

Proper 9 A
Matthew 11:16-19, 25-30
July 9, 2023

“An Obsequious Church”
Rev. Dr. Brandon S. Perrine

‘But to what will I compare this generation? It is like children sitting in the market-places and calling to one another, “We played the flute for you, and you did not dance; we wailed, and you did not mourn.” For John came neither eating nor drinking, and they say, “He has a demon”; the Son of Man came eating and drinking, and they say, “Look, a glutton and a drunkard, a friend of tax-collectors and sinners!” Yet wisdom is vindicated by her deeds.’

At that time Jesus said, ‘I thank you, God, Lord of heaven and earth, because you have hidden these things from the wise and the intelligent and have revealed them to infants; yes, God, for such was your gracious will. All things have been handed over to me by my God; and no one knows the Son except God, and no one knows God except the Son and anyone to whom the Son chooses to reveal.

‘Come to me, all you that are weary and are 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.’

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I love those last lines, don't you? “Come to me, all you that are weary and are 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.” It's nice coming to church and hearing that something about living our faith can be easy for a change!

Maybe that's why these are some of the most well-known words attributed to Jesus. I'm not sure he was being entirely honest, though. This is the same guy who said that we need to love God with all our hearts, and with all our souls, and with all our strength, and with all our mind. This is the same guy who said that we should love our neighbors as we love ourselves. This is the same guy who said that we should love our enemies and pray for those who persecute us. This is the same guy that said it's impossible to love both God and money. This is the same guy who said that his followers would be hated and persecuted. So, I'm not sure he was being entirely honest when he promised an easy yoke and a light burden.

In fact, just a couple of verses earlier, Jesus pointed out that his cousin, John the Baptist, had been disparaged and labeled demon-possessed for abstaining from common food and drink. Jesus, on the other hand, was condemned as a glutton and a drunkard, a friend of tax-collectors and sinners. They were destined to be damned if they did and damned if they didn't. What about this could Jesus have thought was easy? I've been wondering about that this week.

From a very young age, we're taught to seek the approval of others – sometimes at all costs. We try to please our parents and grandparents and partners, our teachers and coaches, our friends and our colleagues. We long for validation in the form of a high-five from teammates; an 'A' on a paper; a pat on the back, a positive review, a raise, or a promotion at work; likes on Facebook or Instagram; or a "well done son" from parents or role models. Let's face it, affirmation feels good, I'll be the first to admit that.

The downside, according to psychologists, is that "When we urgently aim to please other people, we're seeking approval of self from outside sources. And whenever we reach for something in the outside world to give us what we should be giving ourselves, we set ourselves up for disappointment . . . [we] lose awareness of what's important to [us]."¹ I

¹ Ilene Strauss Cohen, Ph.D. "How to Let Go of the Need for Approval," Psychologytoday.com, July 13, 2018: <https://www.psychologytoday.com/us/blog/your-emotional-meter/201807/how-let-go-the-need-approval>.

guess Jesus and John just got it and their sense of achievement, validation, and affirmation came from deep within.

I'm reminded that in his first letter to the church at Corinth, the apostle Paul states: "I have become all things to all people."² John and Jesus, they made no such claims. Perhaps the easy yoke and light burden that Jesus offers is freedom from the need for approval – an internal sense of validation because we really believe in what we're doing. If that's the case, I'm inclined to think that there may be some churches and some church people that need to pick up Jesus' easy yoke and light burden and lay down the heavy and impossible task of garnering wholesale approval. After all, during his lifetime the Jesus movement was never mainstream. It was unconventional, countercultural, and subversive. It wasn't about mass-marketing or convincing powerful influencers. Jesus and his followers did what they did because they believed in what they were doing. Period.

Today, the invitation to us is the same. Jesus says, "*Come to me, all you that are weary and are carrying heavy burdens . . . For my yoke is easy, and my burden is light.*" Might this news be freeing for those growing up in 21st century America – those who place such high value on the opinions of their online peers and classmates? Might this news be freeing for those of us living in a society in which the court of public opinion is courted with as much diligence as the court of law? Might this news be freeing for those churches afraid to stand up and speak out about what they believe in their hearts to be right even if it's not popular?

The easy yoke and light burden Jesus is talking about won't necessarily ever be popular, or mainstream, or garner thousands of likes, or turn a humble church into a mega church. What it will do, however, is assure us that our value doesn't come from what others think of us. What it will do is remind us that it's better to be true to ourselves and our values than to sacrifice both on an altar of approval. What it will do is free us from the

² I Corinthians 19:22, NRSV

judgements of others to accept, affirm, and validate ourselves when we follow a path we believe in.

I personally don't believe that we're called to be an obsequious church filled with a bunch of sycophants out to win a popularity contest. From its earliest days, the Jesus movement was unconventional, countercultural, and subversive. We're called to lead, against the flow if necessary, upstream if necessary. And that's okay because a people doing what they're doing because it's the right thing to do and they know it, can be a force for positive change in our world. It's never the followers who make a real impact. It's the ones who dance to the beat of their own drum, who end up creating a new step and inviting others to dance alongside them.

May we be that kind of people, that kind of church. May we take up Jesus' light yoke and easy burden. And may we dance. Amen.