

Proper 9, Year A - 5th Sunday after Pentecost
July 9, 2017
Matthew 11:16-19, 25-30
The Rev. Carenda Baker

She was between jobs and needed some sort of income. Because she knew it wouldn't last forever, she took a job at an Amazon Fulfillment Center working the night shift from 5:30pm – 4am. The "Fulfillment Center" – sounds like a place that makes wishes and dreams come true, doesn't it? It has a happy ring to it, don't you think? The "fulfillment center" was an immense warehouse, crammed with just about any product on earth imaginable. Cartons upon cartons upon cartons of diapers. Fifty pound bags of dog food. Car parts – windshield wipers, fan belts, and ball bearings. Halloween costumes. Baseball bats and football helmets, golf clubs and camouflage hunting gear. Heavy cases of soda and juice drinks. Blankets, pillows, and comforters. Small hand tools and power saws. Tea kettles, silverware, and sets of dishes. Row upon row upon row of hundreds of items – and that was just one section of the warehouse. Her job was called "stowing". Stowing consisted of pushing long flatbed carts up and down the aisles of the warehouse, looking for a shelf to "stow" the items for later retrieval to fill Amazon customer orders.

A male co-worker named Mohammed befriended her within her first week on the job. He was friendly and took a genuine interest in his co-workers. She was extremely glad that Mohammed took her under his wing. He offered her the carts piled with lighter weight items whenever he could, taking the heavier carts of items himself. If there was an aisle that had a lot of open space for stowing, he pointed her in that direction. They exchanged occasional snatches of conversation when they passed each other on the solitary miles of the warehouse they walked each shift. Through brief bits of conversation, she learned that he was married and had two daughters. The family was originally from Libya and were Muslim. Mohammed was a good and hard-working man.

Supervisors were vigilant about measuring worker efficiency while employees were "on the clock". Management kept a close eye on worker productivity and accuracy, from the very first day on the job. She had ordered things from Amazon herself, but never gave a thought to how those rapid next day deliveries happened. In that windowless warehouse which felt like a barren and un-soulful place to work, performing a job that was extremely physically demanding, Mohammed's presence and caring came unexpectedly as a gift to her, like a breath of fresh air. He was for her a God-send. A bearer of love and light.

It takes openness and spiritual imagination to recognize when and how God shows up in our lives. Take for instance the crowd Jesus criticizes in today's reading from Matthew. "This generation", as Jesus calls them, were the people of his day who refused to respond to what God was doing in their midst, new things, unexpected things. Religious establishment people we would call them – spiritual authorities and learned leaders. Nothing could please them, because they weren't really interested in seeing their world differently. They respond negatively to every invitation. If the child's game is funeral, they will not join in the wailing. If the game is wedding, they will not dance to the sound of the flute. What they do best is sit on the sidelines and judge, making up reasons to justify their own inaction.

John the Baptist called them to repent, to turn around and go in a new direction. But his strong words and desert dwelling, his wild appearance and strange diet gave them their "out" - "He has a demon." Jesus invited them to feast. But his table fellowship with those they saw as undesirable gave them an "out" – he is a "glutton and drunkard."

These are not the real reasons for their criticizing from the sidelines, refusing to see what God is doing. These pronouncements are smoke screens, camouflage. The reasons they give make *them* look good, respectable, above board. The real reason they refuse God's invitations to change is that they are the privileged. The way the system is set up suits them, works to their advantage. They are protecting their status, clinging tightly to what they have. Anything that does not fit with what they already know is dismissed. Their knowledge is used to support their privilege and position. Any manipulations they engage in are orchestrated to keep things the same.

So what about "this generation", the current generation of 21st century America? Our cultural, including our religious landscape has been shifting and continues to do so rapidly. Every denominational expression of the Christian faith is in flux. Rule-keeping, learning and believing certain things about the Bible, the creeds and the faith tradition, the former expectation of believing before belonging – these things no longer are able to sustain the church. The ground moving under and around us is shifting. Phyllis Tickle, in her writing about the "emergent church", says that every 500 years or so, the church goes through a major "rummage sale", where things shift dramatically, there is a major shake-up, and re-formation happens. That's where we live in these days, making our way through the Christian Church's latest rummage sale.

