

Sermon for the Eighth Sunday after Pentecost (Proper 9A) July 6, 2008
 Delivered by the Rev. Margaret Bullitt-Jonas
 Grace Church, Amherst, MA

Zechariah 9:9-12
 Psalm 145:8-15

Romans 7:15-25a
 Matthew 11:16-19, 25-30

Comfortable Words

“Come to me, all you that are weary and are carrying heavy burdens, and I will give you rest” [Matthew 11:28]. Before I say one more thing, let’s stop right here and give our minds room to do what they are probably already doing – going straight to Handel’s *Messiah*. First the alto sings, “He shall feed His flock like a shepherd,” and after a bit the alto steps aside and along comes the soprano, picking up the melody and launching into that exquisite passage, “Come unto Him, all ye that labour, come unto Him, ye that are heavy laden, and He will give you rest.” You’ll be glad to know that I don’t plan to sing it.

That sentence from Matthew is one of a group of sentences from Scripture that are often called the “comfortable words.” If you grew up with the 1928 Prayer Book, you may remember that after the confession and absolution, the priest would say “Hear what comfortable words our Saviour Christ saith unto all who truly turn to him. ‘Come unto me, all ye that travail and are heavy-laden, and I will refresh you.’” A contemporary translation of that sentence is also in today’s prayer book,¹ though introduced by a different phrase.

“Come unto me” – why do we call these “comfortable words”? It’s not that Jesus wants us to lounge around in an easy chair, but that he wants to give us strength. That’s what the word “comfortable” originally meant --“strengthening.” The word “comfort” comes from the Latin “cum” (with) and “fort” (strength). The Holy Spirit, the Comforter, sends us God’s strength. “Come to me,” Jesus says to us this morning. “I want to give you strength. I want to give you hope. I want to give you life.”

But many people didn’t listen to Jesus and turned him away, and today’s Gospel begins with Jesus’ cry of frustration as he says to the crowds, “But to what will I compare this generation? It is like children sitting in the marketplace and calling to one another, ‘We played the flute for you, and you did not dance; we wailed, and you did not mourn’” [Mt 11: 16]. It’s as if Jesus were inviting people to play wedding games, and the people said, “No, we don’t feel like being happy,” and as if John the Baptist were inviting them to play funeral games, and the people said, “No, we don’t

¹ Rite 1 Eucharist, BCP, p. 332, and the sacrament of Reconciliation, BCP, p. 449. The ‘comfortable words’ have been part of Anglican worship since the first efforts to produce an English language prayer book back in 1548.

feel like being sad.”² Human nature can be so perverse! John the Baptist and Jesus were saying in different ways, “Look, here is the doorway to God! Here is the path to life!” but no matter what each of them said, the crowds could find fault, if they wanted to. They could hang back -- wary, critical, refusing to be satisfied. When John came, neither eating nor drinking, some people blew him off – “Hey, what’s wrong with him? He must have a demon.” And when Jesus came, eating and drinking, they shrugged him off, too, saying, “Forget that guy -- he’s a glutton and a drunkard, and he hangs out with tax collectors and sinners” [c.f. Mt 11:18-19].

Catch us in a certain mood and we don’t want to listen and we just don’t care, and it doesn’t matter what the person is saying, it’s never going to be good enough. The person could be telling us the secret of life and giving us the keys to the heavenly kingdom, and we would stick our fingers in our ears. *I don’t want to know this. I don’t want to hear this. My life is fine the way it is. I have my own way of doing things. I already know everything I want to know. I don’t want to change. I want you to leave me alone.* Am I the only person in this room that gets like that sometimes? When I go there, I am stubborn and proud and my heart is as hard as a rock. Jesus ran up against plenty of people who pushed him away like that.

What did he do then? Today’s Gospel tells us what he did: he turned to God in prayer. He touched into the love of the divine Father that was always flowing through him. He refreshed himself in that harmonious, mutual indwelling of Father and Son, in which the Father knows the Son and the Son knows the Father, and the Holy Spirit is the love that circulates between them. And out of that deep sense of interior companionship and strength, out of that relationship of love from which he received his identity, Jesus turned again to the people around him and invited them to join him.

“Come to me,” he said, “all you that are weary and are carrying heavy burdens, and I will give you rest.”

It is an invitation that Jesus extended to everyone, for to everyone he met he said, “Come.”

“Come down!” he cried to Zacchaeus, who had climbed high up in that tree. “I want to share a meal with you!” [c.f. Luke 19:1-10].

