

Fifth Sunday after Pentecost, Year A, July 5, 2020 UPMP

WELCOME

CALL TO WORSHIP

“Christ Be our Light” (Insert)

SCRIPTURE

Matthew 11:16-19, 25-30

[Jesus said:] "But to what will I compare this generation? It is like children sitting in the market-places 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 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 indicated 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."

HYMN AFTER SCRIPTURE:

“Thanks to God for My Redeemer” #571

SERMON:

It's a rare year that I'm hear for the 4th of July. This marks 18 years, I think, since I've been heading up to the Boundary Waters, or some other wilderness, to escape fireworks. I'm like the dog hiding under the table. That, and mid-day sugared-up sunburnt kids with bottle rockets make me turn in another direction.

But things happen, and sometimes we change course. Between heat and sun and pulling a muscle in my back, I opted to head home early. Took my kids to a remote beach yesterday, just to stay away, but when we had had enough, I still wound up in Morgan Park at sunset.

It's crazy here. There was a layer of smoke everywhere. There were three, maybe four displays going on, and from my vantage point on 87th they were circled around me. Iron Mug, Blackmer Park, Good Fellowship.

...and these fireworks weren't just the little bottle rockets and roman candles, these were full sized, across the sky, boom boom feel it in your chest kind of things.

Here's what happened to bring me back. I met dead ends. After I pulled a muscle in my back I thought "well, I'm not doing much portaging, let alone a couple miles, so I took the small swampy streams that wind off the beaten paths. I knew from the past they were not the easiest, nor terribly pleasant in the heat, but word out there was that they were navigable.

Friends, they weren't. I'm here to tell you that the beaver are thriving in that Kawishiwi region, and their dams are impressive, blocking more water than I've ever seen. Even trails that I knew were open years ago, from experience, are now reduced to a slow trickle below the dam.

This happened probably seven times. Get a ways out, meet a giant beaver dam. So, what can I do when I run into this? ...I'd turn around. Not feeling frustrated or defeated, just..."ok...time to try another course."

And it was in one of those processes of turning around to try another course, there as I'm swatting horseflies, that it something became clear. Some lesson. Some guidance. A God nudge.

Dead ends... are not defeat. They are not failure. Just turn around, and try another path.

And friends, lest this sound like a light and simple little dose of hallmark wisdom. I've known three friends that completed suicide, one of them is very close to me as I paddle out there, and the common theme, as best as anybody can glean from notes and narratives they left behind, is that they all felt defeated. They all felt they had failed. ...And I want to tell them, there as I'm dodging snags and frightening turtles back into the water, I want to tell them: "Not a defeat! A dead end! Just turn around! Try another path!"

And in all of the walking I do with people struggling with addictions and self abuse. You are not defeated, only reached a dead end! Turn around. Try another path!

Or for people seeking to engage their faith that were less than enamored by religious experiences from the past—churches with poor theology, more dogma than love, hegemony over help, exclusionary practices to others—I want to say the same thing! Dead end. Not a defeat. Turn around and try another path! Find the way God is reaching out to you."

...Bible Study folks will recall a line I say from the theologian Marcus Borg. Borg says: "when I meet people that tell me they don't believe in God, I ask 'tell me about the God you don't believe in' and nine times out of ten, I don't believe in that God either."

Dead end. Not defeat. Turn around. Try another path.

And I want to say to churches, as I've been reading more about church revitalization recently, notably the protestant churches of our tradition for so many years that are presently in decline everywhere:

The path you've been taking for many generations has reached a dead end. Tradition and ritual and obligation as a means to gather souls has dammed up the Pentecostal spirit, leaving us with nothing but a slow trickle. To all those churches: you're not defeated.

Our culture has not "gone away from God" in the past twenty years—as we're so fond of saying to justify our decline—NO! All of the statistics report an increase in engagement with spiritual life in people fifty years and younger. I'd be happy to show them to you. What's happening is not a loss of spirituality, but that people are demanding more from their churches. It's no longer acceptable for them just to show up and go through the motions. It's no longer acceptable for a church to sit here with its doors open and just expect people to show up.

--Dead end. Turn around. Try another path.

There are many churches out there that have, and many out there where the Pentecost spirit is flowing freely and the ministry is thriving. Just as there are many new church starts that are doing things differently than the past that are thriving. Again, I can show you the case studies on these if you're interested.

That's what Jesus is saying here in Matthew. And we're missing a bit here as we walk through the lectionary, because in the omitted text is a narrative of how the people in Jesus's midst closed their minds and hearts to him.

But if anyone's gonna say it, it is Jesus. Dead end. Not defeat. Turn around. Try another path.

Jesus says in today's scripture: "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."

And this, immediately after speaking about the people's response to John the Baptist and the response he received, where he said this line:

"Yet wisdom is indicated by her deeds."

Now we've talked plenty about the difference between knowledge and wisdom. That knowledge is information and ideology, but wisdom comes from integrating that information and ideology with lived experience.

My son, surly 15 y.o. and all told me a great line about this recently:
 "Knowledge is knowing that a tomato is a fruit. Wisdom is knowing that it tastes terrible in fruit salad."

There are many people that know their Bible, and can rattle off information faster than I can, but many of those people simply rattle off information, but do not practice Jesus call. They are knowledgeable, but not wise. Labels and ideology and badges of belonging are not Christian ministry. Christian ministry is in the practice.

One commentary I read this week put it this way: "Today we might ask if our own ministry would identify us in the same way. Can people "hear and see" the good news in the way we live as much as in the words we say or the identity we claim as followers of Jesus?"

And here, the final verses... the ones most pastors that follow the lectionary will focus on this week...and probably one of our most popular...at least on our "Greatest Hits Album"—let me read it again:

"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."
 Christian practice is not always easy and simple. We know that. So a "gentle yoke" is good to remember. It's good to remember that a yoke is not only a restraint, as we so often view it. It is also an enabler.

I love having a portage yoke as get out with my canoe. It enables me to go further, be more efficient...

Is it more to carry? Yes. Can it be a burden? Yes. But it can also be a possibility.

And friends, we all wear yokes from the culture around us. Barriers and boundaries and resources and possibilities. The question confronting us is, whose yoke or what yoke does one put on?

I invite you to the yoke of Christianity. The possibility and even the challenge. And should you choose to wear it, it will take you down many wandering paths.

Some of those paths will be dead ends. And let God remind you. You are not defeated. Turn around. Try another path.

HYMN AFTER SERMON

“When upon Life’s Billows” #569

JOYS AND CONCERNS

PASTORAL PRAYER

LORDS PRAYER—Sung by Cathy Dale

CLOSING HYMN: “My Country ‘Tis of Thee”

BENEDICTION

POSTLUDE