

24 February 2019

Well-Being
Matthew 11:28-30

We read from the Gospel of Matthew, chapter 11, verses 28-30. Jesus says:

²⁸‘Come to me, all you that are weary and are carrying heavy burdens, and I will give you rest. ²⁹Take my yoke upon you, and learn from me; for I am gentle and humble in heart, and you will find rest for your souls. ³⁰For my yoke is easy, and my burden is light.’

We finish up our sermon series this week, and you could be forgiven for whispering “thank God.” It’s been a difficult series in many ways. I’ve been challenging a lot of what we might call “popular religion” – things like “family values” and enlightened morality and patriotism – and saying that as admirable as these things might be, they aren’t actually Christianity. Along the way, we’ve read some challenging passages of scripture, from Jesus telling his disciples to leave their families, to the prophet Amos calling down violent judgment on Israel’s national cathedral to Paul describing our inescapable sinfulness. Yes, sermons have been a bit heavy this month, so it’s nice to get to something a little more comforting at last. Jesus offers rest to the weary and the broken-hearted and calls us all to come to him so that he can provide rest for their souls. Well, it’s about time. After all that “take up your cross daily and follow me” and “easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle” business that we’ve been reading, this is welcome. It had almost begun to sound as if Jesus *wanted* us to be poor and miserable, but here at last we are reassured that he wants to take away our burdens. He finally seems to care about our health and happiness. This is true. Let me say that clearly. Jesus wants us to be happy – in fact, more than happy. He wants us to be whole, complete, fulfilled, fruitful, and joyous. *But* – sorry, but you knew there was a “but” coming, didn’t you? – but’s it’s not quite that simple and straightforward.

You see, we have sometimes behaved as if we thought that the whole purpose of the church was our happiness, our fulfillment. We have acted as if it is the church’s purpose to meet our spiritual needs, a service for which we are willing to pay regular dues. That’s not exactly how it works, but we keep slipping into that frame of mind – not just church members but also church leaders. We pastors and church leaders frequently slip into the persona of “activity directors,” like Julie on the *Love Boat*. (How many here remember *Love Boat*?) Fine, so let me illustrate from that era. In the 1970s, a new fad began in churches. Those who had resources available all began building “Family Life Centers.” These were basically health clubs for members, with recreational facilities, gyms, weight and cardio rooms, game rooms, saunas and hot tubs. They offered aerobics classes – 1970s, remember – and children’s programs. A church I went to in Oklahoma had all that plus a four-lane bowling alley. Now there is nothing wrong with any of that. A lot of churches have playgrounds; these were just a really nice ones, with stuff for grown-ups as well. And my Oklahoma church did good things with their Family Life Center. Every summer, for instance, they sponsored a community-wide basketball camp for a week for disadvantaged children. But only a week. After that, the regular users got a bit frosted about the disruption. At heart, the FLC had become a members-only perk. If I were still in that church, would I use the Family Life Center? Absolutely. Do I think that a private health club for church members is what Jesus meant when he said “I will give you rest”? Not really, no.

The private gym thing has faded a bit. I’ve seen some at wealthy megachurches, but not many. No, today the focus has shifted to a different sort of well-being that is much less expensive to maintain. Now churches offer yoga, tai chi, meditation classes, and the one that’s

really hot at the moment, “mindfulness” training. (Some churches have more yoga classes than prayer groups or Bible studies, by which I mean, “They have a yoga class.”) Again, all these are good. If someone came to me and said, “I’m a yoga instructor. Would you be interested in hosting a Thursday night yoga class at your church?” would I say yes? In a heartbeat. But is that the sort of thing Jesus meant by “rest for your souls”? I don’t think so, no.

My problem with these self-care opportunities in church has to do with the question of why? For whose sake are we doing these things? Is it for God? Is it to serve others? Or is it for our own well-being? I think we all know the answer. Back in the 70s, when my old church put together the Family Life Center plan, I have no doubt at all that it was presented to the church as a tool for ministry and evangelism, but I’m equally sure that the reason people supported it was, “Cool! Our own health club! I can’t wait to use the whirlpool!” But is that wrong? Maybe. The danger is that we might begin to treat the Church of Jesus Christ as one element of our healthy life-style. We go to the gym three times a week for our physical health; we see a counselor twice a month for our emotional support; and we go to church on Sundays for our spiritual well-being. There are two problems with that. First, Jesus doesn’t have any interest in being one part of your plan for self-care. He doesn’t want to be part of your nutritious breakfast; he wants to be the whole thing. We like to compartmentalize our lives, but Jesus doesn’t stay tamely in his assigned compartment. Second, Jesus has even less interest in being a tool that we use for our own purposes. Christ either directs our purposes or moves on. He’s not a service-provider. He’s king.

