

THE PICTURE

Sermon Preached by Jon M. Walton

July 6, 2008

Scripture: Matthew 11:16-19, 25-30, Psalm 113

“To what do I compare this generation,” Jesus asks, “It is like children sitting in the market places and calling to one another, ‘We played the flute for you, and you did not dance; we wailed and you did not mourn.’”

What in the world is he talking about? It feels like walking into a room where a conversation has been going on and you’re the odd one out. You have no idea what is being discussed.

But in reality Jesus is talking about John the Baptist, and the way that people received and rejected him. John the Baptist had come along, Jesus said, and they dismissed him as too *other* worldly. Then Jesus came along and they said that he was too *worldly*. He liked wine, they said, and he consorted with sinners. There was no pleasing that crowd.

Then, in the passage, Jesus launches into a prayer that is as enigmatic as everything that has preceded it. He thanks God that God has hidden the secrets of heaven from the wise and revealed them to infants. And then, just at the point that you are about ready to give up on the idea of understanding anything that he is saying he says something so memorable that we have never forgotten it, so comforting that we have never stopped being comforted by it. “Come to me all you that are weary and heavy laden and I will give you rest, take my yoke upon you and learn of me, for my yoke is easy and my burden is light.” Now that’s what we came to church for, something peaceful, reassuring, hopeful.

There are so many mood swings, so many temperaments expressed in this short exchange of a few verses that you almost suffer whiplash. It’s hard to keep score. Which Jesus is speaking? On the one hand we hear his prophetic voice, calling the people to repentance, like a fire and brimstone preacher pounding his pulpit, letting the sparks fly where they may. “We piped and you did not dance,” he said, “we mourned but you did not weep. Thank God you kept the secrets from the wise and showed them to the infants.”

On the other hand, he ushers us into the pastoral study, offering counseling, rendering consolation, speaking encouragement, anointing our broken spirits and salving our wounds. Tom Long of Candler School of Theology says that this is one of the points in the gospel where Jesus shifts from being Messiah of Israel to pastor to the disciples. The shift is not smooth, but it reflects both sides of Jesus’ message.

There is something about Jesus that for the great calling of sacrifice and prophetic action to which he was called, there is in him also an enduring and compassionate concern for people that shows in a pastor’s heart taking pity on those who would gather about him, even those who have heard his words of judgment and correction.

It’s as if Jesus understands something about the church better than we do. That those who are his followers are always difficult, sometimes impossible, needing

correction, slow-witted, uneven as examples of the goodness and grace of God if it can be seen in *any* of our lives. Which is why Jesus preaches at his listeners with such energy, “We piped and you did not dance, we wept and you did not mourn.” “What’s wrong with you people? John came and you said he was too pure. The Son of Man came and you said he wasn’t pure enough. There’s just no pleasing you church people!”

What is it about religious types that make us so hard to live with when we are together in the church? I was at the General Assembly meeting for eight days the end of June in San Jose, California. You’d think a week like that would be all sweetness and light, church people together like that. Everybody Presbyterians and all. It would be like a little slice of heaven. We would all know the same hymns, we all know what to say when the worship leader says, “The Lord be With You.” We’re all committed to justice, and peacemaking, and loving one another as the body of Christ. That’s what you’d think.

But when we get together every other year, at the General Assembly the church is divided up like a cherry pie at a Fourth of July picnic, everybody wants a slice, but the wedges are so small that nobody is satisfied.

You walk the exhibit halls and the Presbyterians Pro-Life are across the aisle from the Presbyterians Pro-Choice. The Presbyterians for Renewal are across the aisle from More Light Presbyterians. The folks for this progressive moderatorial candidate have a booth right across from that conservative candidate. Competing ideas of discipleship right there at the General Assembly. Who would have thought?

We’re all sliced up. The truth is we don’t read the Bible the same way or agree whether evangelism or social witness is the more important mandate of the gospel. And don’t even think about bringing up the gay ordination issue, because everything comes apart at the seams on that!

