

Sermon for July 9, 2017 – “Come to Jesus”

14th Sunday in OT, Year A – Texts: Romans 7:13-25; Matthew 11:25-30

Westwood First Presbyterian Church – Rev. Jeff Colarossi

I think it's safe to say that lots of us here today have either had, or still have, problems in our lives. It seems that we're under constant stress from one thing or another. There's always something, something going on in our families, our finances, health issues. The world around us is changing into something we barely recognize. Even the church isn't what it once was. It seems there's always something and understandably, we often find ourselves depressed. We find it difficult to think about any problems but our own. Something's eating at us, gnawing at us from the inside. Anxiety and stress are an all too common companion in our lives. It could be any of a thousand and one things that afflict us, but the result's usually the same. We feel tired, drained or we find ourselves getting angry at others for no apparent reason. Or, far too commonly, we find it difficult to think good thoughts or do what we believe are good things. We find it hard to keep the “main thing” the “main thing” in our lives. We can find no peace – what do we do?

Lots of people do absolutely nothing. Sadly, they feel that somehow this is how things are meant to be, that this is their lot in life, and that they're powerless to change things. Others are more active. And many, way too many if you ask me, turn to the solutions that seem to be offered everywhere you look nowadays; the self-help books and TV shows. For quite some time now the self-help industry has been booming, to the tune of several billion dollars every year. Right now something like 4-5 of the top 20 books on the NY Times best-seller list offer some sort of “life advice”. I was in a book store last week and it had an entire section with nothing but self-help books, literally hundreds from which to choose! And the TV shows...Anyone watch Dr. Phil? How's that working for you? How about “Iyanla: Fix My Life”? It features Iyanla Vanzant, a woman who used to be Oprah's “relationship expert”, and who now has her own show. Oprah herself called her a “living testament to the value in life's valleys and the power of acting on faith...” She's “helping people fix their lives,” by “pulling back the curtain on what is broken in our lives.”

People flock to stuff like this in droves. Yet, despite all their efforts, they end up just as tired and unhappy as those who've done nothing...at times, even more so. Why? Because the principles that so many of the “self-help” methods that they try to follow usually require a lot of effort. It can get frustrating, leaving us at the end of ourselves. “Who will rescue us?” is a cry heard often and everywhere, but most especially in the depths of our hearts. Who will rescue us...? Who will rescue us from the aimlessness of our lives? Who will rescue us from our pain and loneliness? Who will rescue us from the negativity of the world? Who will rescue us from ourselves? Who indeed?

Some actually turn to religion, some turn to the values and principles taught to us by our parents or by our Sunday school teachers. We try to live out the Ten Commandments and the laws laid out for us in the Bible given to us by Moses, Jesus, and Paul. But like Paul, we end up finding that this doesn't work either. Again, usually because it ends up taking a lot of effort; following the rules usually does. And even so, we find that we don't do the good that we'd like to do and we find that the bad we know we shouldn't do and end up doing anyway. As Paul did, we find that there's a kind of war going on inside us. Deep down we end up saying with him, “what a wretched person I am!” We cry out “who will rescue me from this body of death?”

Brothers and sisters – I’m here to tell ya there’s a better way. There’s a better way than the quick fixes our culture offers. There’s a better way than what’s offered by a religion based on do’s and don’ts, a faith built solely on a foundation of laws and regulations. What I’m talking about may come across as maybe a little simplistic, a little silly. It may strike you as maybe even a little naïve but it’s really not even when applied to problems that are larger than own personal ones.

To get at this – I want to re-tell the story of Samantha Smith...anyone remember this? It happened in 1982? Samantha was a 10-year-old girl from Maine. The Cold war was still going on and she’d read about the arms race and thought that it made no sense. So, she did something that only a simple, naïve child would do. She wrote a letter to Yuri Andropov, the newly-elected Soviet Leader. Surprisingly, Mr. Andropov answered her letter. He invited her to Russia to see things for herself. So, Samantha went and met Mr. Andropov who introduced her to many Russian children of her own age. She got along very well with them. When she returned home, she said “If we can be friends, and get to know each other better, then what are our two countries arguing about? Nothing could be more important than stopping a nuclear war.” Cute, right? And I bet most of us had forgotten that story didn’t we? Looking back, it seems silly, but I’m thinking that there’s some profound wisdom here. It is as Jesus said, these things have been hidden from the wise and the intelligent and have revealed to children.

