

3 Sunday after Pentecost, Proper 9 – Year A – July 3, 2011
Genesis 24:34-38, 42-49, 58-67; Psalm 45: 11-18; Romans 7:15-25a; Matthew 11:16-19, 25-30
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After a great week sharing the Good News of Jesus at Vacation Bible School, there's a whole lot of people who really want to hear the words, "Come to me all you that are weary and are carrying heavy burdens, and I will give you rest." What we probably don't want to hear is Jesus' rebuke that we often fail to respond appropriately to prophets like John the Baptist, who calls us to repentance. And even to Jesus, who offers radical hospitality, and unconditional love, even to death on a cross. How strange that we're so often quick to hear the words we want to hear, and tune out the words that challenge us in some way. How often do we see the world laughing and celebrating when the appropriate response ought to be weeping and mourning, or at least prayer? Consider the shocking number of people who gathered to celebrate the assassination of Osama Bin Laden. Compare that response, with the Word of God from Proverbs (24:17-18a) "Do not rejoice when your enemies fall, and do not let your heart be glad when they stumble, or else the Lord will see it and be displeased." As well as Jesus' words from Luke (6:27), "But I say to you that listen, Love your enemies, do good to those who hate you."

Jesus speaks of this generation, meaning anyone throughout the ages, including our own, who are children of the world, who misunderstand or reject Jesus, and therefore reject God. Children of this generation are those who walk to the beat of their own drum. They believe that they can save themselves. They are those who seek worldly power and prestige. Who put their trust in anything or anyone other than God, and who love human wisdom more than the wisdom of God. Then there are the children of light, who walk in the steps of the Master. They know they can't save themselves, and are willing to lose it all for the sake of Jesus. Sometimes it's hard to know which tune we're really listening to, whose dance steps we're following. Jesus speaks of two situations, and two different responses. The first is the flute playing and dancing of a wedding celebration. The second is the wailing and lament of a funeral.

Let's look more closely at Jesus' comments about John and Himself, and the rejection they share. The people reject John's highly austere way of life, and don't want to hear what he has to say about repentance. His words are not pleasing to the crowd, they don't offer much in the way of comfort or affirmation of the way most people live their lives. His style of preaching is harsh and full of hellfire and dire warnings. He calls the crowd a brood of vipers. He wears weird clothes, eats sparingly from whatever he can find in the wild, and probably doesn't smell too good either. His message demands a response. In other words, John is stern, and just too conservative for most tastes. Instead of mourning their sins, they go on playing their flutes and tell John to lighten up a little, relax and enjoy life.

On the other hand, Jesus happily sits down to dinner and shares a cup of wine. Oh, but wait a minute, the people he eats with most often are sinners and tax collectors, just not the right sort at all. He tells us that most of the stuff we do is about making ourselves look good. He exposes our self-interest and our power games. He preaches against extravagant external displays of piety that are obviously all for show, and tells us to go and pray to God in secret with humble and contrite hearts. Jesus teaches us to put others ahead of ourselves, to give until it hurts, and then give some more. He heals the sick, washes His disciples' feet, and treats everyone with respect and dignity. He graciously welcomes all who believe in Him, even collaborators and foreigners. In other words, Jesus' radical hospitality is obviously way too liberal for the good of society, where everyone should know their proper place. Instead of rejoicing in the freedom of Christ, they wail and moan about the demands of His teaching, and His unconditional love.

In the hearts and minds of many, both John, the staunch conservative, and Jesus, the radical liberal, clearly don't get it. What's wrong with a nice moderate way that's neither too austere, nor too demanding, we ask? What's wrong with my playing a tune, and having everyone else dance to it, we say? What many desire is not the virtue of temperance or moderation, but a kind of mediocrity that doesn't challenge or stretch us in any way; a life of personal gratification, one big comfort zone, that gives little or no regard to

others. Is this really what God's kingdom looks like? Personal fiefdoms? Is this what God teaches us in Scripture? Living for self? Is this how Jesus lives **His** life? Don Henley and Glenn Frey of the *Eagles*, say it this way in song. "I turn on the tube and what do I see a whole lotta people cryin' 'Don't blame me'. They point their crooked little fingers at everybody else. Spend all their time feeling sorry for themselves." The song goes on to describe various scenarios of greed and selfishness. The final words of each verse are, "Get over it."

Even you and I, as members of Christ's Body don't always find it easy to "get over it". We are fickle creatures. At times, we all want to change the song, and the rules of the game to favor ourselves. It's easy to criticize and complain, and to rationalize our own inaction. It's easy to make ourselves feel better by putting others down. It's easy to dismiss a lively faith, and avoid the challenge to move out of our comfort zone. It's all much easier and safer than humbly coming to God in prayer. To pray is to open ourselves to God, and to risk God's response. God wants us to grow and stretch ourselves beyond easy and comfortable. God wants us to love unconditionally, to serve others without expecting anything in return, and to give generously from our store of God's abundant gifts. This is what God desires of each of us, and there are plenty of times when we don't want to hear it.

At the heart of every vocation is the real work of loving God, seeking a deeper relationship with God, growing in God, serving God, and ultimately pleasing God. Some of us shared God's love by welcoming and serving forty children at Vacation Bible School last week. Some of us seek a deeper relationship with God by participating in Bible study. Some of us grow in God by offering ourselves in service to the hungry and homeless, by standing in solidarity with the marginalized, and by working for justice and peace. Some of us love God through a deep compassion for those who are sick or lonely. Some of us please God by sharing our love for Jesus, and inviting a friend to worship. There's no formula here, no right vocation, or perfect ministry. God calls us all in different ways. The Holy Spirit empowers us all to serve God. And we are all blessed with a variety of gifts that help us to do the work God has given us to do.

Jesus says, "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." What does it mean to say that Jesus' yoke is easy? Jesus certainly never preaches an "anything goes" philosophy of life. Nor does he teach us in His own life to follow the easy path, to avoid pain and suffering, to compromise our integrity, or lose faith or trust in God. Dietrich Bonhoeffer hits the nail on the head when he writes about the cost of discipleship. So what's so easy about Jesus' yoke? A yoke provides discipline, and focus. If we're willing to learn and practice the ways of Christ, and keep our focus on God, then we know our purpose in life. We know what God is asking of us, and our burdens become light, because the Lord is sharing the load. We find ourselves working almost tirelessly to share our gifts by loving and serving God and our neighbors. Our lives become a testament to the hope of our salvation, and the blessing of God's healing grace. The deep and perfect rest that our souls are constantly seeking can only be found in Christ Jesus our Lord. His arms are open. All we have to do is come to Him.

Amen.