If, in the earliest days when Jesus was already dealing with factions (the John faction vs. the Jesus faction, the folks who heard the music but would not dance, the ones that heard the wailing but would not mourn) how much more is the church divided today on issues that have the deepest of roots and the most passionate of commitments?

I have been the preaching minister at the Worship and Music Conference of the Presbyterian Association of Musicians a couple of times now, and I will tell you off line that I have never worked so hard in my whole life as I have during those weeks. Folks come to that conference and tell stories of tensions between pastors and music committees, organists and choir members, whether to play contemporary music, or whether the traditional works of the great classical masters are more appropriate. Folks drag themselves to these conferences worn down from the fighting all year long in the church. Church musicians who say, “We piped and they did not dance, we wailed and they did not mourn.”

There is something about church people and church life that can wear you down. It wore Jesus down. The best and most faithful people who came to him to hear his teaching, they wore him down. The priests and scribes and Pharisees and the elders of the synagogue, they all wore him down. Why even in his own home town they ran him out once they got the drift of what he was saying. There is something about church folks

and how we treat one another that wears everybody down. And you'd think we'd really be all peaceable and nice to each other.

It's interesting to me that at precisely that point where Jesus has scored a particularly troubling indictment of the unfaithfulness of the faithful, that he speaks one of the most profound and compassionate words of consolation and comfort that he ever offered. "Come to me, all you that are weary and are carrying heavy burdens," he says, "and I will give you rest. Take my yoke upon you and learn of me, for my yoke is easy and my burden is light."

Here is Jesus the pastor, reaching out to his disciples and offering them a word of consolation and hope. And I wonder why? I wonder why it is that he takes a moment and tends his flock in this tender voice and gentle way.

I wonder... I wonder if he does that because at heart he knows that that is why all of us have come to him, even if we don't perform very well as his disciples, what we have come for is consolation and hope, peace and reassurance, because the burdens of life are heavy and the yoke around our necks is part of what leaves us worn down and out of sorts. Whether it be the burdens of work that demand our time and energy, or the burdens of family that wear us down, or the responsibilities of caring for aging parents, or providing for grown up children who really ought to be on their own but are not, not yet. Whether it be the bickering that we get into in the church about when to hold the strawberry festival, or what color to paint the sanctuary, or what to do about kids crying in the service, or whether the choir robes should be red or blue, or how come the preacher never mentions the plight of migrant workers or the politics of torture. Whatever is the tune that we play to which no one dances, we can be tough to live with in the church.

And maybe it's in part because the church lifts our hopes so high that when we realize that it too is only an earthly expression of a heavenly promise not yet fully realized on earth, that we get irritable and out of sorts and impatient with one another, because at heart it's easier to be impatient with each other than it is to be impatient with God, who never seems to be working on our timetable anyway.

I was thinking about all this at General Assembly a week ago. How the church finds it so difficult to be the kind of church that Jesus would be proud of when we are together. How we as a denomination bicker over ordination and every word of every amendment to every overture that comes before the Assembly. How we try to out maneuver each other in parliamentary jabs and feints. I was thinking about all that at the Assembly a week ago.

We were all there a week ago Sunday, several thousand of us, Presbyterians gathered to hear the Moderator of the General Assembly preach, to sing together and receive communion, and pray and commission missionaries to their work and military chaplains to their assignments, and to send young people as volunteers in mission.

I got there to the service early, but I still had to sit in the balcony, which actually turned out to be very nice because of the view you could get of everyone in the hall. I came in with three close friends, and I was joined by Chris Valentine who is the husband of Linda Valentine, the Executive Director of the General Assembly Council, one of the

three highest elected officers of the church along with the Stated Clerk and the Moderator.

Chris asked me if I would mind if he took a picture or two with his camera from beside me because, as he said, he wanted his children to “Have some idea of just how impressive it is what their mother does.”