We have so many problems on so many levels as individuals, as a nation. The world as a whole is broken seemingly beyond repair. Who will rescue us? It’s enough to drive a person to their knees. We get to a certain point after we’ve tried everything else; we’ve consulted all the manuals, listened to all the experts. We’ve seemingly done all we can and answers still elude us. Tired, and desperate, we finally think to try God. But wouldn’t we be better off to try God first? Wouldn’t we be better off to live by God’s wisdom than our own? Or the wisdom of the world? Uh, yeah...Of course, we would. But which do we most often choose? Like the thinking about 10-year-old Samantha Smith’s attempt to end the threat of nuclear war. Most people refuse to believe that complex problems can be solved so simply. But listen to Jesus once again. He said: **“I thank you, Father, Lord of heaven and earth, because you have hidden these things from the wise and the intelligent and have revealed them to children...”** Sad to say it often seems as though the answers we need to the problems that confront us are often hidden from us, and the reason why? It’s because so many of us, often the more educated among us, can’t entirely comprehend the simplicity of the truth. For so many there has to be a catch. There’s got to be, we say to ourselves, more to this. There has to be something I’m not doing. They can’t accept that things might actually be easier than they appear. So, we often wind up doing more than is necessary. We wind up exhausting ourselves, or becoming more frustrated in the process, but stop and think about this for a second. Don’t you think that Jesus wants us to understand our situations, find solutions to our problems and answers to our questions? Of course, He does! But in His infinite wisdom, He’s arranged it so that our knowledge isn’t what’s important but rather our **heart** and our **will**. Jesus wants us all to have peace and fulfilment. Indeed, He Himself said that He came that we might have life and have it abundantly. And it’s not rocket science. There’s really nothing all that complicated here. Instead, there’s only a call; a call to yield ourselves to God if we will only listen. It is a call to enter into a deeper relationship with God, a call to pick up our crosses and follow Christ. Theologian Alfred Plummer said it best, “The heart, not the head, is the home of the gospel.”

The smallest child is given the capacity of knowing Christ, of knowing what’s important and what’s not. But we adults, we need something more, right? We need a model, a plan, a formula, something concrete, something we can actually follow! Jesus provides one.

He says: **“Come to me, all you who are weary and burdened, and I will give you rest. “Take my yoke upon you and learn from me...“For I am gentle and humble in spirit, and you will find rest for your souls. “For my yoke is easy and my burden light.”** I love that – don’t you? **“Come, find rest for your souls.” “My yoke is easy and my burden light.”**

Back in Jesus’ day, different rabbi’s interpreted the Torah (Jewish laws) in different ways. They essentially boiled it down to a set of rules, things you could do and things you couldn’t do. The particular rabbi’s interpretation was referred to as his “yoke”. If you could afford it and he approved it, you follow that rabbi. You did so because you believed that rabbi’s set of interpretations were closest to what God intended and when you followed that rabbi, it was said that you were “taking up” that rabbi’s “yoke”. But it wasn’t all fun and games. Rabbi’s “yokes”, the lessons and so forth, were quite hard. Not so with Jesus. Jesus’ were easy, but not simply easy in the way most of us understand the word. The word in Greek, as it’s used here, implies “well-fitted”. In Jesus’ day, yokes were made of wood. The ox was brought to the carpenter’s shop, it was carefully measured and then the yoke was roughed out. Then the ox was brought back and it was tried on him. The yoke was then marked and carefully adjusted by shaving the wood. Each yoke was tailor made to fit each ox. So, when Jesus says that “my yoke is easy and my burden light” what He means, as one scholar writes, is this: “The life I give you is not a burden to gall you...“Your task is made to measure to fit you”.

Brothers and sisters, here’s the thing, Jesus saying that “my burden is light” – means that it’s not meant to weigh you down with demands. It’s not about a set of rules and regulations telling you what you can and cannot do, nor is it a task that you’ll hate doing something that you’ll buckle and collapse under. No, the burden of Jesus is like the one in the old story which may sound familiar. The one about a man who comes upon a little boy carrying a still smaller boy, who was lame, upon his back. “That’s a heavy burden for you to carry,” said the man. “He’s no burden,” came the answer, “he’s my brother.” In his sermon “The Preparation and Portrait of a Prophet” – Ravi Zacharias reminds us that “the One who shapes the back for the burden, also shapes the burden for the back.”

Whatever Jesus gives us, whatever He asks of us, it’s made to fit our needs and our abilities exactly. It’s made to give not only us, but our whole world, rest. We need to give up our old way of thinking about and looking at life. We need to find a new way of seeing and living, a way that concerns our hearts, a way that is suited to us. A way in line with the One who is the way, the truth and the life. Come to me, He says, all you who are weary and burdened...Come to me you who are tired of doing it all under your own steam...and I will give you rest. Take my yoke upon you. Take what I have designed and made especially for you, take it and learn from me, for I am gentle and humble in spirit. Do this, come to me, and take what I have designed for you. Learn from me, let me teach you, let me help you find rest for your souls. Who will rescue us? Who indeed. I hope by now the answer’s clear. Jesus will. In fact, He already has and invites us to share in the new life that His death and resurrection has won for us. He’s done all the heavy lifting for us. His cross weighed what?, something like 150 pounds? Think of it this way, have you ever watched a child learning to walk? How eagerly they do so. Arms out-stretched, big smiles on their faces, and the parent waiting patiently, their own arms open wide. Encouraging the child that they love so dearly to come to them, catching them as they stumble. Drying their tears when they fall. How much more so Jesus with us? So, come to Jesus as a child. Take up His burden – and you will find rest.

Thanks be to God.
Amen and amen.



TAKE MY YOKE UPON YOU, AND LEARN FROM ME...MATTHEW

"TAKE MY YOKE UPON YOU, AND
LEARN FROM ME" - Matthew 11:29