

Sermon by The Rev. Betsy Johns Roadman, 7/3/05
St. Augustine's Church, Croton-on-Hudson, NY
Text: Matthew 11:25-30

It's not easy to keep track of the flow of the Gospel readings as we move from week to week through each liturgical year. In Year A, we're progressing through the Gospel of Matthew, for the most part, and it's hard to remember what the previous week's text was about so that we can build on that part of the story with the current week's passage. Things get even more difficult when those in charge of the lectionary decide to skip certain verses altogether, as is the case this morning. We're plopped in the middle of a situation without knowing the context.

At least four questions come to mind for me as I hear this morning's Gospel passage. I'd like us to consider them one at a time.

The first question is this: Who is Jesus talking to? Is he praying alone? Is he addressing his disciples? The religious authorities? The crowds who have been following him? Some or none of the above? The answer is that we're not sure. Earlier in the chapter, the text says that he was speaking with the crowds about John the Baptist. Although the subject of his conversation changes, it's not clear whether the venue or the audience does. Most commentators indicate that the original audience was most likely the crowd – those who had been following him, listening to his teaching, witnessing his acts of mercy.

The second question is simply about missing information. Our text begins with a sentence that says that Jesus gave thanks to God because God has hidden “these things” from those who are wise and powerful and has revealed them to those without privilege. What are “these things” that are either hidden or revealed?

In the verses leading up to this particular passage, a couple of different things have happened. John the Baptist, who's in prison, sends word to Jesus asking whether Jesus is, in fact, the Messiah for whom Israel has waited, or whether he's not. Jesus doesn't give a “yes” or “no” answer. He tells John's disciples, “Go and tell John what you hear and see: the blind receive their sight, the lame walk, the lepers are cleansed, the deaf hear, the dead are raised, and the poor have good news brought to them ...” And then, immediately before today's Gospel reading, there's another section of text. In it, Jesus reproaches certain cities, in which he's spent some time, for not repenting when “deeds of power” were done in their midst.

It seems, then, that “these (unnamed) things” are those works of healing and the message of hope that have defined Jesus' ministry. It seems that while some have recognized the reality of the reign of God in their midst through Jesus' presence and his works, many others haven't. It seems that “the wise and the intelligent” - those who had the resources and the social, political, or religious standing to have real control over their own lives – missed the good news that Jesus' life and work proclaimed. The “infants” – those who had no ability to obtain things for themselves – gratefully embraced the healing and the hope that was offered them by Jesus.

A third question arises from the text: Is Jesus claiming to have exclusive access to God? It sounds that way: "All things have been handed over to me by my Father; and no one knows the Son except the Father, and no one knows the Father except the Son and anyone to whom the Son chooses to reveal him." This makes me really uncomfortable. Verses like this fuel the conviction of some that Christians are the only ones who really get it; that if you don't know and follow Jesus, you're denied access to God.

There are hundreds of pages of scholarly research devoted to this verse. I read only a few of them. This is what's at the core: Like father, like son. It seems that Matthew's intention was to stress the unique and intimate relationship between God as Father and Jesus as Son of God; to claim mutual knowledge between them; to show how the intention of God is manifest and expressed in and through Jesus the Son. Continuing the theme of things hidden and revealed, we might simply say this: In the person of Jesus, the nature, character, and intention of God is fully revealed. In Jesus, God is seen.

My fourth and final question is this: Is Jesus out of his mind? Over and over again in this Gospel, Jesus has called his followers to do the impossible. The law holds people responsible if they commit murder. Jesus says his followers are liable to judgment for their anger toward someone. The law says, "An eye for an eye, a tooth for a tooth." Jesus says, "No - if anyone strikes you on the right cheek, turn the other also. Don't refuse anyone who wants to borrow from you. Love your enemies and pray for those who hate you." And then, at the end of today's passage, he has the nerve to invite those who are weary to come to him because, he claims, "my yoke is easy and my burden is light." Under what circumstances could these demands of Jesus possibly be either easy or light?

Again, the scholars have lots to say, with some differing opinions. A yoke was a frame that harnessed two animals together to enable them to carry a heavier load. "Yoke" was also a word used metaphorically to describe things that control peoples' lives. Some scholars think that Jesus is offering a lighter burden than that of the religious authorities who demanded scrupulous attention to all the intricacies of the law. Some see Jesus drawing to himself those oppressed by the social and political realities of their lives. Jesus' yoke and burden could very well have been easier and lighter than was the law, as interpreted by some religious authorities; or than was life as a poor Jewish peasant under Roman occupation.

What about us, as followers of Jesus in 2005? How do these words of Jesus speak to us today? In what way might Jesus' yoke be easy, his burden light for us, given what he requires of his disciples?

I think it must be all about love. If the life of Jesus uniquely reveals the nature, character, and intention of God, then God is all about love. God's love is the foundation, the purpose, and the goal for all that is. We struggle endlessly to discern what God's will for us might be, to listen for God's particular call to us and then to respond to that call. Maybe we actually make things more complicated and more burdensome for ourselves than they need to be. What if, in all decisions, in all of our next steps, we simply do the

most loving thing, whatever that might be? For example, which of two jobs gives me the most authentic opportunity to act in genuine love? Or, what job doesn't deplete my energies, so that I'm able to show love to my family at the end of the day? Or, giving away what percentage of my income is about real sacrificial love?

I think that Jesus' yoke is about love. Because while doing the loving thing might be the harder thing, the more difficult option to pursue short-term, ultimately we're taking on a burden that is bearable – maybe even light. We're choosing a yoke – that which controls us – of love. We're defining our lives by love. We're intentionally taking on and entering into God's purpose for the world. We're choosing to join God in God's work.

As followers of Jesus who are members of a faith community, we're not doing it alone. We're sharing the burden of love, and the joys that accompany it, with each other. And we've been invited to step into those acts of love by the very one who has promised to be with us, and whose spirit empowers us to carry them out.

The Message, a contemporary translation of these verses, puts it simply and clearly:

[Jesus says] “Walk with me, and work with me – watch how I do it. Learn the unforced rhythms of grace. I won't lay anything heavy or ill-fitting on you. Keep company with me and you'll learn to live freely and lightly.” Amen.