

6 July, 2008  
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I express my thanks to Father Green for inviting me to share this worship time with you. Retired clergy appreciate the privilege of sharing thoughts with faith folk. The writing of a reflection on the Sunday lessons each week becomes a habit. A lynchpin to one's being, a marker for the week. I miss the discipline of reflecting on God's word each week and especially looking at the wisdom of those who preceded us and who put pen to parchment or papyrus and shared their wisdom with us.

This morning I share a reflection on the passage from Matthew that we just heard. We also remember that it appeared in the 1928 prayer book and in Rite I of our current book. "Come unto me all ye that travail and are heavy laden and I will refresh you."

I recall with some degree of horror the first time I prepared a sermon meditating on this passage from Matthew. Some priests in the diocese of California had chosen this passage as one of the scriptural jumping-off points for the canonical sermons that were required of seminarians to write before they could be ordained to the priesthood. And we all knew that three wise and learned men were going to read them. And we weren't quite sure what they were going to say about our offering. I wrote that sermon forty-seven years ago. And I also knew I had to justify what I wrote. I am pleased to say that they were kind, very kind.

And looking back, I know that what I wrote for that canonical sermon on these words was filled with pious nonsense. Pure pious nonsense. It was rich in such names as Bultmann and Bonhoeffer and Barth and Charles Dodd and other esteemed biblical scholars of the day.

I looked at the lesson this week and thought, what will I say this time? And I can only wonder what the three priests who examined me on that sermon would say about this morning's offering? I hope that they would perceive a person who is more at peace and comfortable with Jesus than the young man who struggled with the Word forty-seven years ago.

Ahhh, the temptation. Temptation rolls around in front of us in so many ways. And I'd love to digress on the changes that our world and church has undergone over these past forty-seven years. But let me pause and give thanks for one change: Forty-seven years ago, when I wrote that first sermon I used a yellow pad and [an] ink pen that leaked. I had a dictionary beside me (because I can't spell), a bible, some textbooks. How our world has changed! I love spell-checkers! They are a gift from God! Word processors are also a gift from God. I never learned to type and now I can read my own thoughts in good letters. And they look good!

We can talk about other changes. I remember when I wrote that first sermon I had myriad books around me; I had an extensive library for a seminarian. That library now rests in boxes in my basement. And what do I do for source information? When I want

to know something I carefully type it and go to Google and there it is in front of me in thirty seconds or less! And I encourage all of you, when you look at your lessons for Sunday – and I see that they’re printed ahead of time – go to Google, type in the text and see what comes up and read it. It’s a miracle what is before us today.

“Come unto me all ye that are heavy laden.” I’ve often wondered about that phrase. I’m very thankful that the author of Matthew preserved that little line that Jesus spoke. Unfortunately, Matthew does not give us the context where Jesus uttered those words. We have no reliable way to fully understand what Jesus meant by this saying. So we, like Matthew, probably have to stop and speculate and try to figure out in our minds what Jesus intended. And that’s okay. We have to paint the picture of Jesus.

I begin by noting Jesus’ concern for the people: “Come unto me all ye are heavy laden.” That’s you and I. It is the people in front of me. It’s humanity. And Jesus cares.

Who sat before Jesus? Well, in your mind’s eye think about those who traveled either some distance or came out to find out what this person named Jesus was saying. No doubt most of them were peasants, probably uneducated. Obviously politically powerless. None of them had any authority in the religious world of the day of the temple or the Sadducees or the Pharisees.

The plight of the peasants was hard. They carried terrible burdens just to eke out an existence from the land, wondering, probably, where the next meal was going to come from. And those who had a little land and a little extra? Well, there were a lot of folks who liked to tax it. Temple authorities wanted 10% off the top. Civil authorities and their paid thugs practiced extortion over the powerless peasant. It wasn’t fun being a peasant in Jesus’ day. And they carried a heavy burden. Probably many of them feared falling into slavery because of tragedies that hit their family. When Jesus said to them, “Come unto me all ye are heavy laden,” he was truly speaking to them.

And then we look further. Who was before Jesus? Surprisingly there were a lot of women present at his gatherings. The list of ladies’ names in the gospels were phenomenal in an era when women were property and most men prayed, ‘Thank God I’m not a woman.’ But they came to him and found somebody that welcomed them.

