet the Human One [that’s the phrase the Common English Bible uses instead of the more familiar “Son of Man”] came eating and drinking, and they say, ‘Look, a glutton and a drunk, a friend of tax collectors and sinners.’”

John the Baptist leads an ascetic lifestyle, fasting and abstaining from alcohol, and they call him crazy. Jesus lives fully immersed in the regular day-to-day lives of the people and they call him a glutton and a drunk. There is simply no pleasing these critics; they will find fault no matter what a person does.

Then Jesus goes on to "scold" the cities that haven't "changed their hearts and lives" – that's the phrase the Common English Bible uses as a clear description of what is meant by the word translated as "repent" in most other translations. The cities he refers to as places that will be better off on the Day of Judgment are nearby Gentile cities that were generally looked down upon by the Jewish community. He's essentially saying, "You think you're better than those guys? Well, they're going to fare better on the Day of Judgment than you are!"

He then makes a comment about how the "wise and intelligent" often don't get it, entirely missing the point because they think they already have things all figured out.

And THEN he says,

“Come to me, all you who are struggling hard and carrying heavy loads, and I will give you rest. Put on my yoke, and learn from me. I’m gentle and humble. And you will find rest for yourselves. My yoke is easy to bear, and my burden is light.”

In that context, who are those who "are struggling hard and carrying heavy loads"? Not homeless people pushing their belongings around in a shopping cart, but the wise and intelligent critics who think they already have everything figured out in terms of religion and want to criticize everything

and everyone. They're struggling hard to live up to some unreasonable standard and carrying the heavy load of judgment of everybody else.

In Matthew chapter 23, verse 4, Jesus critiques the Pharisees by saying,

"They 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."

So the words of comfort in Matthew 11 about "come to me all you who are carrying heavy burdens," however much they might resonate with people experiencing homelessness, were actually directed at people like the Pharisees who were laboring under a strict interpretation of the law that heaped up heavy burdens on themselves and others.

In contrast, Jesus offers a "yoke," an interpretation of the law, that is light. His interpretation always prioritizes the spirit of the law over the letter of the law. If the law is intended to bring the people closer to God, and the law says you can't work on the sabbath, but someone needs to be healed and it happens to be the sabbath, then the thing that brings one closer to God in that situation is to heal the person, even if it's breaking the letter of the law.

Jesus's words in Matthew 11 are addressed to those who, in a situation of healing on the sabbath, would agonize over the fact that the law was being broken.

Let go of all of that strictness and worry about the rules, Jesus is saying.

Let go of feeling like you need to judge what everyone else is doing and tell them how to think, feel, and act.

We're back to Thomas Keating's Welcoming Prayer that I shared with you last week: let go of your desire for power and control. Let go of your desire to change any situation, condition, person, or yourself.

Let go of all of that and just be. Open yourself to what is, remember the ultimate goal is to connect more deeply with God and others, and let Jesus give you rest.