That’s the “Almost Christianity” I want to talk about today, the insidious tendency to use Christ or the church or spirituality as a tool for our own benefit or well-being. Let me go back to the hot item I mentioned earlier, “mindfulness.” At heart, this is meditation for people who don’t have the luxury of going to a retreat center all day and doing nothing. It’s meditation for people who have jobs. It involves techniques for remaining in the moment, for maintaining awareness of yourself and your surroundings at all times, for focusing intently on even the most mundane of tasks, and in this way of growing aware of the divine in the midst of the ordinary. Now, as I said, this is very big right now. All the best people are doing it. But it’s actually thousands of years old. Hindus taught it a millennium before Christ. It was taken up and refined by the Buddhists, who made it an essential part of their practice. It was taught by Christian mystics, like the 14th century Meister Eckhart, and it was given beautiful expression in the 17th century by the Christian monastic Brother Lawrence in *The Practice of the Presence of God*. To Christians like Eckhart and Brother Lawrence, mindfulness is a tool for looking beyond yourself and your petty day-to-day business and finding God in the routine. And how is it used today? Well, some schools are adopting regular mindfulness training as a way of helping kids to focus on class. Business seminars are teaching it as a time-management tool for increasing productivity, and when I was researching this sermon I swear to God that I found an article on mindfulness for salesmen, how to use this spiritual practice to get customers to buy more. I read it twice, just to make sure it wasn’t a spoof. No, they were serious. I wondered what other spiritual practices are being co-opted for personal fun and profit. “Fasting and Your Portfolio.” But I’m afraid to look.

This is the sort of thing that happens when people, or even the church, make our well-being (as we define our well-being) the purpose, and adopt Christ as a method for achieving our goals. This is not what Christ meant. Let’s look back at our scripture. Notice that before promising to give us rest, Jesus says, “Take my yoke upon you.” That’s a curious paradox. We don’t think of yokes as having to do with rest, do we? A yoke represents submission and hard labor. What are we supposed to make of that? Well, apparently for Jesus, “rest” does not involve

the concept of “comfort” or “self-indulgence.” Instead, it is something that only comes on the other side of some difficult sacrifice.

So let me try to express one of the core teachings of Altogether Christianity, as opposed to Almost Christianity: a paradox that lies at the heart of our faith. We start out by giving ourselves away to God and to others, and in so doing we discover ourselves. We surrender everything in love for others and discover that we have gained much more. We deny ourselves and by doing so meet our true selves for perhaps the first time. This is the heart of Christian morality. We were designed to love and be loved, and until we give ourselves wholly to that purpose we cannot become the person we were intended to be. The more avidly we seek our own well-being, the more we become a stranger to ourselves and to God. But when we give up seeking our own well-being, then we are finally made well. Only when we put our own happiness behind that of others are we able to experience what is far deeper: joy.

So how do you do that? How would I know? I’m *way* better at explaining that this is what Jesus teaches than I am at actually doing it. All I will venture to say is that when we as individual Christians or we as the Church of Jesus Christ make a plan, one of the questions we should ask first is: who is this for? Is it for our own sake or for others? Because the Christian or the congregation whose primary concern is his or her own well-being has already wandered off the path that Jesus walked. But if our idea or plan is at heart a way to show love to others, then we will find rest for our souls. Jesus promised.

Final word: In an interview a few years ago, the actress Whoopi Goldberg was asked what living person she admired. She replied, “Pope Francis. He’s going with the original program.” I like that phrase: *the original program*. In a sense, that’s what I’ve been trying to do with the sermon series we’re finishing: strip away things that have been added to Christianity over the past 2000 years – and especially in our own time and culture – to show what the original program was supposed to look like. I want to close now with a blessing and challenge from an earlier Christian who sought the original program, with a portion of the prayer of St. Francis of Assisi: *O, Divine Master, grant that I may not so much seek to be consoled, as to console; to be understood as to understand; to be loved as to love; for it is in giving that we receive; it is in pardoning that we are pardoned; and it is in dying to ourselves that we are born to eternal life. Amen.*