

“Come to Me”

Psalm 23; Matthew 11:28-30 – Rev. Rebecca Littlejohn
Vista La Mesa Christian Church (Disciples of Christ), La Mesa, California – May 8, 2022

Holy God, bless the speaking and the hearing of these words, that we might open ourselves to your invitation to find rest for our souls. In Jesus' name, Amen.

Did you hear those words, my friends? Did you really hear them? With your heart and your soul and your achy muscles?

“Come to me, all you that are weary and are carrying heavy burdens, and I will give you rest. 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. For my yoke is easy and my burden is light.”

Last week, as our stewardship campaign kicked off, Tesa reflected on these verses, focusing on the “yoke” that Jesus is offering us. It seems counter-intuitive, in our superficially freedom-obsessed society, that a yoke could bring relief, but that’s exactly what Jesus is inviting us to accept. It’s the yoke of love, the yoke of community, the yoke of church, with which we work together to live out the gospel abundance God has promised us.

Today, I want to focus on a different word in this passage, one that has always been a bit of a challenge for me: the word “gentle.” “I am gentle and humble in heart,” Jesus says. Do you believe that? What does it mean that Jesus is gentle? What would it look like to follow a Gentle Savior?

Gentleness is not a particularly lauded virtue in our culture. It's often either associated with weakness, which is seen negatively, or patience, which we conspire to set up so high on a pedestal everyone understands we're not really expected to aspire to it. But if we pause for a moment and sit with the word "gentle," what happens? What does it feel like in your body to focus on picturing God or Jesus as gentle? For me, there is a relief that "floods my soul" as the song goes, loosening up my muscles and opening up my breath. But there's also a trepidation and almost a sadness, because becoming gentle seems so impossible. For some of you, I'm sure it's not as hard; I can attest that there are those in our midst for whom gentleness seems to come naturally. I wish I had that gift, but it seems it will be hard-won if it ever manifests.

But perhaps one reason gentleness seems so unachievable as a daily approach to life is because we don't spend enough time seeing God as gentle. So let's think about that for a moment. If God is gentle, what does that mean for you? Have you spent time agonizing over things you've done that you feel guilty about, worried that God wouldn't forgive? Does anything about that shift if you remember that God is gentle? When things have gotten hard in your life, have you felt like God must be punishing you? How might your struggle have felt different if you could have leaned into the gentleness of God? When it seems like the grind is endless and life is coming at you, full-speed, from all directions, what could become possible if you reminded yourself that you follow a Gentle Savior?

This is good news, my friends! There is bad news faux gospel out there that is still trying to convince people that God is an angry, demanding overseer in the sky, insisting that we work harder and be better and do more and never mess up. There's also a secular counterpart to that fake gospel, often called "hustle culture," that worships the false gods of productivity and grind and the myth of the "self-made man." People need to hear that all of that is a lie. People need to hear the good news that God is gentle. We need to hear the good news that God is gentle. Can you imagine fully believing that you're allowed to have feelings and get tired and make mistakes? That you're allowed to stop and rest when you're weary? And more, not just allowed to do these things, but expected to, because you're human? And that it's okay, because God who made you and loves you is gentle and humble in heart? Just imagine for a moment what it would feel like to truly and fully believe that with every cell of your body. "And oh, the joy that floods my soul!"

So here is Jesus telling us that that's how it is; why is it so hard to believe? Maybe we think we believe it, when it comes up, but can you really say you believe something, if the way your live your life tells a different story?

What do we do with the call to follow a Savior who is gentle and humble in heart? I'm quite certain the answer is different for each of us. Here's a weird thing that's emerged in my life recently that feels related: I've stopped speeding on the highway. No, really, I have. I've been a far-left-lane, fast driver for most of my adult life, in part because I'm usually running late and feel pushed to get where I'm going as

fast as I can. But recently, motivated by increased gas prices and probably, I'm realizing in retrospect, the Holy Spirit, I decided to just stop rushing and drive the speed limit on the highway. I have to use the cruise control to make it happen, of course, but honestly, that's part of why it's so relaxing. I cannot tell you what a gift it's been. When you're trying to go as fast as possible, the most common response to anyone getting in your way is irritation and stress. Now that I've slowed down, I am more aware of my obligation to let others go around and ahead, since I've made a different choice than them. It's making me a gentler driver, which, honestly, I never would have thought possible until I tried it.

The soul relief of bringing your life into better alignment with your professed convictions, even in limited ways, is quite a blessing. Have you had that experience? How do you need to evangelize yourself, so that you can better proclaim the good news that God is gentle with your life? Do you believe God is gentle? Do you believe it is possible for your soul to find rest? Is there some little change you could make that would bring that truth into fuller reality in your life?

One of the blessings of leaning into God's gentleness is that it's a self-perpetuating cycle. If we slow down, we become more aware of God's presence. When we pause to remind ourselves what our faith tells us about God, we suddenly notice that God is right there, being that way. You see this happen in the 23rd Psalm, in fact. The writer starts out talking about God: God is the good shepherd, who provides and protects. But suddenly, we're not talking about God anymore; we're

talking to God. “You are with me.” “You prepare a table before me.” This abrupt shift reflects an irresistible intimacy that emerges when we slow down long enough to remember the gentleness of God.

One way of describing church is that we’re here to make life gentler for one another. Life is rough, on so many levels and for so many different reasons. And there are those who would say we should just accept that and buck up. But that’s not what Jesus says. Jesus says, come rest, lay down that heavy weight, sit for a spell, take a breath. What if Jesus is actually a grandma? Grandma Jesus knows you’ve been working too hard to hold it together. Grandma Jesus knows you messed up, and given that Abuelita knows how you got the way you are, she knows why. Grandma Jesus loves you anyway; Grandma Jesus loves you because of all your weird foibles and blind spots. Grandma Jesus has saved a spot for you on the couch, that couch that’s just the right amount of old and worn to be especially comfortable. There’s a pillow for whatever part of your weary body needs propping, and a blanket in case there’s a draft.

What if church could be Grandma Jesus’ living room, so that we could live the rest of our lives, safe in the knowledge that we can always come back here and find rest for our souls whenever we need to? We can be part of making that real. All of this talk of rest and gentleness may not seem like it has anything to do with our financial lives. Thinking about money tends to push us in the opposite direction, toward realities that seem anything but gentle.

But the thing we're doing today, when we bring our commitments of financial support before God for blessing, is all about coming together to maintain a place of gentleness for one another. And that "one another" doesn't just refer to the people in this room or in our community; it's all God's grandchildren, for everyone is welcome on that comfy couch. We take on the yoke that is easy, together, and we do it for the sake of maintaining a place of gentle welcome and love for all those who are weary. If the yoke you're sensing seems onerous or punishing, it's not the yoke Jesus is offering. I invite you to pause and lay that down, and look again. Nobody is asking anything of us that we cannot do. The beautiful thing about Jesus' yoke is that it allows us to share the burden, even as we share the blessing. That is what it means to follow a Gentle Savior. I pray that we might all receive this blessing today. Hallelujah and Amen!