Economically, the rule of the day seems to be - make a profit at any cost. A friend told me recently that he knew a young man who had just taken a job with a company. The young man was told that the company's policy was that if any employee talked about going to work for another business they would immediately be fired. This young man

did happen to be looking for other employment opportunities. Naively, he shared this with a co-worker. Subsequently he was fired. Workers who don't comply with the company line are dispensable and disposable.

Among those who govern and are responsible for overseeing work for the people's common good, there will always be enticements to satisfy personal needs for power, glory, and ego. Nearly every village, every feudal state, every kingdom and nation in the world has grappled with these temptations throughout recorded history. Political rulers are flawed human beings who govern imperfectly, and are not always able to serve the common good.

Jesus' invitation comes to us just as it did to listeners in his day - *"Come to me, all you that are weary and 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."*

Listen to the way Eugene Peterson in his paraphrase of the Bible, *The Message* says it: *"Are you tired? Worn out? Burned out on religion? Come to me. Get away with me and you'll recover your life. I'll show you how to take a real rest. Walk with me and work with me – watch how I do it. Learn the unforced rhythms of grace. I won't lay anything heavy or ill-fitting on you. Keep company with me and you'll learn to live freely and lightly."*

What a rich nugget of good news! Think about how this sounds. For those living in poverty, facing violence, exploitation, discrimination and injustice, these words of Jesus' come as a welcome, sweet relief from heavy burdens suffered at the hands of others. "Come to me, all you that are weary and carrying heavy burdens, and I will give you rest", Jesus says.

For hearers of this word who are part of the "establishment" – religiously, culturally, racially, economically, and socially; for those who are rich by the world's standards and live with the advantages that come from having access to more than our needed share of the world's resources, this does not sound like such good news. These are not comforting words. They prick us and are words of real challenge. Words of challenge wrapped in hope that we can still learn to care about what Jesus cares about, and reach the people Jesus wants us to reach, whether they look, think, and act like us or not. "Come to me, all you that are weary and carrying heavy burdens," Jesus says.

Jesus' invitation is for all who are world weary, who can no longer find zest and pleasure in life, whose backs are bent with the burdens of each day. This is an invitation to all of suffering humanity, especially those whose suffering has caused them to lose heart. "Come to me, all you who are weary and carrying heavy burdens and I will give you rest."

The question we need to ask ourselves is – "To whom or what am I yoked, and under what burdens am I struggling?" The way to find the rest that Jesus offers is to be yoked to him. This means we must undertake Jesus' disciplines and learn from him. The "rest for our souls" Jesus promises comes only through serious discipleship.

We often would prefer a God who takes away our problems rather than helps us cope with them. We would prefer a God who eliminates challenges rather than equips us to meet them. We would rather have a God who vanquishes our opponents than enables us to make peace with them. These are not things we necessarily want, but they are pretty much exactly what we need.

The path to inner transformation and to the rest Jesus promises is learning to dwell in the spirit of the beatitudes: humble, gentle, merciful, peacemaking, embracing our poverty and complete dependence on God. The rest that Jesus provides will bring the deep peace of Sabbath. This is the rest that happens when we live in deep harmony with ourselves, our neighbor, nature, and God.

Jesus' invitation is to take on his yoke, a yoke that he shares with us. It is not one we labor under alone. As we come to the Communion table today, consider what burdens you need to lay down in order to make room for Jesus' blessings, and offer those burdens up to God. God in Jesus meets us in the Eucharist. Waiting for us. Encouraging us. Forgiving us. Bearing us up. Longing for the world to know that rest of shalom – peace and wholeness. This is what makes the burden light, the yoke not just easy but joyful. With faithful love and commitment, God carries the yoke with us, always.

As we lay our burdens down and take on Jesus' yoke, may we find this yoke not a burden, but a delight. Not a chore, but a gift and a privilege. Not only the way of self-sacrifice, but the way to deep and life-giving blessing. The yoke for our own healing, and the healing of the whole world.