And the burden of ethnic prejudice played a part in daily life. If you were a Samaritan, you were outside the pale of the Hebrew family. Not loved by God or neighbor. But Jesus told stories that made their burden lighter. Can you recall who was the kind person to the person who had been beaten up by robbers? It was the Samaritan, not a good Jew or a Pharisee, but a Samaritan. And in that Jesus quietly said, “You’re valuable, even though you’re outside what normal society of my day considers part of it.” Those must have been impressive words for those who carried terrible burdens.

Then we look a little further at those who stood or sat in front of Jesus, because religious leaders of these days placed very unreasonable demands upon people. Try to

figure out when you go back through the Old Testament what it's like to fulfill all the sacrificial laws at the temple. It was hard, but demanded. Pharisees studied the law and expected the common man to follow their interpretations of the law. Especially those that revolved around keeping kosher food, or laws regarding purity. And if you are a working peasant, there is no way on God's green earth that you could follow the precepts of the laws interpreted by the Pharisees so therefore you aren't a good person. Terrible burden.

And we smile at our ancient ancestors as they struggle with religious injunctions. But we should also smile at ourselves. Can an unbaptized person receive communion? I don't know how many times I've been in that debate (and I'm not going to answer the question).

I recall waking into a sacristy when I was a new priest in a parish, and there were two ladies of the Altar Guild arguing how many inches the candles were supposed to be from the end of the altar. Was it three inches or six? So they looked at the new priest in charge and asked, "Well, what should it be?" They looked at me in horror when I asked them what difference did it make. I'll guarantee you that the Altar Guild had roast priest for lunch. But I also looked at them and said, "You know, I'm delighted you're both here. I hope you go out and have a cup of coffee together because that's what Jesus really wants."

I go back and read the gospels and wonder why Jesus said my burden's light. Is it truly light? I think it is. Take a look and see as you read the gospel – what does Jesus really require of us? It doesn't tell us to go take a sacrificial lamb. It doesn't tell us how to wash our dishes. It doesn't tell us how far we can walk on Sunday. The religious injunctions in Jesus' message are minimal.

Jesus took bread. Simple, healthful bread. And he broke it and he asked his disciples to do the same – eat. He added, "Do it and remember me." Now that's a simple injunction: Remember. It doesn't take much work to remember, does it?

All folks break bread in some form. But he also knew that in the breaking of bread, people are sustained by the food of the earth. Sustained by God who provides it. And Jesus saw that in the breaking of bread his disciples could be one with him in memory and in love and with God and with one another. Can you think of a more comforting thought than in the breaking of bread with one's friends? It's a joy.

I watched a family enter a restaurant. The waiter brought a basket of bread. The family paused and gave thanks and shared the bread. The mother even buttered the bread for one of the younger children. And I continued watching the little family of the three children and parents and their conversation was lively. Obviously the five of them just thoroughly enjoyed being a family at that point in time. I wondered if Jesus saw them too and liked what he saw as they broke bread together and were one.

Jesus added one more injunction, a simple one. He took a cup of wine and shared it with his disciples. A simple act of generosity, steeped in tradition but yet so profound. For what does wine do? What does it do? Wine facilitates conversation and joy. We don't drink wine with our enemies, do we? We drink wine with our friends and those we feel close to. I often say a silent prayer when my wife and I share a glass of wine at dinner. I ask Jesus to be with us in our joy and in our leisure and give thanks that we are a family. And it's holy. I have no doubt that Jesus is there.

Give thanks as you come to the altar rail this morning to take a bit of bread and a sip of wine. Give thanks that the religious direction the Jesus gave to his disciples and to us were intended to unite us with him, with the Holy One and with one another. Jesus was a genius – he relieved us of many burdens of life that others would like to impose upon us that divide us and enslave us. And he gave us one that gives meaning in the breaking of bread and the sharing of wine, that our burden may be light as we enjoy one another.

Wonder with me what those priests of forty-seven years ago would do with the sermon I wrote this morning. I wonder if they'd like any better than the first one I wrote. I'll leave that one to you to figure out.

I understand that we have something called the Creed. I think we should proceed to it.