

Fifth Sunday after Pentecost, July 9, 2017
Sermon preached by the Rev. Daniel Vélez Rivera
Lessons: Genesis 24:34-38, 42-49, 58-67, Psalm 45: 11-18, Romans 7:15-25a, Matthew 11:16-19, 25-30

You are great, O God, and greatly to be praised. You have made us for yourself, and our hearts are restless until they rest in you. Grant that we may believe in you, call upon you, know you, and serve you, through your Son, Jesus Christ our Lord Amen.

At one point or another in our life journeys, we commit believe that that we have the power to change other people, especially those we love the most. We probably all agree that people can learn better ways to cope with who and how they are, but people don't fundamentally change others all that much! I'm not saying that transformation can't occur, I'll address that later in the sermon, but certain changes are hard, maybe even impossible, and wanting others to be more us or how we want them to be is a guarantee on future disappointment. So how is this Good News?

The concept of progress has to do with growth and change, and culturally, one's own progress is typically framed in having the power of our own wills to change ourselves. We are taught to think that empowered with the right information, the right policy, the right timing, then we would just be who we are meant to be. But if all that we needed was more information, then we would all be millionaires and have perfect lives.

You may have some experience with trying to stop some behavior only to return again to what you don't want to do. We heard this in what sounded more like a confession from Paul in his letter to the Romans. Maybe you have been trying to lose weight, stopping the cookies and chips, only to sneak one in here or there. Maybe you have been trying to grow closer to God with a prayer discipline or scripture study, only to not feel like it at the beginning or end of the day. Our happiness, our fulfillment, our satisfaction, and ultimately our growth in Christ has less to do with taking on more information or doing things, and more to do with unlearning some personal behaviors.

In today's Gospel, Jesus appears to be frustrated. He indicated that the people gossiped about John the Baptist being possessed by a demon. They also criticized Jesus for eating and drinking with the "wrong people" too often. Jesus went on to pray in thanksgiving to God for *not* revealing God's purposes for Jesus to the wise and wonderful people of the barrio, but to the least of those. He continued with that well-known prophetic exhortation: "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."

Are you weary? Is your burden too heavy? Do you need a rest? Do you need a change? We are all there at one time or another. We each deal with something, or a whole bunch of things in life. If the world really knew what was going on inside of us, we would have a much more compassionate world! Jesus invites us into a different way of being, of depending, of learning, and of wanting. Jesus first took

notice of people's spiritual state. He noticed what was going on, he spoke the truth about them, and he prayed for them. Sometimes it is enough simply to have someone notice our weariness and burdens to alleviate the burden. This noticing, without judgment or fixing, is a lesson in empathy, one of Jesus' many strong qualities. Jesus didn't pity the wise and mighty but he had empathy for them and he told the truth about the situation he observed. He invited the people to take on his yoke. A yoke is intended to help carry a burden, work animals are harnessed to help manage the heavy loads put upon them. Jesus offers his yoke so that our loads can balance our burdens.

What does this mean, "my yoke is easy and my burden is light"? In our world and in our society, the incessant media would have us believe that we are deficient in one way or another. But our Lord accepts us precisely where we are, with what we bring to the table, and with no exceptions. Jesus doesn't say change how you are to come to me, he says come to me and you will be transformed.

Christ's countercultural teachings require that we unlearn cultural norms and ways of living. His learning is an unlearning, and his burdens are an unburdening. Christ's "work" is rest. What this looks like in a daily practice is a constant reminder that we are enough, we are sufficient just the way God made us. Our sufficiency with God is not about our own goodness, though we have inherent goodness in us, but it's about God's goodness and God's love and acceptance of us.

What is it like to accept God's unconditional love? What would it be like to take on the yoke of Christ? What is it like to authentically love and pray for the people who annoy us the most or fear the most, or to pray for the politicians we might not only disagree with but who also enact policies that hurt those whom we love? Jesus doesn't ask us to accept abuse or injustice, he invites us to love and to pray freely. And while Jesus doesn't have a requirement for us to change who and how we are in order to be welcomed into the kingdom of God's love, he does transform our lives and our ways with unconditional love and compassion. To encounter Jesus is to be transformed. Being part of the Jesus Movement, the slogan of the Episcopal Church coined by Presiding Bishop Michael Curry, is an invitation to be transformed. There has never been an encounter with Jesus in Holy Scripture or since then where the other person did not leave changed or challenged. Jesus isn't a fix it guy, he is a transformative kind of guy! The love of Christ will transform us and this world, but it is hard to follow Him. To follow Jesus is work, it is a yoke.

To be transformed by the presence and love of Christ doesn't require that we start with deficiency or need, but to have a measure of love and compassion for ourselves and for others. Following Jesus doesn't require being perfect, he already knows that we aren't. God's love isn't earned, it is freely given. I was speaking to someone earlier this week and the conversation got around to not feeling worthy. I paused for a while and reminded this person that we aren't worthy of God's love, it is freely given by our Creator. Once we understand that we are unequivocally and unconditionally beloved, we are asked to pay it forward.

My prayer today is for the Holy Spirit to empower us all to go into the world with the grace and love of Christ that is deeply and unconditionally given, so that we can help transform the world with our peace, our compassion, and our love. Amen.