

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

11:16 "But to what will I compare this generation? It is like children sitting in the marketplaces and calling to one another, 17 'We played the flute for you, and you did not dance; we wailed, and you did not mourn.' 18 For John came neither eating nor drinking, and they say, 'He has a demon'; 19 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."

25 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; 26 yes, Father, for such was your gracious will. 27 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. 28 "Come to me, all you that are weary and are carrying heavy burdens, and I will give you rest. 29 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. 30 For my yoke is easy, and my burden is light."

### **Sermon**

One of the big questions I didn't touch on in my getting to know you time was hobbies. You see, that question has long stumped me, as it has been a good amount of time since I have had enough free time to really explore activities and find unique things that I enjoy doing. That said, I have had a little more free time since graduating from seminary, you know around getting married and moving and all that, and I found something that I really got into. I couldn't tell you how or why, but I ended up really into the National Geographic documentaries on Ancient Egypt that are available on Disney Plus. I watched all of them. In under a week. One of the things that really intrigued me about those documentaries was the way that the archeologists could make so many conclusions based on even the tiniest artifact, but then also how they could make even more full conclusions if they were able to bring a number of artifacts together and create a bigger picture to work with.

A similar process happens when we interact with scripture. When we look at a couple verses by themselves we can usually make some conclusions on what those verses mean and it could be profound and meaningful for us. Though when we put those verses in context and read the text that surrounds it, that can bring us to some

more specific or different conclusions. This isn't a bad thing. Our Bible is a living text as we know that the Spirit works through the words on the page to bring meaning to us today and that the text can have different meanings for us depending on how and when and who reads it. That is one of the cool parts of scripture! The same text can bring me something new every time I read it. I also love that our texts can give us something to hold onto without doing a bunch of research to understand every word, but that also, Biblical and theological scholars can dig so deep into and share with us new tidbits.

The verses that we read today are such a good example of this. I'm sure that the last few verses were familiar to many of you. I know they were to me! They actually became pretty special to me these last few months. I went to a retreat for Michigan seminarians put together by our conference before the start of Spring semester and one of the leaders read us those few short verses. They resonated with me so deeply. I had been feeling the heavy burdens of stress, burnout, exhaustion from seminary, and it was a needed reminder as I went into my final semester that Jesus tells us to come to him when we are weary and that he will give us rest. Little did I know then, in January, all that was to come this Spring for all of us with the pandemic. These words have continued to stick with me and keep me afloat when everything happening and everything I had to do felt like too much. So, I was happily surprised when I found out that it was this text that I was going to get to preach on for my first Sunday here.

This time though, the text for today given to us by the lectionary includes a bunch of verses before this last part that I was not as familiar with. Like those archeologists in Egypt, I realized I was going to have to take a step back and look at the whole big picture of this passage and not just at what those couple of verses meant to me. Lo and behold, in my study of this whole passage this week, I have come to some new conclusions for what God is trying to say to us through this text. The first parts of the passage set the stage for what Jesus meant in those final verses.

I didn't realize during my first read through of this passage how much of it is metaphor and subtext, so I first want to explain what Jesus and Matthew are trying to say with all the foofy language that is used in this collection of verses.

So Jesus is speaking to a crowd of people and trying to convince them that John the Baptist and himself are the real deal. This passage starts as Jesus says, "But to

what will I compare this generation?” and then uses an analogy to children playing in the market. We can know from the verses that follow that Jesus is making a comparison between the way the people responded to John and Jesus as real deal messengers of God, specifically in how so few people believed they were legitimate. In the following verses 18-19, we can take away that it is because neither of them fit into the people’s preconceived ideas of what a messenger of God should be like. Jesus is basically saying,

You are the generation of people who got to see the Messiah in the flesh and you still don’t get it! You’re like that Katy Perry song, “You’re hot then your cold!” John was too serious and too pious (too into spiritual practices) for you. Jesus was too hippy dippy and not pious or spiritual enough for you. You complained that John must be a demon because he didn’t eat or drink with you. Jesus does eat and drink with you, and you call him a glutton and a drunkard! You just don’t get it!

Jesus ends this part of his talk to the crowd by saying “Yet wisdom is vindicated by her deeds.” To the original hearers of this, they would have understood Wisdom here to mean God’s wisdom, which is called Sophia in Greek in parts of the Old Testament, which is why it is *her* deeds that are vindicated. Jesus is not allowing the peoples not understanding who John and Jesus are to have the last word. Instead, Jesus reminds them that despite the stumbling blocks they have put in their own way, God keeps working and some have come to believe in the new revelation of God.

These first verses are followed by a quick interlude that we didn’t read this morning, but can be summarized quickly: Jesus scolds some specific cities/communities of people for not paying attention to his message despite being the areas he did most of his miracles and ministry. So at this point, we can hear Jesus criticizing their inability to see who he was despite the fact that they were witnesses to his amazing acts because they were not able to see past their own expectations for how God should show up.

This theme continues in verses 25-27 as Jesus says in his cryptic way who we should not be like and who we should be like. Following verse 19, that some still come to believe God’s message, Jesus elaborates that it is not those that are considered the “wise and intelligent” that have gotten it, but those that are “infants.” Based on general historical context and common themes from the rest of the book of Matthew, Biblical

scholars conclude that this is not a general condemnation of anyone who has wisdom or intelligence, but specifically those with superior religious status or individual intelligence who are revered in the community for those aspects, like the Scribes and Pharisees. So in contrast, the “infants” are those that are not super educated in religious practices and have no religious credentials to claim that they know what God is saying. Verse 26 says, “yes, father, for such was your gracious will.” Another translation of this verse is, “for so it was well-pleasing in your sight.” So, God was happy to speak to and through those without any religious credentials. Welp. I just spent three years getting my religious credentials...so uh... I guess I should just leave ya to it!

