

## **COME UNTO ME**

**MATTHEW 11:16-18; 25-30**

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I was doing sit ups in the gym at the Jewish Center earlier this summer and noticed a very cute little boy, hockey stick in hand, passing the puck with his mother.

She was going from the cardio room to the weight room and gave him a few minutes of her workout time. When she left the gym to continue her routine and encouraged him to have fun you could see the disappointment in his eyes.

‘Will anyone play with me?’ he called out to five of us over on the mats. Finally, thank goodness a young woman responded to his plea.

To what shall I compare this generation, asked Jesus. It is like children sitting in the marketplaces calling to one another, ‘we played the flute for you, and you did not dance; we wailed, and you did not mourn.’

That saying was a favorite children’s song in Jesus’ time. A song of lament when playmates failed to participate. How interesting Jesus uses this children’s plea for companionship to describe his generation. A plea we can imagine Martin Luther King, Jr. or Abraham Lincoln using to describe their generations.

Jesus’ age, not so different from our own, or any other was polarized with complex political issues. It was a generation hungry for spiritual peace and wholeness to which he certainly offered hope and new life.

By this time in Matthew, Jesus has called the Twelve, preached the Sermon on the Mount, and performed miraculous acts of healing. You would think, by now, this generation, his generation, would have responded to his invitation to new life.

But Jesus detects reticence. His reference to the children’s song is prompted by one of John the Baptist’s followers, sent to ask if Jesus was the long awaited Messiah. Jesus said “tell John what you see and hear – the blind receive sight, the lame walk, the deaf hear, lepers are cleansed, the poor receive good news.”

Then Jesus turned to the crowd and chastised their curiosity without commitment. Spiritually starving they swarmed John and Jesus but like children refusing to play would not surrender to the rules of a new game.

And who among us cannot relate to their reticence, so reminiscent of St. Augustine’s confession, “Oh God, make me a Christian...but not quite yet.”

We have a way of getting comfortable with our wounds – like so many of those Jesus went to heal. Sometimes we fear the cure more than the illness. Have you ever heard yourself or anyone else say something like this:

“I’ll just keep my mouth shut and endure my marital problems.” Or, “Some day I’ll sit down and have a long talk with the kids.” Or, “I know my job is boring and isn’t useful to anyone but I’m lucky to have a job.” Or, this, “Isn’t it too bad the rest of the world doesn’t have America’s wealth, but I guess we just have to hope for the best.” Such sentiments reflect a hardening not of the arteries but of the spirit.

I'd like to consider this morning Jesus' invitation repeated so often down through the centuries to those suffering hardened spirits, 'come unto me.'

I'd also like to consider with you the spiritual pulse of the nation, of the body politic. We are a people driven by religious concerns and issues. From Terri Schiavo to the Supreme Court ruling on the Ten Commandments to Billy Graham's crusade in New York earlier in the summer.

Religion matters to our foreign policy, our presidential elections, and our local school boards. But sometimes amidst all the hype and hoopla the simple religion of Jesus is obscured. I'd like for us to listen again or for the first time to Jesus' invitation first by considering what leads up to it then by looking at where it might lead us.

When our rationalizations meet reality our conscience knows the difference. Jesus' appeal is to the deep conscience of the people. People held hostage by old behaviors, lies and falsehoods. And as he so often does at moments of impasse or adversity, Jesus prays.

He says, "I thank you, Father, because you have hidden these things from the wise and intelligent and have revealed them to infants and you have given me the authority to reveal them to those to whom I choose."

Jesus' prayer extols the wonder of human growth and development – God's ingenious design that we experience consequences for our actions. Jesus also thanks God for the compass of our conscience, the amazing built-in ethical map-quest that helps us find and know the right thing to do. His prayer reclaims God's blessing to Jesus to reveal to any whom he chooses God's wisdom for life.

So is the stage set for the familiar invitation of Jesus, "Come unto me all you who labor and are heavy laden and I will give you rest. Take my yoke upon you and learn from me; for I am gentle and lowly in heart and you will find rest for your souls. For my yoke is easy and my burden is light."

Jesus with authority to reveal to any he chooses God's wisdom and peace throws the doors wide open – all are welcome, not just the religious elite or the one's with good jobs and bank accounts but all. The poor and sick, the lonely and dying, the broken ones who long for healing. "Come unto me," he says arms open wide.

For those of us who are among the 'wise and intelligent,' as I suspect the world would define most of us in this room, God's truth is hidden from us unless, as the Scripture says today, we become as dependent as infants. 'Come unto me' invites us to be childlike, to depend upon a new teacher for new instruction that leads to new life.

Putting on the yoke of Jesus is the quid pro quo of new life. Perhaps a strange metaphor in today's technological world. The image is of an animal harnessed to do work; the yoke provides discipline and direction. In Judaism the yoke-image was used with the Torah.

