

## *Step into God's Love*

*Romans 7:15-25a; Matthew 11:16-19, 25-30*

Sometimes there are scriptures that are hard to hear and a lot of work to unpack. The passage from Romans today, I feel, is one of those passages. How many of us thought to ourselves as we heard it being read: “But I do not do what I want, but I do the very thing that I hate.” How many of us hear our own voice in that statement? How many of us want and strive to be a better person? To be more patient with others? To help other people more? To love all people...and yet, have ended up feeling like we have fallen short. That we are incapable of living as God has called us. How many of us have felt disappointed, like the generation described in the Gospel of Matthew that cried out, “We played the flute for you, but you did not dance. We wailed and you did not mourn.” How many of us are tired of being told that we are sinners and that we are not living up to God’s standards? How many of us are carrying these and other burdens in our lives?

This is not the message from the Gospel. This is not what Jesus is trying to say to us. Listen to the last three verses of Matthew again, where Jesus says, “Come to me, all you that are weary and carrying heavy burdens and I give you rest. Take my yoke upon you. Learn from me, for I am gentle and humble in heart. And you will find rest for your soul.” If we were to listen to these verses again from a slightly different translation from *The Messenger*, it says:

“Are you tired? Worn out? Burned out on religion? Come to me; get away with me and you will recover your life. I’ll show you how to take a real rest. Walk with me, work with me. Watch how I do it. Learn the unforced rhythms of grace. I won’t lay anything heavy or ill-fitted on you. Keep company with me and you’ll learn to live freely and lightly.”

Who wouldn’t want to receive that message?

Emilie M. Townes, a theologian, believes that the discipleship that Jesus is inviting us to in the passage from Matthew “requires that we stretch into our ministries by focusing on Jesus’ message and realizing that we will find rest from carrying heavy burdens of the Gospel by living out our unique vision and commitment to which God

has called each and every one of us.”<sup>1</sup> These passages today ask the fundamental question: who are you listening to? Are you listening to God? Are you listening to the voice of Jesus? Are you hearing the Holy Spirit through the words of others? Or, do you find yourself listening to the voice of fear? The voice of judgement? And the voice of cynicism?

The voice of fear is the voice that plays upon your worst imagination with negative scenarios. It leads us to believe that our world is not safe and that we are in danger. Now, please don't get me wrong; I'm not saying to not listen or heed the warnings of the voice of fear. When you are physically or mentally in danger, please listen to that. But on the whole, and what I think this scripture is asking us, is in our day-to-day lives and in our work, this voice of fear can lead us in ways that are not helpful.

This voice of cynicism is that sharp, snarky voice inclined to believe that others are only motivated by personal self-interest. This is the voice of suspicion, disbelief, distrust and doubt.

And the voice of judgement – which, in my world, is probably the strongest one – is certain about many things. It leads to either/or choices. It shuts down the open mind and labels issues. Which of those three voices – the voice of fear, cynicism and judgement – do we hear in that passage from Romans? Which of these voices do you hear at the beginning of the passage from the Gospel of Matthew?

As I read these passages over and over again this week, the words and wisdom of Susan Beaumont came to mind. I've spoken about her book before, which is entitled *How to Lead When You Don't Know Where You're Going: Leading in a Liminal Season*. She speaks about how there needs to be three spiritual shifts in order to move through and out of a liminal time – a time of unknowing, which we've all been through. These three shifts are asking us to move from knowing to unknowing; from advocating to attending; and from striving to surrender. She points out that our culture values leaders who know many things. Who have strong viewpoints. Who strive to overcome any obstacle that stands in the way of success. And who never ever shows weakness. But this isn't what the world needs right now. If we look around, we have been led by these types of leaders and the world is still in a lot of trouble. The world is still full of violence, hate and oppression. As followers of Jesus, as people of God,

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<sup>1</sup> Emilie M. Townes, *Feasting on the Word*, Year A, Volume 3, (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2011), p. 215.

we are being called to something different. Jesus is inviting the disciples, is inviting all of us to place ourselves and open ourselves up, to be vulnerable in front of God. Jesus says in the Gospel today, “I thank God, because you have hidden these things from the wise and the intelligent and have revealed them to infants.” I ask you to try and quiet that voice of judgement in your heads at this moment. Why would Jesus say this? Why would God hide things from adults? But if we think about it, what it means to be an infant...the best parts about being an infant is that there’s innocence, and with that comes wonder, imagination, possibility. We need to embrace the fact that infants also rely on the love and care of adults. If we come to God in this spirit – in the spirit of curiosity, in the spirit of vulnerability, where we need to accept the care and love that both Jesus and God offer each and every one of us – how will our lives be different? If we go back to the three spiritual shifts, if we let go of knowing and instead embrace unknowing, we will take the pressure off of ourselves. All too often, we choose not to do something because we believe we don’t know enough. Maybe we are not prepared enough, so we hold back. However, if we adopt a sense of wonder, if we are more open, then our lives can be transformed and changed in ways we would never expect. In a spirit of wonder, we have a capacity for challenging unstated assumptions and seeing new possibilities. We have the ability to see beauty in each other. If we stop advocating for what we have or what we feel we need, we are open to embracing the fullness of the present moment. If advocacy assumes certainty about direction and clarity about outcomes, attending opens us up to seeing possibilities that emerge. That could provide even more than we could ever have imagined. It opens us up to seeing the abundance that is all around us. And if we stop striving to look good, feel confident and appear successful – things that often drive us to burnout – if we stop striving and instead surrender and yield to God, we will be able to accept the past for what it was, embrace the present reality, and yield to the mystery of the future. When we let go of our old understandings and negative attachments and release our fears, we accept what Jesus is offering us today.

Jesus says, “Take my yoke upon you. Learn from me, for I am gentle and humble in heart. You will find rest for your soul.” Jesus says, “Come, follow me and I will give you rest.” Jesus is inviting us to live and be in a different way; a way that is counter-cultural. When we are rested, when we are present, when we are grounded and listening to God, then we will know that we are loved, that we are valued. And when we do that, we will be able to commit and share with faith, with courage and with strength, all that God has offered us to other people in this world. God is calling us out of our fear, away from that cynicism, away from judgement – and instead asking

us to step into God's love. Open yourselves up as an infant would to the wonder, love and care that God offers. Thanks be to God. Amen.