

“Comfortable Words”
The Rev. Debbie Cook, Grace Church in Haddonfield
The Eighth Sunday of Pentecost, Proper 9, Year A, RCL
July 6, 2008

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

This verse, the 28th verse of the 11th Chapter of Matthew’s Gospel, is probably one of the most beloved passages in the Gospels. In fact, in the Rite I Eucharist, it is listed as first among the ‘comfortable words’ – passages meant to be read after the General Confession and Absolution so as to reassure us of our Lord’s love for us—and rightfully so. After all, who doesn’t long to find rest for our weary souls, our burdened hearts? This verse and the two that follow speak to all those things our most vulnerable selves crave—gentleness, comfort, refreshment—someone who is willing to help, to lighten the load.

And as meaningful as these words are to us today, they were just as important to those who first heard them, though for perhaps a different reason. The burden that Jesus speaks about is that of the Jewish law at that time. The God-given law that was handed over to Moses and the Hebrew people was meant to be joyfully lived—a yoke that was lighter than the yoke of the world’s ways. But as time went on, the Law became expanded, intensely detailed, and perhaps as complicated as today’s IRS code. Religious professionals of the time—the priests and the Pharisees—could barely keep up; the regular person stood not a chance of perfectly observing the law. It had become a burden and almost a barrier to God, not as a way to walk with God.

And so, Jesus invites his followers to learn from him—how to rediscover the lightness of the Law, how to walk with God. The rest he promises is not that of a put-your-feet-up, full-time retirement type rest—but that of respite, a refreshment. It is the type of rest that comes when you are free of worry, free to do that which speaks most truly to your heart. It is the kind of rest that comes from knowing that you are not alone, that God knows all about those things that seem to weigh heavy upon you.

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Today, the heaviness that we are concerned about is not so much the burden of Pharisaical interpreted law (our own legal system notwithstanding). But we do have our share of modern day heavy burdens—intensely busy schedules that make no provision for downtime; pressures from work, from family, from friends; medical concerns; worries over our jobs, finances, our families, our children; grief over the loss of loved ones, loneliness, isolation. We long for rest from these as well. And yet, as burdened as we are, we find it difficult to lay these burdens down, to give them over to God. We try to rationalize our pain away, assuring ourselves that so many others have it far worse. So we shoulder our burdens, trying to shift the yoke so that it can carry even more, and stagger on. The ‘rugged individualism’ that is our calling card as Americans kicks in, and we tell ourselves that surely we can do this, it’s not that hard—trying to live into the words, “Never let them see you sweat.”

But all these burdens are precisely the stuff that our Lord patiently waits for us to give over to Him. He will not take them from us—they must be freely surrendered by us. We need to come to Jesus and say, “I can’t do this anymore by myself; I need your help. I need you to show me the way—how I can live my life more freely, how I can walk more closely with God.”

And so Jesus offers us his yoke—a yoke that fits well, that distributes the burden so it is not unbearable—a yoke that spans two sets of shoulders instead of just one. And we learn, as we walk with our Lord, how to let Him lead, how to get through those difficult spots. We discover that some of the burdens we have been carrying are not our own, and we need to let them go, set them down. We are taught how to draw on strength that is not our own. In doing all these things, we may notice something: though life has not changed much, our approach to it has. The load has become easier to bear. We find rest in the knowledge that we are beloved by God, and

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the help is always available to us—maybe not always in the way we would like, but rather in a way that reminds us of who we are—disciples of Christ, followers of the Way. And it is enough.

Henri Nouwen, a world renown spiritual writer, professor, and Catholic priest, has his own take on our burdens and Jesus’ yoke. In his book, “The Inner Voice of Love”, he wrestles with finding rest from his burdens—particularly the burden of a crippling depression. This book, published at about the time of his death, is his journal of spiritual imperatives to himself from a six month period in his life where all he thought he knew about himself and his relationship with God came crashing down. I turn to it whenever I feel the burdens in my heart become too heavy and overwhelming, reminding myself through Nouwen’s words that it doesn’t need to be this way. And in a moment of struggle yesterday, I picked up the book, spotted the Chapter title “Permit your Pain to become The Pain” and turned to it—and lo and behold, Nouwen quotes from this Gospel passage. He writes:

Your pain, deep as it is, is connected with specific circumstances. You do not suffer in the abstract. You suffer because someone hurts you at a specific time and in a specific place. Your feelings of rejection, abandonment, and uselessness are rooted in the most concrete events. In this way all suffering is unique. This is eminently true of the suffering of Jesus. His disciples left him, Pilate condemned him, Roman soldiers tortured and crucified him.

Still, as long as you keep pointing to the specifics, you will miss the full meaning of your pain. You will deceive yourself into believing that if the people, circumstances, and events had been different, your pain would not exist. This may be partly true, but the deeper truth is that the situation which brought about your pain was simply the form in which you came in touch with the human condition of suffering. Your pain is the concrete way in which you participate in the pain of humanity.

Paradoxically, therefore, healing means moving from your pain to the pain. When you keep focusing on the specific circumstances of your pain, you easily become angry, resentful, and even vindictive. You are inclined to do something about the externals of your pain in order to relieve it; this explains why you often seek revenge. But real healing comes from realizing that your own particular pain is a share in humanity’s pain. That realization allows you to forgive your enemies and enter into a truly compassionate life. That is the way of Jesus, who prayed on the cross: “Father forgive them; they do not know what they are doing” (Luke 23:34). Jesus’ suffering, concrete as it was, was the suffering of all humanity. His pain was the pain.

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Every time you can shift your attention away from the external situation that caused your pain and focus on the pain of humanity in which you participate, your suffering becomes easier to bear. It becomes a ‘light burden’ and an ‘easy yoke’ (Matthew 11:30). Once you discover that you are called to live in solidarity with the hungry, the homeless, the prisoners, the refugees, the sick, and the dying, your very personal pain begins to be converted into the pain and you will find new strength to live it. Herein lies the hope of all Christians.¹

Let us always remember that we do not suffer alone, that do not need to carry our burdens alone. The yoke we are offered is one that is to be shared; the One who shares it with us walks freely and lightly and invites us to learn how to do the same. So let us go to Him, and find rest for our souls, so that we can help others do the same.

Amen.

¹ Nowen, Henry J. M.; The Inner Voice of Love; Image Books/Doubleday, New York, New York; 1996; pages 103-104.