

Sermon on Matthew 11:16-19, 25-30
Fifth Sunday after Pentecost, July 9, 2017
Lutheran Church of the Redeemer
By James Erlandson

Now that you've got up out of bed this morning and have to come to worship, what did you come expecting to find? What did you come looking for, and what is your frame of mind today? Perhaps you woke up humming a hymn of praise to God this beautiful summer morning, and came to sing God's praises with other Christian believers. Perhaps you came looking for answers to some questions you have about God, faith and life, which you find troubling or hard to understand. Perhaps you came looking for community here, with other people of faith whom you know and trust. Perhaps you have come here all stressed out, upset about the way things have gone in your life, and have come to pray, seeking answers or insight from the words of Jesus or even from a pastor. Perhaps you have been grieving the loss of a loved one, or are separated from a friend or your family, and you hope to find some comfort in God's word. Maybe you expect to find answers, reassurance and comfort - because this is what you have received in the past, it is what you have been taught to expect, or maybe you just heard that this is what you can get out of church! Or maybe you are here angry inside, for you have been hurt, and you don't expect that the church in its worship can be any help to you whatsoever, and you question whether God is even listening.

I guess what you and I expect to receive in worship depends on your past experiences, or even your mood or situation in life on a particular day. So allow me to let you in on a secret I have discovered:

The God whom we seek usually depends on the one whom we have learned to expect, while the true God whom Jesus came to reveal to us, most often comes as a total unexpected surprise! For sometimes the truth of God bursts out, through the wise words or merciful act of a human messenger, when you least expect it, or weren't even looking for it. This is the truth I find in Jesus' words from the gospel today, as he addressed the crowd who had come to hear him preach, as they came with questions about his identity as a teacher, healer, or prophet of God. That's when he gave the invitation: *"Come to me, all you that are weary and carrying heavy burdens, and I will give you rest."*

Our passage today begins with Jesus making an observation about the people in the crowd, and their expectations. They had come previously to John the Baptist in the wilderness, who now was in prison, partly out of a desire to repent from their sins, partly out of curiosity, and partly because they had heard he was a prophet with challenging things to say about God. But though they came to him expecting

a prophet and a preacher, they didn't understand him – he didn't eat or drink normal foods, he ate locusts and wild honey, so people said “he had a demon”.

And then there was Jesus. He came to their villages, and word on the street was that he was a great teacher and teller of stories, who gave inspiring insights into the scriptures, who challenged his hearers to follow him and seek the kingdom of God. But Jesus wasn't like John the Baptist – he liked to eat and drink, attend wedding banquets, change water into wine, and invite himself to peoples' homes for dinner. Some called him a “drunkard and a glutton, a friend of tax collectors and sinners!” Jesus wasn't what they expected in a holy man of God. He really shook up their world. But they kept on coming.

Jesus observed this, and also how people were distracted by many things, so that their minds were not focused on the ways of God which lead to life. It was as if a funeral procession were passing by, with loud wailing and mourning, but they didn't notice. Or like musicians playing songs on the flute, but the people didn't dance. They weren't hearing the voice of God calling out to them, through prophets like John the Baptist or a Messiah named Jesus – even when they could see and hear them with their own eyes and ears, right in front of their faces! What was preventing them from hearing them as God's messengers, from listening to their words, repenting and changing their lives and their ways? I guess it was just the cares of life, the burdens of making a living, feeding their families, caring for the sick and diseased, while under the oppression of a foreign, occupying army – they had a lot on their minds, and too little in their stomachs. Can any of you relate to their inability to hear God's voice in those days – even when it was Jesus?

