

“Rest For Our Souls”

Matthew 11:16-19, 25-30

“But to what will I compare this generation?
It is like children sitting in the marketplaces
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, Father,
Lord of heaven and earth,
because you have hidden these things
from the wise and the intelligent
and have revealed them to infants;
yes, Father, for such was your gracious will.

All things have been handed over to me by my Father;
and no one knows the Son except the Father,
and no one knows the Father except the Son
and anyone to whom the Son chooses to reveal him.

“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.”

Rest For Our Souls

Matthew 11:16-19, 25-30

July 9, 2023

Rev. Michael P. Catanzaro

I.

This morning, I have a rather strange idea for you which arose from a rather strange story; the telling of which is how I would like to begin today's sermon. Last week I stopped into the Wood Chop Shop, located just outside of Canton on the Cowan Road off Route 11 on the way to Potsdam. If you own a chainsaw, snowblower, trimmer or lawnmower you probably know the place; great people, fair prices, quick service.

I was there to purchase replacement line for my Stihl weed-whacker ahead of attacking the wild growth that has run amok outside the manse over the past few years owing to not living there all that much during the spring and summer months; and, when I am, I'm doing the church thing. Rather than weed the various beds, I just wack them down once or twice a year; which, during this three week span of renting the cottage at the lake, I had hoped to accomplish.

II.

I was standing there in line waiting to make my purchase when I noticed the guy ahead of me had a Stihl weed-whacker, but on the business end of it he had what looked like a round disc with a chainsaw edge. Beyond wracking down the beds, I was also hoping to get after the invasive bush grown wild on the back property line; the Giant Japanese Knotweed, a real nasty piece of work. In preparation for the task I had asked for, and received, a machete for Father's Day (a tool I had always wanted, but could not really justify...until now). Standing there in line looking at that beast of a power tool, which looked like it would make quicker and much easier work of the Knotweed, I asked the guy behind the counter if I could purchase such an attachment for my own weed-whacker.

III.

He said, “Do you have a straight shaft, or a curved shaft?” “Curved,” I answer. “Sorry, that won’t work,” he answered, “you need a straight shaft.” To which I said, “That’s unfortunate.” “\$200 will get you one,” he offered. “No thanks,” I said, “I just got a machete for Father’s Day; that will have to suffice.” And off I went.

Two days later, Friday morning, I received a text from Bill Gollinger. He asked if I knew anyone looking for a weed-whacker, as he had just got a new electric trimmer and didn’t need the gas-powered any longer. It is a Stihl brand, he added. To which I said to myself, “Well *that* is odd?!?” “Straight shaft or curved?” I replied. “Straight,” he answered. To which I typed, “LOL. I was JUST looking at one the other day. I’ll take it. How much do you want for it?” “For you, \$0,” he graciously offered. Which is how I manifested a straight shaft Stihl weed-whacker in my life.

IV.

While I admit to being intrigued by the notion of mystically manifesting things, events, and people in one’s life, and can recite a good number of examples of such a thing happening to me, I try to not get too carried away by or invested in such things. One could certainly make the case that when we pray, when we seek divine intervention in our lives, the world, or the lives of others, we are engaging in the pursuit of mystical manifestation; as we seek healing, miracles, discernment, direction and, very often, a cessation of the woes which have beset us. Sometimes, as in the recent case of the straight shaft weed-whacker, we aren’t even aware of *trying* to manifest anything and, yet, it happens just the same.

In another example of mystical manifestation, last Sunday following the Canton and Brick Chapel worship services, I went to the hospital to visit two church folk and, instead, ending up visiting four people as I just *happened* to meet two other folks I knew from Canton; each of whom had a family member in serious medical peril.

V.

The first person, whom I met at the entrance, had a spouse with a reoccurrence of cancer. After hearing this news I asked if they would like me to stop in for a visit. Though Catholic and very active at St. Mary’s, my offer was eagerly accepted. Just as there are no atheists in foxholes, there is no

difference of denomination. Up in the room, we had a tender, heart-felt, and greatly appreciated conversation.

After, while making my way up the stairwell in order to visit the two people I had actually driven over to see, I literally almost ran into another person I know from town who is not a church person. I have been at the minister “thing” long enough to know you should *always* extend yourself in such a situation, church folk or not; but you should also be prepared for the consequences of doing so. In this instance, the situation was quite dire as the person’s adult child was in ICU, in critical condition, and fighting for their life. I sat, talked and prayed with them. I am quite sure each family understood that, somehow, they had mystically manifested a minister; and they were not incorrect.