I had my camera too, smaller, fewer bells and whistles than Chris’. As the Civic Auditorium in San Jose filled with people, there was a lot of excitement in the air. We looked down on the assembled masses, the whole first floor filled, the stage set with pulpit and lectern and communion table, the jumbotron behind the mass choir scanning the faces of people as if we were at Yankee Stadium.

Eventually the service was ready to start, and the processional hymn began. We all stood up and sang “All creatures of our God and King, Lift up your voice and with us sing, Alleluia.”

And while we were standing up, Chris took a picture standing beside me when his wife Linda came in, the Stated Clerk just ahead of her in the line in a resplendent stole; and I took one picture too of everybody in the auditorium, as wide a shot as possible. It was that kind of moment, very emotional, very stirring.

The service was beautiful. The preacher did well. We commissioned the missionaries, we prayed, we sang, we worshipped in traditional Presbyterian style. We celebrated communion.

After the service was over I looked to see what I had gotten in the way of a photographic record of the Assembly at worship. You know how you can review the pictures you’ve taken in a digital camera these days. And I flashed back to that picture I took when we were all there singing. And I was really quite surprised at what I saw.

There’s only so much a photograph can tell you, of course, the music was gone, the adrenaline pump when we were singing was over, the energy of the preacher was no longer there. But what I had captured was nonetheless an enduring image of the church gathered together. People from all over the United States, and some from around the world were there worshipping God.

On the stage was one man who was in a motorized wheelchair. He was a small man, his arms and legs a fraction of what should have been their length. His torso was diminutive as well. He sported a beard, and dark hair, and it was hard to judge his age, maybe thirty, maybe not. But when he led the litany he did so beautifully from his wheelchair, as if he was accustomed to being a leader in worship. And I could not help but think what courage it took for him to take his place and do his part for the sake of us all in that worship service that morning. I can only imagine what challenges in life a very small man, with limited physical mobility and shortened limbs has, but I suspected there was a lot he could tell us by his witness; and he did.

Come to me all you that labor and are heavy laden, Jesus said, and I will give you rest.

I knew someone there who was worshipping in the congregation. She has cancer and is undergoing chemotherapy. She wanted with all her heart to be at the General

Assembly this year, because she loves the friendships that she has, the satisfaction of being there when history is made, and she wanted to support our commissioners from New York City by being with them. Maybe it might be the last time she would be able to attend. She was there, a bit ashen, sporting her stylish turban that an African American woman that she met on the bus taught her to bind up... she was there singing with all of us, “Ye who long pain and sorrow bear, Praise God and cast on God your care! O sing ye. Alleluia!”

She was there because Jesus said, “*Come to me all you that labor and carrying heavy burdens, and I will give you rest.*”

My friend Bruce was there. Bruce’s heritage is Chinese and Filipino. He is a young dad, 39 years old, a pastor, a blogger and techy, who has just grabbed a tiger by the tail by becoming the moderator of the 218th General Assembly. If he didn’t know it before, he knows now that everything he does will be criticized over the next two years and a little bit of what he does will be praised. He will learn what Jesus meant when he said, “*Come to me all you that labor and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest.*”

There was an older couple there, missionaries returning from a lifetime of service overseas. They are retiring from active service in the church. They need to be closer to home now, health is more fragile, their grandchildren are teenagers now and living not far away, the sun is setting on these people who have given their life in service to others, and who now need others to help them in turn. It is the full circle of life. *Come to me, Jesus said, all you who labor and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest.*

All those people were in the picture I took of the General Assembly at worship. All Presbyterians who gathered a week ago Sunday from around the nation and around the world to be in San Jose and to sing, “All Creatures of our God and King, lift up your voice and with us sing, Alleluia.”

We have our disagreements in this denomination, God help us. But we also have an invitation, one that binds us together and holds us in a common human tether, the binding love of God that unites us in prayer and praise and word and deed, in spite of our differences because we all belong to God, who invites us to come, in all our human vulnerability and need.

“Come,” he says, “all you who labor and are carrying heavy burdens, and I will give you rest. Take my yoke upon you and learn of me. For my yoke is easy and my burden is light.”

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