Because we have similar burdens ourselves, today. We, too, carry the burdens of providing for our families, paying medical bills and the mortgage, watching our children rack up those college loans or credit card debt, worrying about whether we can keep our health benefits or our parents can pay those bills for long term care. Add to these the worries about our nation, about climate change or violence in our communities, the political divisions we observe around us, and the fear of deportation that many immigrants feel. Is it any wonder that people are too distracted by worry or anxiety to hear the voice of God today? The shrill voices of politicians, cable news networks, or social media distractions overflow the eyes and ears of most people with too much noise, sights and sounds. Too many people don't expect to find answers to their fears about financial struggle or health care bills in church – why would they? They were never taught to expect that God or the Bible have anything to say about such things. They think church is for praising God on Christmas or Easter when your life is going well, or to go for comfort in times of death or sorrow, but it's hard for most people to think that God has much to do with anything else. They have only heard that God is about enforcing morality, and the church is the place to hear the rules that keep you

from doing anything “fun”, where you will be judged a sinner and excluded if you are “different”. That is the expectation too many people have about church, especially the young. So why would anyone WANT to go to church, with such expectations? I certainly wouldn’t!

Most of us here grew up learning that there is a God who made us and loves us, whom we can call Father or Mother, and gives us mercy and forgiveness, who sent Jesus out of God’s love, to show us how to live, and die for us in order to give us life. But often we have learned to expect to come to God in prayer so that God can “fix” our problems, who we hope will give us answers to our questions. Why do we pray, or come to church? What do we want from this God, the Creator of the universe, who promises to hear us?

Most of us want a God who protects us from adversity, who takes away our problems or fixes them for us, if we are faithful – or answers our questions of faith, life and death, if we dig deep enough in God’s Word. This has been common to all generations and faiths. So human beings have learned to expect a God who either is a condemning judge demanding right living, or a merciful, compassionate parent who will intervene to take care of things for us when we repent. Am I far from the truth here? Does this picture sound about right?

But the good news today is how Jesus turns our expectations on their ear, and surprises us with a very different picture of God and himself. Jesus addressed the crowd of his listeners by thanking God, “for you have hidden these things from the wise and the intelligent and have revealed them to infants.” Perhaps only children and babies are open enough to appreciate God’s surprises – because to the young, almost everything is “new”, and a pleasant (or unpleasant) surprise. When we get older we get jaded, less open to surprises or to change. But kids often “get it” – and receive joy from anything positive that is new or different.

So Jesus gives us the real good news, in one of the most comforting passages in all scripture: *“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.”*

Notice how Jesus doesn’t promise to TAKE AWAY our burdens. No, Jesus offers to SHARE our burdens, and invites you and me to bring our burdens to God so that they can be shared – hence, making our burdens lighter. Now we would prefer that God take away our burdens, our challenges and our problems, or just fix them. Instead, God promises to walk with us, to strengthen us while we address our challenges together! The good news then is that we are not alone!

This changes the Church’s invitation to us and to our neighbors. It is not only to welcome seekers of God (although it is that), nor only to invite people to come and cast their burdens on God to let God take them (although it’s partly that).

The real invitation is for the Church to say “come – we will share your burdens with you, in the present of Christ, strengthened by God and sustained by the Spirit.” Today we need a Church that says, “come to me ” to those who have not received mercy in this world, whose healthcare is in jeopardy now with Congress and legislatures in session, “come to me” to people who fear for their lives because of their skin color, who are banned because they are Muslim and come from certain countries, who experience discrimination due to their gender or sexual orientation, who fear deportation because their immigration status has lapsed or they are undocumented, who struggle with addiction, mental health, depression or anxiety. We need to be the Church that says to all those with such fears and anxieties to “come to me”, and we will stand with you and help you find rest, just as we have found comfort and rest in the arms of the Church ourselves. That’s what true welcome means – to open our doors and our arms, to share one another’s burdens in the name of Jesus, and at his command.

Wouldn’t it be awesome, for all people to EXPECT to find in any Church (and first of all with us, in this Church) a community of faith who will receive them with compassion as well as a word of welcome, who will share their burdens and walk with them. This would be a very welcome surprise for those who have only experienced rejection or exclusion from Christians and churches. I believe that such open sharing of our burdens with each other would lead to new, abundant life for a new generation of the Church.

So may we proclaim with the psalmist today, that the *“Lord is gracious and full of compassion, slow to anger and abounding in steadfast love, who is good to all, whose compassion is over all creation...The Lord upholds all those who fall, and lifts up those who are bowed down.”*

How blessed we are to worship and serve a God such as this, who shows up, and to follow the Lord Jesus, who has promised to be with us always. Amen.