

**“Rest for the Weary”
Matthew 11:16—19, 25—30**

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When a lectionary text pops up near a religious holiday, we can be pretty certain that it will have some connection to the holiday being celebrated. However, when we are dealing with secular holidays, it's kind of hit or miss. This past week we celebrated the 4th of July holiday, the celebration of the birth of our nation; and this morning we have a Gospel reading in which Jesus scorns the state of the current generation. So, is it possible for us to see a connection between the words of Jesus and the celebration of our nation? I think so.

Jesus declares that the people, the nations, the whole generation, have come up short. Jesus certainly isn't proclaiming the merits of a faithful nation, but is bemoaning the state of a generation of quasi-believers who have lost touch with their faith foundations. They have lost touch with what God tried to teach them through Moses, and they have so twisted the faith that it barely resembles God's intent for the world. Gosh – that kind of sounds familiar, doesn't it? While we might like to believe that we are very different today from those crowds taught by Jesus, perhaps we shouldn't try to distance ourselves so much from the state of religion that Jesus describes. Too much rings true, even for believers today.

Our Gospel passage begins in the playground - with the children. They are playing songs which no one seems to understand. When they play a glad song, no one is glad, no one dances; when they play a dirge, no one is sad, no one is moved to tears. The simple songs of children were no more understood than John the Baptist, who was called wild and crazy; no more understood than Jesus, who was called a glutton and a drunkard.

While we might like to believe that Jesus is only addressing the religious elite, he is actually addressing society as a whole, the entire generation, a people who have somehow failed to recognize a song that is absolutely clear; a people who have failed to recognize a messenger from God who isn't hiding who he is or why he has come.

Abraham Lincoln, now celebrated as one of our greatest, or perhaps the greatest president, took office during one of the most turbulent times in our history. Despite the respect he enjoys today, he was reviled from all quarters, criticized mercilessly for what he was and for what he wasn't.

During the four months between his election to the presidency and his inauguration he was reviled by southerners who twisted what he said, ignored his peace offerings, and left the Union before he even took office so they might learn what he really stood for. In many places throughout the south he was not even on the 1860 ballot. Everywhere in Dixie he was burned in effigy, lampooned in newspapers, and harpooned with insults and injury.

Political cartoonists had a field day with his stature, elongating him to a figure stretched across an ungainly frame, something one might meet in a nightmare dream. Even when not directly satirized, Lincoln's appearance, accent, and vocal tone were mocked in sometimes hateful and hurtful ways.

Lincoln suffered from crippling depression and those who have studied history have concluded that Lincoln did not overcome his depression to triumph as president, but triumphed as president while living with this debilitating disease.

Lincoln, who was not threatened by having other intelligent individuals in his cabinet, at first did not impress the very people he invited to form his government. William H. Seward, for instance, agreed to become Secretary of State because he imagined Lincoln was so weak that he himself would end up running the government. It was only later that he came to realize the intelligence, strength, and character of the president and became one of his most ardent admirers.

It seems that in order to admire Lincoln, you had to make an effort to know him. Many in his day didn't try. The same might be said to be true for Jesus. In his day it is clear that many didn't listen. Many didn't get to know who Jesus was and what he was saying. Is that true today as well?

During our time of patriotic merriment, our celebration of what a great nation we are, perhaps we should pause and contemplate how we aren't all that different from the generation described by Jesus in 1st century Israel. We are so easily swayed by the popular voices, the prestigious voices, the intelligent voices, the powerful voices, that we fail to take into account the voices of the abused, the lonely, the downtrodden, and the marginalized, as well as the voices of those who speak on their behalf. We become so focused on our needs and our happiness that we miss the moments that matter. Do we dance when we ought to mourn for a world whose burden is heavy for many and for a people who need rest?

In the prayer Jesus offers during his time of teaching, we begin to realize that the focus of Jesus is not on the wise and powerful, but on the "infants" (v. 25), on the marginalized and forgotten – on those who have no power and no status. Many spend their lives striving for wisdom, intelligence, recognition; but it seems that those are the very qualities that Jesus rejects. Could it be that in God's Kingdom the things we hold as being important aren't really all that necessary? This is a hard lesson for a Presbyterian pastor, as intelligence and knowledge are hallmarks of the Reformed faith. Not only that, but it seems that the ways of God are purposely concealed from those who are filled with the arrogance of self-importance. Instead, it is the infants of this world, the innocent and trusting, who best understand the ways of God.

Just as this is a hard lesson for a Presbyterian pastor to accept, it may also be a hard lesson for a Presbyterian congregation, full of wise and educated folks, to acknowledge; but, it needn't be so. Remember what Jesus says in verse 27: *"... no one knows the Father except the Son and anyone to whom the Son chooses to reveal him."*

To whom might Jesus choose to reveal the ways of God? To those who are obedient followers of the Son. Wisdom and intelligence do not negate obedience. What Jesus condemns is the arrogance and control that the wise and intelligent wield over those with little or no power.

Reformed theologian Karl Barth insisted that Christian justice always requires favoring the "threatened innocent, the oppressed poor, widows, orphans and aliens.... God always stands unconditionally and passionately on this side and on this side alone: against the lofty and on behalf of the lowly; against those who already enjoy right and privilege and on behalf of those who are denied and deprived of it." The example of Christ's radical words and actions reveal to us that the saving word of the gospel is best understood when it is situated in the heart of the experience of the powerless and the disenfranchised. The PC(USA) has an initiative called 1001 Worshiping Communities. This project is encouraging Presbyterians to revise the old ways of doing worship and building community, and seek to live their faith at the margins, reaching out to the lost and the searching, without the burdens of physical property or established power.

Jesus is inviting us to relinquish our arrogance, our struggles for power, our striving for success as it is defined by our society. He then offers the frequently quoted words of comfort to those who are weary and carrying heavy burdens. How do his words speak to the hurting of the world? If Jesus is in fact proclaiming that his blessing is known, not by the mighty and the powerful, but by the infants and the lowly, then where do we stand? What burdens do we carry that we might turn over to Jesus? And how do we identify with the plight of those who live on the fringes of our society and the fringes of our lives, and how might we lighten their burden?

As we process these words of Jesus in today's lesson, we must recognize that Jesus is present more in times of need than in times of plenty, more in times of desperation than in times of certainty.

Rest is not offered to the strongest and the most powerful. Rest is offered to those who have been made weary by a society that fails to recognize the burden of the marginalized. The yoke is made easy by relying on divine powers, which come to the assistance of those who don't fit into society's mold of acceptability.

In short, any who believe that they are responsible for their own salvation, through power or control, through intellectual aptitude or charisma, have no need for the comforting arms of Jesus. They probably wouldn't accept it anyway. To those who recognize their inability to go it on their own; those who recognize their need for a Savior, however, Jesus comes with comfort abundant, supporting life's burdens and offering rest for the weary soul. AMEN