This is one of those spots that reading it all in context, both historically and reading the text around it is quite important. (At least to my job.) When we consider what we took away from the first section, we remember that Jesus was criticizing how their preconceived notions for what a messenger of God should look like was what got in their way of recognizing Jesus as the Messiah. It was those with religious credentials that created and were the most tied to those preconceived notions, and they were the least open to God doing a new, unexpected thing among them. By contrast, it was those who were the least strict in their religion that were the most open to however God showed up amongst them. Perhaps this is less an outright condemnation of wisdom and intelligence, or even those with religious credentials, but instead a reminder to listen to those that we don't usually consider to have those things when it comes to God stuff. Some terms that we use today come to mind when I think about who are the unexpected people without the right religious experience. What about those that call themselves “spiritual but not religious” or those we label as “baby Christians” who are new to their faith. What could we learn from those types of people in our own community about who God is or how God is working in the world?

Verse 27 uses a bunch of circular language, but boils down to say that Jesus is more than just a messenger of divine mysteries, but is the one who already knew them through his intimate relationship with God the Father. As well as saying that Jesus is the one who chooses who to reveal God to. Which is to say, that it is not us who decides, or there is not a specific way to make Jesus reveal God to us. We can only do our best to avoid the stumbling blocks that Jesus has been warning us of in this passage--having

too strong preconceived ideas of who God is, how God will show up among us, or of what God wants that we miss it when God does something unexpected, and also to value our intelligence over the true revelation of God.

So that brings us to these familiar last few verses. “Come to me, all you that are weary and are carrying heavy burdens, and I will give you rest.” After that consistent message so far in the passage, this feels a bit out of left field upon a surface-level reading. A key is to think about who are those that are weary and burdened. Once again, we find some answers in how Jesus continues his thought. He says, “Take my yoke upon you, and learn from me.” The use of the word yoke here is interesting as it is a symbol of servitude and obedience, which was important in the Hebrew Scriptures, or Old Testament, as a contrast between the yoke from fellow man and the yoke of God, or forced obedience from other humans versus the obedience we are asked to have toward God. By Jesus commanding “Take MY yoke upon you,” he is claiming his divine authority and how he is an embodiment of God’s will. He describes his yoke in verse 30 as “easy” and the burden light. So the light and easy burden of Jesus’s Yoke can be contrasted to what is being referred to in verse 28 as causing weariness and heavy burdens. Based on the previous disdain for those flaunting religious credentials, and common themes in the rest of Matthew, Jesus is likely referring to the burdens of religious obligations laid upon religious followers by the religious leaders, like the Scribes and Pharisees, that ended up being a barrier between them and communion with God. So, Jesus is inviting all those that feel overly burdened by their religious obligations to just come straight to the source and follow his teachings more directly.

We hear much later in Matthew, in chapter 22 a bit of what those teachings are, as he is asked which is the greatest commandment in the law. His response is to “Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind.’ 38 This is the first and greatest commandment. 39 And the second is like it: ‘Love your neighbor as yourself.’ 40 All the Law and the Prophets hang on these two commandments.” Jesus’s yoke is much more focused on our personal relationship with God than following all 613 laws of the Torah to a tee. When we focus more on following every rule, practice, ideology, tradition, and/or doctrine perfectly it can and often does get in the way of us loving God and loving our neighbor to the best of our ability.

Jesus's promise, if we shift our focus to our relationship with God and being open to the new ways that God is leading us, is rest for our souls. Which is a common way that the Bible talks about salvation or being a part of the Kingdom of God. This is not an invitation to a rule-free, chill life of faith without responsibility, but instead deliverance from the trappings of human religion which, as we have discussed at length with the beginning part of this passage, often acts as a stumbling block to our ability to hear the true revelation of God and enter into the true fellowship in the Kingdom of God. These verses promise us that God gives the rest of salvation to those who are open to accept what Jesus is doing among us, no matter how unexpected.

There are still expectations for us when we choose Jesus's yoke over those fabricated by humans. One of the expectations is laid out right away, Jesus says "Take my yoke upon you, and learn from me." Learning is a hugely important part of discipleship. We are never done learning about God, our faith, and how we can better be a follower of Jesus. And how do we learn best from Jesus? In case you weren't sure already, the point is driven again in new words, we are to learn from Jesus who is gentle and humble in heart. So again, we shouldn't be pretentious and overly confident in our own understandings, but be open-minded to continue learning through our entire journey with Christ.

This is one of my main goals as a Pastor, to find a balance between using the knowledge and understanding that I have come to in my walk with Jesus, and being open to the ways that Jesus is at work within our congregation and beyond. I will never claim to know it all or have all the answers. I am on my journey of learning about God and God's Will for our world alongside all of you. This time in our country and world is an especially poignant moment to listen for where God is speaking in the world outside of ourselves and those who are just like us as we experience this global pandemic, as we witness a burgeoning new wave of the Civil Rights Movement, and as we are within this culmination moment over LGBTQIA+ inclusion within our denomination. I will use my voice as the Spirit leads, but I will also step aside when it isn't my voice that needs to be heard. It is these attitudes that I hope to cultivate with my ministry. Attitudes of humility, of acceptance of those that are in different places in their faith, of openness to

new or unexpected ideas, of hunger to learn new things about our faith, our God, and our world.

We are reminded by Jesus that we are all burdened and need salvation, and given the invitation to join him in his rest if we work to remove the stumbling blocks we create for ourselves between us and God, and work to remain open to learning something new from Jesus, especially from unexpected sources. We thank you, God, for always leaving that invitation open to us. Amen.