

Genesis 24:34-38, 42-49, 58-67

Song of Solomon 2:8-13

Romans 7:15-25a

Matthew 11:16-19, 25-30

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Can We Accept Jesus' Invitation?

St. Paul is not what I call a lukewarm saint. His many letters to the various early churches in the New Testament conjure up great passion in his readers - you either love him or hate him. Today's reading from Paul's letter to the Romans is unusual in that it may strike a chord with everyone, whether you take issue with Paul or not. Paul reveals the unvarnished truth of what it is to be a human being. We are created in God's image, and yet, how easily we fall short of who or what we are called to be. In other words to be fully human is to acknowledge both our goodness and our brokenness as crazy as that may sound. The two are not mutually exclusive.

Paul courageously and with great humility holds himself up as an example of the paradox of the human condition; even with the very best intentions, and misguided at times, we often fall prey to sin. No matter how hard we may struggle to do the right thing, we miss the mark, which is the original meaning of sin. Like the archer that pulls back the string on his bow and aims for the red bull's eye, he releases the string and his arrow shoots it high into the air but it misses the mark completely. I think this is what Jesus is saying in this rather odd but comforting reading from Matthew's gospel.

Jesus is addressing the crowd gathered around him after having commissioned his inner circle of twelve for God's mission in the world. He is calling out not just the local community but an entire generation for their failure to understand his message about the coming of God's kingdom.¹ Jesus has been teaching, healing and performing miracles throughout all of Galilee and yet they still don't get it.

Those in positions of privilege and power first rejected John the Baptist. He went about the countryside shouting out his prophetic message of fire and brimstone at the top of his lungs while living the ascetic life of a hermit dining on locust and wild honey. Yet, they dismiss John as some kind of demon. And they reject Jesus as well. Since Jesus first turned water into wine at a local wedding feast Jesus has lived a life of compassion and radical inclusivity, dining and hanging out with tax collectors, ne'er-do-wells and all those marginalized and deemed undesirable by society. And, they label him a glutton and drunkard. As the saying goes, you can't win for losing. Jesus' good news of love and justice has fallen on deaf ears of the "wise and intelligent" as they fail miserably to respond with compassion to those who are struggling and suffering in their very midst.

¹ William Goettler, *Feasting on the Word, Year A, Vol. 3*, ed. Wm. Bartlett, Barbara Brown Taylor (Louisville, KY: Westminster Knoxville Press, 2011), 212.

To make his point Jesus recites part of a children's rhyme, "We played the flute for you and you did not dance; we wailed and you did not mourn" (Matt. 11:17). In other words, Jesus says, "John and I shared the good news of God's saving grace and yet you did not rejoice. We also shared the plight of the poor and most vulnerable and yet, you felt nothing and did nothing."

I wonder is it any different today for our generation? We are faced with a pandemic that has swept the over the entire globe like a giant tsunami and in its wake it is revealing the gross disparity of adequate healthcare for the poor, the homeless and those pushed to the margins of our society. At the same time we are also witnessing a great awakening to the evils of racism and resulting injustices that people of color have suffered long before our nation's very beginning 244 years ago.

Yesterday, we marked the anniversary of the birth of the United States of America. It seems timely that during this weekend of celebrations that we pause and give some serious thought about the principles this nation was founded upon. The preamble of the Declaration of Independence states, "We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men are created equal, that they are endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable Rights, that among these are Life, Liberty and the pursuit of Happiness." This is a most lofty statement and hopefully one that inspires us to strive to live into, knowing we still have much work to do make this a reality for those who have never known true freedom.

It is time we open our minds with great humility to learn the breadth and depth of this oppression from the very ones who have been oppressed. It is time we open our hearts with great compassion to hear the stories of our brothers and sisters of color who have been denied the freedom and privileges they so rightfully deserve. In the documentary, *I Am Not Your Negro*, based on the unpublished book by the late African-American writer James Baldwin, he writes, "It is a great shock to realize that the country you are born in, your birthplace, has no place for you."

As we learn more and more how far we have missed the mark and miserably failed to protect and provide for those most vulnerable, the disenfranchised and impoverished of this nation, we, like Paul, need Jesus more than ever to save us from ourselves. Without him we are like the children playing in the market place, not knowing whether to mourn or whether to dance. Once we are able to admit the hard truth that we are utterly lost without God only then are we ready to see Jesus' invitation as the path forward to healing and reconciliation. "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" (v.28-30).

With these tender words of comfort and compassion Jesus calls all who are aware of our need for God. We know only too well what a hopeless mess we make of things when we try to go it alone. We hear it in Paul's lament, "Wretched man than I am! Who will rescue me from this body of death?" (Romans 7:24). The answer is the same for us as it was for Paul, "Thanks be to God through Jesus Christ our Lord!" (Romans 7:25a).

Speaking as the Wisdom of God himself Jesus calls us to a life where we know the joy of being fully alive, which we can only experience when we are in relationship with the one, true

living God.² He calls us to take his yoke upon us, to live as he himself lives as members of God's kingdom here on earth. And, finally Jesus promises rest for our weary souls. This is not an interior sense of contentment or passivity but a type of inner peace that only comes from returning to God and doing God's will.³ This is how we become disciples, taking on the yoke of Christ with love, compassion and humility, all the while knowing that our brokenness can only be healed by God's goodness.

A wise person once shared that the essence of life can be summed up pretty simply. We reach out and take each other's hand and we journey home together.

Amen.

² Alice McKenzie, <https://www.patheos.com/resources/additional-resources/2011/06/lay-your-burden-down-alyce-mckenzie-06-27-2011>, last accessed on July 4, 2020.

³ Id.