“Come up!” he said to the woman who had been bent over for eighteen years. “I want to see your face and look into your eyes” [c.f. Luke 13:10-17].

“Come out!” he cried to Lazarus, who was closed away in a tomb. “In me you are alive” [c.f. John 11:38-44].

“Come close!” he murmured to the children as he gathered them into his arms. “It is good to be with you” [c.f. Matthew 19:13-15].

“Come on!” he called to the fishermen. “Follow me! Let’s go” [c.f. Matthew 4:18-19].

If Jesus were to show up this morning, I wonder how he would invite you into his presence. Would he say, “Come down -- come down out of your head and into

² *The Gospel of Matthew*, Volume 2 (Chapters 11-28), revised edition, translated with an introduction and interpretation by William Barclay, Philadelphia: The Westminster Press, 1975, p. 9.

your heart -- that is your home; that is where you will meet me”? Or, if you are in a place of self-criticism and low self-esteem, maybe he would say, “Come up. In me you have dignity and worth.” If some part of you is dead, or closed off and locked away, maybe he would say, “Come out! I want to give you life.” If you feel lonely, uncertain, or afraid, maybe he would say, “Come close. I want to be with you.” If you’ve been holding back from jumping into the adventure of giving yourself to God 100%, maybe Jesus would say to you, “Come on. Let’s go.”

I invite us to pause for a moment so that you and I can listen inwardly as Jesus says to each of us, “Come to me. Come.”

..... [silence]

In leading retreats over the years, I’ve found that when many people try to imagine Jesus loving them and inviting them to come close, they can’t let him in. They worry that Jesus is judging them -- that they are not good enough for him, not worthy of his care. If you notice this coming up for you, don’t worry -- you’re in good company. So it’s worth noticing that Jesus says very explicitly in this passage that he is “gentle and humble in heart” [Mt 11:29]. He is not judging us or setting any conditions. You don’t have to become perfect before you can receive his love and be welcomed into his presence.

And he comes above all to those who are weary and whose burdens are heavy. What burdens are you carrying? Some of us have financial worries: will we have enough to get by? Some of us are burdened with fears about our health or the health of a loved one. We may be burdened by anger, by the weight of a fight we’ve had with someone, or a painful misunderstanding. We may feel the burden of loss -- maybe the loss of a friendship or the loss of a dream or the loss of someone we love who has died. We may feel burdened by responsibility, by a difficult decision that we have to make, or by the effort to be in control, to stay on top of things, to make things go the way we want them to. We may be weighed down by guilt, or by worries about the future -- our own future, our country’s future, maybe even the future of the planet. The burden we carry may be something new, or it may be something we’ve been hauling around for so long, we hardly know who we’d be if we let it go.

What burdens are you carrying? Can you drop them for a moment? Can you place them at Jesus’ feet? Can you let them go so completely that not even the tips of your finger are touching them?

Put them down, he is telling us. Let them go. I will give you rest.

It’s really hard to do this -- it’s the discipline of detachment and self-emptying, the practice of letting go our obsessions and preoccupations -- not just our worries, but even our noblest thoughts, our most cherished personal convictions and political opinions, even the ownership of our own lives. We put it all down when we come into Jesus’ presence, and we rest at last. We rest in that space of encounter, that space of love, holding on to nothing.

And as our souls rest in Jesus’ presence, we are drawn into the divine love that gave birth to the earth and all the stars. We discover that just as there is something for us to let go, there is also something for us to take up. “Take my yoke upon you,” says

Jesus, “and learn from me.” A yoke is something that holds two oxen together. Where one goes, the other goes. They pull together in the same direction. When we put on the yoke of Jesus (a yoke that began at our baptism, when we were drawn into the life of the crucified and risen Christ, and marked as Christ’s own forever) -- when we consciously and willingly take up the yoke of Christ, then we put ourselves at the service of God’s love. We let God’s unconditional love be our goal, for that is the direction that our souls want to head, and our brother Jesus is beside us as a constant companion to give us comfort and give us strength. We are yoked to a love that will never let us go and that wants to overflow into all our relationships, into all our decisions and actions. Our souls are at rest, because they are at ease. Love is what they were made for, and so the yoke is “easy” and the “burden is light” [Mt 11:30].

Yet there is also a work to be done, the spiritual discipline of staying connected to that love, moment to moment to moment. And that is why we are gathered for the Eucharist this morning: willingly and consciously to join our lives again to the love we find in Jesus, the one who invites us to come to him and to find rest for our souls.