

“COLD COMFORT?”

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Summer helps us unburden ourselves, take it easy, kick back, and discover deep rest for our souls. Of course, we crave that every summer and it doesn't always occur. Then we sigh, “Wow, summer's over! Where did it go? Back to the grind.”

Today Jesus tells us that if we come to him feeling weary, bearing hefty burdens, he will give us rest. If we take Jesus' yoke on ourselves and learn from him, he says, we'll find him gentle and humble, absorbing our anxieties, giving us soulful rest. In a word, today God's promises intersect with our summer moment in time.

“For my yoke is easy and my burden is light,” Jesus assured in Matthew's gospel. Then again, a yoke is still a yoke no matter what we call it. And burdens, though light, are still burdens carried on one's back. Yokes, for us city folk, have nothing to do with eggs. They are rigid harnesses holding livestock in place so they can drag a plow through the fields without veering from creating a straight and narrow furrow. So we crave comfort, and Jesus talks about yokes on beasts of burden. That is not the image I'd choose to give you rest and lessen your anxiety. I'd talk about nitrous oxide for the gerbils scampering on our mental treadmill at 3:22 am.

But Jesus does remind me of a story. I'd been a pastor for only two years when I returned to New Haven to be groomsman for a wedding at Yale Divinity School. I stopped by to visit with my former professor of preaching, Bill Muehl. He was known for his keen grasp of the gospel, his sense of humor, and his straight talk. “So how is it going as pastor of a local church?” he smiled. “Truthfully?” I replied. “I find doing well everything that's expected of me as pastor to be *overwhelming*.”

“Well, isn't that wonderful?” he said, still smiling. It felt inappropriate. But his absurd smile had me smiling too. “Mr. Muehl, is this what you call pastoral care? Celebrating what feels like an impossible position?” “Yes, exactly,” he said. “We have too many *underwhelmed* pastors serving in churches. We need more *overwhelmed* pastors.” In a flash I learned what our faith calls comfort is a mixed bag.

C. S. Lewis wrote in *Mere Christianity*, “The Christian religion is, in the long run, a thing of unspeakable comfort. But it doesn't begin in comfort; it begins in the dismay I have been describing. And it is not use at all trying to go on to the comfort without first going through that dismay. In religion, as in war and everything else, comfort is the one thing you cannot get by looking for it. If you look for truth, you may find comfort in the end; if you look for comfort you will not get comfort or truth—only soft soap and wishful thinking to begin with and, in the end, despair.”

Yes, Jesus is our calming teacher and our tender shepherd and assuring Savior. But don't forget that Jesus bids us to follow him and he is headed toward a cross. Jesus is not some teacher content to tease or tantalize us with interesting ideas.

Jesus is the kind of teacher who sought to fully embody and live his ideas. Ideas like turning the other cheek, loving and forgiving enemies, suffering for the truth. Our doing likewise is what he means by picking up his cross and following him. So it's not surprising that his comfort feels more ambivalent than some easy chair

Jesus begins today's gospel lesson lamenting that many want to criticize him rather than follow him. He relates the impossible position I charted for Mr. Muehl. He invites us to the dance. But we don't want to dance in the way Jesus invites. For some he's too this, and for others he's too that. We're dodging his message. We can quibble with details and look for loopholes all we want. But there is no changing the truth that he is the Son of God, if you believe that sort of thing. I do.

That means Jesus teaches with divine authority. Moderns don't respect authority much anymore. We just blow it off. So let me put it another way. Jesus describes reality, the way the world is put together, and the way that this world will become.

Of course, that doesn't mean we blindly and unquestioningly accept everything he says. But it does mean Jesus is a window into how things are way down deep. It does mean at the center of all things, God's loving forgiveness rules. We can rebel against that. But it's like sawing the branch we sit upon. Not our best move. Wouldn't it be better—despite his cost and ours in bringing God's truth—to allow ourselves to be comforted and consoled by it, to be calmed and heartened by it?

Jesus invites us to join the dance of the universe from the beginning of time until the consummation of world history. My advice is: take his invitation. Don't refuse because his body on earth—the church—doesn't "meet your needs." We don't even know what our needs are until we enter Jesus' reality, his universe. Believe me, living in step with where God is taking things is the dance we want to learn.

But it's not a dance we learn naturally, one we can master alone by ourselves in front of a mirror. It's not a view of reality and history we're born with. Seeing our destiny tangled with the needy and the sinners--responding with compassion and forgiveness--none of this comes naturally to us human beings. That's why I stand here week after week describing this new reality of God's reign. That's why I step down to this table with meager but mighty morsels to feed your soul with the one thing no one can ever take from you--your final belovedness before God in Christ. But as God offers us this love, he expects us to participate in it. In fact, he takes our non-participation in it as our refusing it, no matter what we profess about it.

So Jesus begins our lesson today upset by our refusal to loosen up a little, to join the party, to get in step with the dance of God's mercy and grace for all the world. But do you remember those dances and romances back in seventh grade? We called them sock hops or proms or homecoming. At first it feels a little awkward. We feel like everyone is staring as we figure out steps and then count them out. We must think intently about what we are doing, and it makes us self-conscious. But before you know it, mostly through repetition, the rhythm becomes part of us.

And you begin to smile because the music has taken over. You can let go a little. Then you let go and let God a little more. It is a dance of confidence and peace. For you're no longer thinking about dancing, what others think. You *are* dancing. Dancing makes us vulnerable. At first it feels awkward and anxious. But once we learn it, this dance is our calm assurance, our confidence in the face of all things. Amen.