The sage in Sirach says, "put your neck under the yoke and let your souls receive instruction." That saying is probably where Jesus got his yoke image, "learn from me, for I am meek and humble."

Yet, invited to put on the yoke that is easy, we persist in putting on yokes that chafe and bruise hearts and lives. Consider some of them. *The yoke of illness and despair.*

By our own doing or for no explicable reason. This summer falling into the orbit of our pastoral care have seen people struggling with brain tumor, Lou Gehrig's diagnosis, and a women living in a local motel because she cannot live at home.

*But Jesus says come unto me all you who are weary and carry heavy burdens and I will give you rest.*

*The yoke of image and importance.* A new book by Nancy Lieberman entitled, "Admissions," tells how the rich and famous in New York City make blood sport of getting their children into the city's elite private schools.

Parents engage in exhausting, hustling, aimed-at-success competition with the prize the school reputation rather than its fitness to build their child's character.

*But says Jesus, come unto me, take my yoke upon you and learn from me.*

*The yoke of self-absorption.* The late Christopher Lasch, whose sharp observations on American culture introduced us to what he called the "new narcissism," lamented the declining sense of responsibility for our common life.

Lasch talks about the "lust for immediate gratification that pervades American society...a universal concern with self-fulfillment and self-esteem: slogans of a society incapable of generating a sense of civil obligation."

*But Jesus says, come unto me, for I will teach you to give away your life so that you may gain it.*

*The yoke of perfectionism.* Somehow across the centuries, the notion has emerged that being a faithful Christian is a matter of avoiding doing immoral, impure or sinful things.

One preacher says this is nothing more than a way of insuring personal security. The bible says that a religion concerned only with not doing anything wrong in order that its practitioner may one day stand vindicated ignores the will of God.

*But Jesus says, come unto me and I will teach you a new commandment.*

*The yoke of small religion.* There is a difference between New Testament Christianity and much of what goes under the name of religion. Religious ethics traditionally offers negatives rules, prohibitions: don't do this, don't do that.

Jesus, without denigrating the rules which are necessary for a society to survive, emphasizes the active, positive moral implications of love: "Do this, do that for my sake and in my name."

But even the religion of Jesus is subject to small-minded formulations designed to remove any ambiguity or doubt about the Bible or God. *And Jesus says, come unto me, for the mercy of the Lord is from everlasting to everlasting.*

How does this spiritual dislocation affect our national life? I was struck by the July 4<sup>th</sup> cover of the *New Yorker*. It pictures a forlorn, lonely Uncle Sam sitting in front of his own birthday cake with red and blue streamers above. Flags of nations at the table are place cards. But each seat is empty. No one is celebrating in America or with America. Isn't it peculiar that when so much is right about our nation we seem increasingly divided, at cross-purposes and encumbered? Red v. blue.

Then it dawned on me what's missing from Uncle Sam's birthday party in that picture are children. Energized by life. Eager to learn. Ready to follow a leader. What's missing from our body politic are the voices of a softer, kinder disposition.

The kind Abraham Lincoln espoused when he cautioned his generation against claiming God on their side, but rather to worry whether they were on the side of God. It is a critical difference of perspective. One is arrogant, the other humble. One dictatorial, the other open.

Jesus chooses a children's lament for playmates to describe his relationship to his generation. We know Jesus delighted in children not because they were 'innocent.' He loved them because they were exemplars of trust. That's what I'm saying today. The simple trust and openness of a child would go a long way to restoring the spiritual health of our nation.

Perhaps the mirthful child in Jesus was asking the child in each one of us, like that little boy at the Jewish Center, "will anybody come and play?"

What America needs now, more than ever, in the midst of a grinding war in Iraq and partisan battles igniting brush fires across the land, is a childlike freedom and joyfulness of heart. The ability to laugh not at each other but with each other. Tom DeLay and Charles Schumer giggling like kids running through a sprinkler. George Bush and Dick Cheney playing kick ball on the South Lawn with Ted Kennedy and John Kerry. I'll bet if we could engineer a kickball game like that it would do more than anything to bring cooperation and respect back to Washington.

Here we are in what has to be one of the most beautiful locations on the planet in summer – Western New York. Summer is the season of childhood and childhood memories. Have you taken time this summer to let the child in your heart out to play.

The bible was right when it said a little child shall lead them to the mountain of peace and healing.

Now here's your assignment for the rest of summer: find a child who can speak to the child in your heart. Any child will do. Then play some child's game or sing some child's song. It's time to take off what ever yoke it is that burdens you, trust Jesus and all that he teaches, let your conscience be your guide and put on the yoke of new life. Amen.