

## Proper 9A 2020 Sermon

*Matthew 11:16-19, 25-30*

*Jesus said to the crowd, “To what will I compare this generation? It is like children sitting in the marketplaces and calling to one another,*

*‘We played the flute for you, and you did not dance;*

*we wailed, and you did not mourn.’*

*For John [the Baptist] came neither eating nor drinking, and they say, ‘He has a demon’; the Son of Man came eating and drinking, and they say, ‘Look, a glutton and a drunkard, a friend of tax collectors and sinners!’ Yet wisdom is vindicated by her deeds.”*

*At that time Jesus said, “I thank you, Father, Lord of heaven and earth, because you have hidden these things from the wise and the intelligent and have revealed them to infants; yes, Father, for such was your gracious will. 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.*

*“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.”*

“To what will I compare this generation?” Jesus asks the crowds. “For John [the Baptist] came neither eating nor drinking, and they say, ‘He has a demon’; the Son of Man came eating and drinking, and they say, ‘Look, a glutton and a drunkard, a friend of tax collectors and sinners!’”

“Nothing can please these people,” Dr. John Shea explains. “What they do best is sit in the marketplace and make judgments, fabricating reasons that justify [why they won’t listen to either John the Baptist *or* Jesus, who both invite them to change].

“John the Baptist invited them to repent. But his strong words and desert abode gave them their ‘out’ [so they didn’t have to listen to John] — ‘He has a demon’ [they proclaimed, dismissively]. *Jesus* invited them to feast. But his table fellowship with those [whom] **they** deemed *undesirable* gave them their ‘out’ — [they judged Jesus to be] ‘a glutton and a drunkard [a friend of tax collectors and sinners!’ **That** was their justification for not accepting and following *Jesus*’ teachings or example.]”<sup>1</sup>

Of course, those justifications were not the **real** reason that “this generation,” which, in both Jesus’ day *and* ours we might call “the establishment,” would not listen to either John the Baptist or to Jesus. The **real** reason was that both John and Jesus were calling for them to *change* – change their minds, their attitudes, their hearts, their behaviors. But, like many of us, they were comfortable in their lives just the way they were, and did not want to change.

My friends, *our* generation is not all that different from Jesus' generation. For, if you are at all like me, you *resist* change, *especially* if you are relatively comfortable in your present situation or position in society. We, in *our* generation as in Jesus' generation, will find reasons why **we** won't listen to a message that we *need* – but don't *want* – to hear; a message that *might* be from God, and *might* be telling us that **we** need to *change*. Those of us, especially, whom Jesus calls “the wise and the intelligent” (which also refers to the establishment), will find reasons **not** to hear or follow any message which might criticize or threaten our mindset or attitudes or behavior – *even* if that message comes from the mouth of Jesus. I know that is difficult for us to hear, but it is God's truth; it is what Jesus is telling us in today's Gospel about the excuses we make for not listening to what we don't want to hear, not doing what we don't want to do.

Take, for instance, the message we have been hearing recently: “Black Lives Matter.” It is a statement meant to bring to our consciousness the fact that disproportionate numbers of Black Americans are imprisoned, disproportionate numbers of Black Americans are in low-wage jobs, disproportionate numbers of Black Americans suffer severe effects of COVID-19; and black parents (like our own Bishop) must repeatedly have a talk with their children reminding them about how to act when the police stop them – a talk which white parents *never* have to have with *their* children.

“Black Lives Matter” is a message that I, at least, need to hear. And I think it is a message that all of us of “this generation” need to hear.

But like the generation to whom Jesus speaks in today's Gospel, we often give *ourselves* an “out,” an excuse *not* to listen and respond to the message which asks us to change – change our perspective, change our minds, change our attitudes and behaviors. “**All** lives matter!” we proclaim; or we say, “There was looting and vandalism at that particular Black Lives Matter rally! **All** those protestors are hooligans!” Saying these things gives us an “out,” a justification **not** to take seriously the uncomfortable message that there **is** systemic injustice toward our fellow Americans who happen to have a different color of skin.

When scientists raise the alarm about the destruction and burning of the Amazon Rain Forests, we don't say, “**All** forests matter.” Yes, all forests *do* matter; but it is the Amazon Rain Forests that are currently burning, destroying one of our planet's greatest means of removing carbon dioxide from our atmosphere, and destroying the habitats, the homes, of beautiful and endangered species – God's beloved creatures. Because it is the Amazon Rain Forests that are currently burning, **they** deserve our attention and action right now, *more* than other forests do.

“I thank you, Father, Lord of heaven and earth,” Jesus prays, “because you have hidden these things from the wise and the intelligent and have revealed them to infants.”

We have already said that “the wise and the intelligent” refers to the establishment – those of us who occupy comfortable positions in society and are relatively content with the way things are. And when Jesus speaks of “These things,” he is, according to John Shea, referring “to the mysteries of the kingdom [of God], how the revelation of divine love enters the human heart and transforms persons and society.”<sup>2</sup>

How the revelation of divine love enters the human heart and *transforms* persons and society.