VI.

While I would not discourage anyone from attempting to mystically manifest those things in life we seek, and always encourage folks to pray with earnestness for those things in life we need, for the purpose of today’s sermon we need not go nearly that far. Instead, we are going to set the mystical aside for a bit, and focus our attention on just the plain, old, manifesting part. Which is something all of us have the power to do in ways that will either greatly diminish or greatly enhance our lives depending, of course, on what we choose to spend our time and energy trying to manifest. While this is true for anyone, it is particularly true for church folk and people of faith, especially as it regards social connection, health and happiness.

VII.

Though there has always been ample scientific evidence to suggest the value of social connection, the importance of being part of a community was really brought into sharp focus by the COVID pandemic. The Center for Disease Control and Prevention, otherwise known as the CDC, states:

When people are socially connected and have stable and supportive relationships, they are more likely to make healthy choices and to have better mental and physical health outcomes. They are also better able to cope with hard times, stress, anxiety, and depression. Social isolation and loneliness have become widespread problems in the United States, posing a serious threat to our mental and physical health.

VIII.

Recently, the Surgeon General issued an advisory on the devastating effects of what has been termed, “the epidemic of loneliness and social isolation”:

The physical health consequences of poor or insufficient connection include a 29% increased risk of heart disease, a 32% increased risk of stroke, and a 50% increased risk of developing dementia for older adults. Additionally, lacking social connection increases risk of premature death by more than 60%.

With the advent cell phones, email, texting and social media, the ability to communicate and connect with others has never been so easy or inexpensive (remember when you paid by the minute to make a long-distance phone call?). Ironically, though, loneliness and social isolation has dramatically increased rather than decreased, with the very technology that was intended to connect us becoming the main instruments which have set us apart one from another.

IX.

Today’s scripture reading from Matthew 10 should be very familiar to us; especially, the final few verses which I have read at just about every funeral and memorial service I have ever officiated: “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.”

For those grieving the death of a loved one, these are certainly welcome and comforting words. Amazingly, though, I have only heard them, and understood their meaning, in such a context. In considering today’s sermon, however, I had something of an epiphany, perhaps even embarrassingly so, in realizing that while particularly poignant at the time of death, they are even more so during the time that is one’s life.

X.

Theologically, we understand the Church to be the body of Christ. While we almost always hear these words as “come to me, Jesus” it is just as accurate to hear them as “come to me, the Church.” Come to the Church, all you that are weary and are carrying heavy burdens, and we will give you rest. Take our yoke upon you, and learn from us; for we are gentle and humble in heart, and you will find rest for your souls. For our yoke is easy, and our burden is light.

The Church, the body of Christ, has always been understood as an intentional community of caring, concern, and mutual cooperation; as one body with many members. A place where people can connect, not just superficially, but at the deepest levels and in the most intimate areas of our lives; a place to share ourselves with others such that loneliness and isolation might be kept at bay, if not altogether banished.

XI.

Moreover, not only is the Church the place where we are *allowed* to explore, discover and share ourselves, the Church is the place where we are *encouraged* to do so. Here we call one another to be partners in dancing to the joys of life; playing the flute, singing songs and shouting with gladness in encouragement. Here we wail, that others might allow themselves to mourn during times of trial, tribulation and death; giving not only support and permission to fully acknowledge and experience such hard times, but also offering companionship along the way of one's journey such that we might never walk alone. What is so amazing about this, is that while mysticism may surely be involved at some points along the way (or not) it is the intension one has, and effort one makes to manifest that matters most.

XII.

When we began the sermon I told you I had something rather strange to share with you this morning. However, the strangeness comes not from the ability to manifest things, events and people in our own lives, but the resistance or reluctance that some show in choosing not to do so.

If you are weary and carrying heavy burdens and want rest for your soul, come to the Church. Though the burden may yet remain, here you will find the strength to carry it, share it, and get a get a break from it; if only for a little while, every once in a while. While this life will always require some yolk to be placed upon us, the one to be found in the Church is easy and light, for here we are gentle and humble in heart. When it is time mourn, we will wail right along side of you; and, when it comes an occasion to dance, we'll be right there calling the tune. Sometimes, as is often the case in the Church, we aren't even aware of *trying* to manifest anything and, yet, it mystically happens just the same. Amen.