

Homily for the 14th Sunday in Ordinary Time

July 4-5, 2020

Readings: Zechariah 9: 9-10; Romans 8: 9, 11-13; Matthew 11: 25-30

Preacher: Cathy Kamp

When I started preparing this reflection, I was feeling quite “burdened”—the word Matthew uses in this week’s Gospel as he quotes Jesus: “Come to me all you who labor and are burdened and I will give you rest.” During our current state of pandemic, is there anyone who does not feel burdened? Aren’t we all living in fear about something—our health, our jobs and livelihood, our families, our emotional well-being? Don’t we need rest from it all? Where do we turn?

For those of us in parish ministry, the revolving door of changing New York State guidelines related to re-opening our churches during COVID-19 presents its own challenges that are overwhelming at times. At St. Joseph’s and Holy Spirit, we are dealing with the pandemic in a year that is meant to bring us closer together in a sister parish collaboration and in many ways this time has presented opportunities as well as challenges.

When I finally sat down to write this, after an especially daunting week, I consulted one of my favorite Gospel commentaries and came across the NRSV translation of the second paragraph of this Sunday’s Gospel, Matthew 11: 28-30. That translation really speaks to me in the present moment:

“Come to me, all you who are exhausted and weighted down beneath your burdens, and I will give you rest. Take my yoke upon you, and learn of me, for I am gentle and lowly in heart, and you will find rest in your souls; for my yoke is easy and my burden is light.”

When Jesus spoke these words, the Jewish people were trying their human best to be in right relationship with God. They were collapsing under the burden of a religion that, at the time, was focused on rules and regulations. Through the lens of history, their rules may seem silly and superfluous to us now.

Right now, we are a society of necessary—and burdensome—public health rules and regulations. Even inside Church we must wear masks that can feel stifling. We cannot offer a hug or a hand to someone who needs to feel our love and concern. We can't even sit within six feet of them! We come to Mass but we are not supposed to sing; Eucharist is offered under the form of the Body of Christ only; and only the Lord knows how many times we collectively wash our hands in the course of even one liturgy. And let's not even talk about the many opinions on the best ways to sanitize wooden pews following each and every Mass. No, please, let's not go there.

Hundreds of years from now, through the lens of history, how will we, in this time and place, be remembered? How will this time be viewed?

I believe the answer depends on how we respond to the invitation of Jesus in the second half of this passage: "Take my yoke upon you, and learn of me, for I am gentle and lowly in heart, and you will find rest in your souls; for my yoke is easy and my burden is light." Can we be gentle with ourselves and others, as Jesus was? Can we follow the voice of our heart instead of the voice in our head that's trying so hard to make sense of circumstances that make no sense?

When Jesus says his yoke is easy and his burden light, he is acknowledging to us that this life on earth is not a piece of cake. It is work, hard work. But when we "learn of" Jesus and we take the outstretched hand he offers (yes, we can take his hand!) life starts to make much more sense. In Greek, "my yoke is easy" translates to "my yoke is well-fitting." Jesus does not burden us in ways that we are meant to collapse under. Rather, we are challenged in ways that help us grow in love and faith. The burdens carried with a loving heart are made light.

So, it seems that the path to finding rest in our souls lies in letting go of carrying our burdens—our worries, our frustrations, our sadness—alone. We are meant to turn to each other and to Jesus; we are meant to allow him to lift us up and lighten the load.