My friends, you and I *long* for this divine love to enter our hearts and lives – even if we’re not conscious of that longing. 1500 years ago, St. Augustine wrote, “You have made us for yourself, O Lord, and our hearts are restless until they find their rest in you.” We yearn *desperately* for this divine love, because it is for **this** that we were created! And yet, at the same time, we *don’t* want to be **changed** or **transformed** by this divine love, since change is uncertain and often means loss; and, if you are like me, you **avoid** uncertainty and loss as far as is humanly possible. We want things to be the way they have always been. The result is that we remain closed to divine love, remain closed to the kingdom of God, and we live our lives instead in the familiar kingdom of this world, where we don’t have to be transformed, don’t have to have our mindsets, hearts, or comfortable behaviors changed.

When Jesus says, “Come to me, all you that are weary and are carrying heavy burdens, and I will give you rest,” he is not telling us to put our feet up and take a break (not that that’s a bad thing). Jesus is not talking about the kind of rest which is a break from work; rather, he is speaking of a far more profound rest: **God’s** rest on the Seventh Day of Creation, when God looked at her created World, proclaimed it holy, and *rested*. The kind of rest Jesus is promising us **also** refers back to the beginning of Creation – *our* creation. “Rest happens when our **true** nature is realized,”<sup>3</sup> John Shea notes. Rest happens when our *true* nature is realized: when we are restored to the original relationship God intended in Creation between our self and God and our fellow human beings and all of God’s Creation. Rest happens when we are restored to our **true** nature, which is the image and likeness of God. (Genesis 1:26)

My friends, you and I and our world today are *not* at rest because we are **not** living in accord with our true nature, in accord with the image and likeness of God in which we were created. To use *Jesus’* metaphor, we are living under the reign of the kingdom of *this* world rather than the Kingdom of God. We may be able to fool *ourselves* with our justifications for not heeding Jesus’ words and the

example of his life, and we may even fool some other people; but we do not fool God.

- When God looks out at our world today and sees the ways we act so *selfishly* – asserting “America First!” and buying up virtually **all** the world’s supply of one of the **only** proven drug treatments for this pandemic disease COVID-19, leaving almost *nothing* left for the rest of God’s children who make up over 95% of the world’s population; when God sees this selfishness, how does God feel?
- When God looks out at our world today and sees the ways we act so *selfishly* by refusing to protect our neighbor when we don’t observe the simple practice of wearing a mask, using as an excuse “**my** freedom;” when God sees this self-centeredness, how does God feel?
- When God looks out at our world today and sees how we pollute and pillage God’s own Creation, taking little or no **responsibility** for how we Americans use a vastly disproportionate amount of the world’s energy and resources, or how we are contributing to climate change, the endangerment of God’s multitude of beautiful species, and the health and well-being of our fellow human beings, especially in poorer nations and in future generations; when God sees this lack of responsibility, how does God feel?<sup>4</sup>
- When God looks out at our world today and sees the ways our politicians incessantly and unapologetically hurl insults at each other and at their fellow Americans who belong to the “other” political party, while you and I lustily approve (and even, at times, join in); when God hears these unremitting insults, how does God feel?<sup>5</sup>
- When God looks out at us human beings, whom God created in God’s own image and likeness,<sup>6</sup> and sees the way we *treat* each other, especially how we treat our sisters and brothers who happen to belong to the “other” political party, or who come from countries other than the United States of America, or who happen to speak a different language or have a different color of skin or have no home; when God sees how we treat each other, how does God feel?<sup>7</sup>
- When God looks out at us human beings living in the United States of America and sees that those who have no health insurance cannot receive the healing gifts God has given to doctors and nurses; when God sees this systemic lack of compassion, how does God feel?<sup>8</sup>
- When God looks out at God’s own world and sees all these things, how does God feel? What does God think?
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My friends, when we honestly look at these situations in our world today, and consider how God feels about them, what justifications do we give for not listening to, and following, the example and teachings of Jesus? What is keeping us from taking up Jesus’ easy yoke of love, and finding **true** rest for our souls?

AMEN

1 John Shea, *On Earth as it is in Heaven*, Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 2004, p. 218

2 *ibid.*, p. 219

3 *ibid.*, p. 221

4 “God spoke: ‘Let us make human beings in our image, make them reflecting our nature so they can **be responsible for** the fish in the sea, the birds in the air, the cattle, and, yes, Earth itself, and every animal that moves on the face of Earth.’” (Genesis 1:26, *The Message* translation)

5 Jesus said, “You have heard that it was said to those of ancient times, ‘You shall not murder’; and ‘whoever murders shall be liable to judgment.’ But I say to you that if you are angry with a brother or sister, you will be liable to judgment; and *if you insult a brother or sister, you will be liable to the council*; and if you say, ‘You fool,’ you will be liable to the hell of fire.” (Matthew 5:21-22, NRSV)

6 Then God said, “Let us make humankind in our image, according to our likeness...” (Genesis 1:26, NRSV)

7 “For you were called to freedom, brothers and sisters; only do not use your freedom as an opportunity for self-indulgence, but through love become slaves to one another. For the whole law is summed up in a single commandment, ‘You shall love your neighbor as yourself.’ If, however, you bite and devour one another, take care that you are not consumed by one another.” (Galatians 5:13-15, NRSV)

8 [Jesus said to his disciples,] “Heal the sick, raise the dead, cleanse those with skin diseases, and throw out demons. You received without having to pay. Therefore, give without demanding payment. (Matthew 10:8, CEB)