

“Learning From Him”
Matthew 11:25-30

“Come to me, all you that are weary and are carrying heavy burdens,” Jesus said “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.”

Those words are often the first ones I speak when officiating at a funeral. I have always felt them to be fitting for such times, as the death of a loved one whether expected or shocking is the kind of moment when the ones left behind often feel weary. I will likely draw from that passage again at similar gatherings in the future, too, yet a few months ago, I looked up when Jesus spoke those words and learned they didn’t come on a day when someone had died.

Instead, they were uttered early in his ministry on an occasion when likely he was weary himself.

At the start of the chapter containing that passage, an imprisoned John the Baptist sends a few of his disciples to Jesus with this question: “Are you the one who is to come or are we to wait for another?” Keep in mind that John’s primary task was to prepare the way for Jesus. His mother and Mary, the mother of Jesus, were kin and even before their births, the women had celebrated the unique role of each son. John, of all people, knew who Jesus was yet toward the end of his life sends messengers to ask “Are you the one...” While Jesus sends an answer back and goes on to praise John before the crowd, the question must have been disappointing for him.

Immediately afterwards and just before our passage, Matthew recalls how Jesus then began to “reproach the cities in which most of his deeds of power had been done, because they did not repent.” Jesus speaks harsh words to the people of those communities recalling a city from the Old Testament era that God had destroyed by fire as he says, “I tell you that on the day of judgment it will be more tolerable for the land of Sodom than for you.” Thus, just prior to our account, Jesus had become weary by the resistance of some to his message and the obtuseness of a kinsman who should have known better. It is then that he begins to pray.

Given what has been happening, it wouldn’t have been a surprise had it been a prayer of lament or even one that questioned if he was up to the task God had given him. Yet instead of either tone, we heard him pray “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.” He then speaks again to the crowd, declaring that no one truly knows him except God and “no one knows the Father except the Son and anyone to whom the Son chooses to reveal him.” It is then that Jesus says, “Come to me, all you that are weary and carrying heavy burdens, and I will give you rest.” He encourages them to take on a symbolic yoke—a farm instrument used to join the efforts of large animals in pulling a plow—and promises rest for them. “For my yoke is easy,” he concludes “and my burden is light.”

As is always true when Jesus speaks, there are all kinds of ways we can faithfully respond, but this morning I’d like to narrow our focus to his call to “learn from me for I am gentle and humble in heart.” Notice he doesn’t encourage them and us to “learn *about* me” though certainly our task is to grow in discovering and affirming the facts of his life as we do with creeds in times of public worship and private devotion. Nor does he say we are to “learn *of* me” though that is part of what each new generation must do to ensure the faith lives on, too. No, Jesus says we are to “learn *from* me” proclaiming he is to be our model for faithful living.

On that particular day then, I hear at least three things we learn from him. First, that even when life is going hard and we are feeling discouraged can turn to God with hearts of thankfulness, celebrating how he still directs our days. Secondly, Jesus teaches us that no one

other than he has absolute knowledge of the nature of God's will and vice versa which among other things suggests if anyone ever says to you "I know exactly what God wants us to do in this moment," the best response is one of cautious skepticism. Lastly, Jesus teaches that he seeks for us to find rest in times of weariness by allowing his humble and gentle spirit to shape what we do next. All of those lessons and more arise from that day when he said, "learn from me."

That invitation led me to think about some of the practical ways that you and I learn. Educators know that people can be auditory, visual, or tactile learners. While most of us are a combination of all three, the skillful teacher varies her/his approach to reflect the diversity of styles in any classroom. To consider how such learning plays out in real life I offer the insights of one Eric Church.

Church is my favorite country performer. Lori and I have attended three of his concerts and would have made a fourth in October of 2021 had it not been for a broken hip. In a favorite song—the one to which my daughter and I danced at her wedding reception—he talks about how we gain knowledge. "Some of it," he sings "you learn the hard way, some of it you read on a page, some of it comes through heartbreak, most of it comes with age. And none of it ever comes easy, a bunch of it you maybe can't use. I know I don't probably know what I think I do, but there's somethin' to some of it." (Church, Eric. "Some of It" Sony/av Tree Publishing, 2018)

While all of those moments of discovery do shape our understanding of life and this world, Jesus simplified the matter by inviting a crowd of long ago and us to "Learn from me."

Since we live twenty-one centuries after he walked this earth, the primary source for doing that is the Bible, in particular, the New Testament. Most frequently in the gospels, but to a lesser degree, too, in the book of Acts and the Revelation of John and the 21 letters that compose that part of Scripture we hear Jesus' words. Thus, just as we are doing this morning, so are there innumerable other times when we learn from him by hearing his words. "For God so loved the world, that he gave his only son...Love your enemy and pray for those who persecute you...Go therefore and make disciples of all nations." Such words and the others he spoke are the main way we learn from Jesus and why we place such an emphasis on studying them.

Yet we also learn from Jesus when, in those same pages, we pay attention to his actions. For what lessons do we gain in reading of how just prior to or after significant deeds of ministry that Jesus would withdraw from the crowds and his disciples to pray? What insights come to us when we see how he gathered with the Twelve for their final meal and even though he knew Judas would soon betray him did not berate that one before he left? What are our takeaways when we look in all these centuries later and watch him follow the path God created for him instead of resisting it and scrambling to assemble defenders for a different way? There is much to learn that arises alongside his words and that kind of education happens in other settings, too. .

A few years ago, our family was enjoying a vacation in Maine when I asked our son how his work was going. Michael is a CPA who has been with one of the Big Four firms for nearly a decade now and while I don't pretend to understand the day-to-day issues involved in that work, I was taken by something he told me. As he shared how he had earned a reputation within his team for being able to deliver hard news to clients in a way that they could accept it. "That's a real skill," I replied. "How do you think you learned to do that?" and he said "I watched Mom and you do that with others over the years." For the life of me, I can't recall a single incident that contributed to that skill, but it was a clear reminder that all of us learn by watching, too.

That is the gift Jesus extends to us, as in word and deed he reveals the kind of life God intends. Which is why he invites to learn from him, so that we, too, will find rest for our souls.