

# Sermon

All Saints' Episcopal Church

The Rev. Stefanie Taylor

Gospel Reading: Matthew 11:16-19, 25-30

9 July, 2017



Jesus said to the crowd, "To what will I compare this generation? It is like children sitting in the marketplaces and calling to one another, 'We played the flute for you, and you did not dance; we wailed, and you did not mourn.' For John came neither eating nor drinking, and they say, 'He has a demon'; 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." Boy can I relate to today's gospel. In it I hear that people can look at facts and twist them into whatever they want it to be. I hear that Jesus is saying that wisdom is all around but nobody can grasp it. In it I hear a troubled time politically and a people desperate to make things better but completely unable to get it together enough to see the possibility of love that surrounds them.

Being a person with some life experience but still not much life experience, I find I am scared often and confused often by what I am seeing in the world today. I don't quite know what it means to be "American" anymore and people I used to think were like minded are clearly not like minded and the fact that we now know that makes it very difficult for us to truly see each other anymore. I must confess that I am weary of the division. I'm weary of the fear. I'm weary in a culture with very few common roots that we can all agree on. I wonder if it's always been like this and I just never saw it or if something has changed and therefore we can just "change it back." I honestly don't know where the path is anymore and the hatred in the air is making it very difficult for me to intuit that path. I'm a little bit lost in our current political climate because it affects so much of my life.

I'm currently taking a class at Columbia Seminary on human development and behavior. One of the many theories we're studying is called the life course perspective and this perspective highlights the trajectory of an individual's life. Every transition in a person's life is rooted in a trajectory that gives form to the life course. For example, having a baby is a transition but it is rooted in a family trajectory that will likely involve many future transitions. I find it interesting that psychologists, historians, social workers, and scientists are studying the trajectory of a person's life in order to both diagnose and prescribe.

It's interesting because we in the religious community have been doing that for centuries. Except we don't call it trajectory, we call it "path." The books of Proverbs and Psalms often talk about being on the "right" path and Jesus says that he is the one Isaiah was talking about when he said, "I am the voice crying out in the wilderness, make straight the path of the Lord." So, we know from scripture that there is a sort of life trajectory that God wants us to intuit and once found, wants us to try to stay on that trajectory. Where I think we in the religious community might sometimes fail is that we often speak of this path as an individual endeavor. "What is your path?" "How can I help so and so on their path?"

But the social scientists just might have something on us religious folk because they seem to understand that individual trajectories are not and in fact cannot exist outside the community. They look at how the pattern of individuals coincides with the pattern of a generation which coincides with the pattern of social change which then affects the individual's choices. It's a very circular idea where one can see that individual decisions both affect others and are affected by others. For there to be just one unique path for each of us is a virtual impossibility. We are and always have been a communal people and our focus on individuality has been a pretty big disconnect for

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all of us. Cynthia Bourgeault once said that the phrase “I think, therefore I am,” doomed the whole western world. I think the the true phrase should be “I connect, therefore I am.” Because the truth is that nobody exists in a bubble and nobody really wants to anyway. By studying trajectory or to use our own language, “path”, one can really see how the individual affects the community and vice versa.

So this divisive, often hateful climate we find ourselves living in right now is not happening to me, I’m very much a part of it. Famous scientist and priest, Teilhard de Chardin says that “in deep time, the ground has been rising to meet our feet, and there is no reason to lose either our way or our nerve.” In other words, the world is the way it is today because that is the trajectory of the world and it has been unfolding for a lot longer than just this past November. Today is part of deep time or “God’s time” and has a trajectory that is part of a bigger whole. The question for us is not “how do we fix this?” but rather, “how can I see with my heart and intuit the bigger path?” How can I find wisdom and therefore my way in these confusing times

And Jesus gives us some insight about how to do that. He talks about the confusing times in today’s gospel and how hard it is to see wisdom. And his answer is “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.” Notice he does not say that we will find rest from our job or our busy schedules, but rather, we’ll find rest for our souls. And indeed, when I really settle into what I’m feeling during these times, it is my soul that needs the rest. It needs rest from being lost and searching. It needs rest from navigating between the two extremes often presented to me and it needs rest from my inability to connect with others because I can’t get past the differences that exist.

It reminds me of being a teenager and having so little insight into what was happening to me in terms of individuation and maturation and the sudden ability to see paradox. That was a confusing time and I hated lots of people. Sometimes I hated my teachers, sometimes my parents, and most of the time myself. I couldn’t see the trajectory of my life and I was scared that one uninformed decision could throw me off this unseen path forever.

Luckily, when I was a teenager, I still had my grandpa Bernie. And as I reflect on where I’m at right now: more knowledgeable and less scared but still wondering how in the world I can find the path when there is so little that I still recognize in the world, I have the creeping sensation that this is exactly the kind of situation that my grandpa Bernie would not tolerate. Because grandpa just didn’t play that game, and he didn’t let me or anyone else who came into his world play it. He was the kind of man who belonged to everyone, and everyone became a part of his family.

That is my grandpa Bernie—the kind of man with the capacity to shrink the world into the space between him and you over a breakfast table at Perkins, so that there was just no room for being right or certain but just enough room to feel how much he loved being with you and therefore made you feel like he could actually see you. My grandfather had the power of presence. When you were with him, you could relax because you knew you were in the company of a man who was guarding your dignity. He believed you were just as important as the next person. I still remember being five years old, on the phone with grandpa and he would say, “tell me about your life Steffie.” I was five, what did I have to tell him? But he knew I had something to offer and he cared enough to hear about it. The last phone call I had with him, he said, “tell me about your life Steffie.” He was dying and he knew it and he still asked about my life.

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When I hear Jesus say in today's gospel, "come to me, I am gentle and humble in heart," I see my grandfather and I know what Jesus means. He means we don't have to have the answers to find the path. He means that surrender is sometimes exactly what is necessary. There is wisdom in surrender. Abraham Lincoln once said, "I have been driven many times upon my knees by the overwhelming conviction that I had no where else to go. My own wisdom and that of all about me seemed insufficient for that day."

So when Jesus says, come to me, when there isn't anywhere else to go, he means wisdom will be gained in the surrender and we can, at last, find rest where there is love and gentleness and humility. Yes, there are lots of things that we cannot control that will affect how we walk the path but the path is before us and the ground has been rising to meet our feet, and there is no reason to lose either our way or our nerve."

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