

# 5th Sunday After Pentecost

July 5, 2020

Sermon by Pastor Zach Johnson

Hill Avenue Grace Lutheran Church  
Pasadena, California

**Gospel: Matthew 11:16-19, 25-30**

[Jesus spoke to the crowd saying:] <sup>16</sup> “To what will I compare this generation? It is like children sitting in the marketplaces and calling to one another, <sup>17</sup> ‘We played the flute for you, and you did not dance; we wailed, and you did not mourn.’ <sup>18</sup> For John came neither eating nor drinking, and they say, ‘He has a demon’; <sup>19</sup> 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.” <sup>25</sup> 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; <sup>26</sup> yes, Father, for such was your gracious will. <sup>27</sup> 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. <sup>28</sup> “Come to me, all you that are weary and are carrying heavy burdens, and I will give you rest. <sup>29</sup> 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. <sup>30</sup> For my yoke is easy, and my burden is light.”

SERMON by Pastor Zachary Johnson

“Come to me, all you that are weary and are carrying heavy burdens, and I will give you rest.” Is there any other verse in the gospels that bring such comfort as these words from Jesus? Right here is a pastoral statement from God’s own son that assures us we will never be alone in our sufferings; that we will always have Jesus to turn to in order to help us when things get difficult and challenging. It is a good reminder that, in Jesus, there is rest from the weariness of life.

You know, I’ve always admired those people who, when going through really challenging times, respond first and foremost with the statement: “I’m just going to give it to Jesus. I’m going to trust that Jesus will see me through.” And, often, it is the people I have met, who have gone through a lot of suffering and trials in their life, that seem to have this enormous faith and trust that Jesus will get them out the pit they’ve fallen into.

I remember, when I was visiting the city of New Orleans back in August of 2016 for the ELCA Churchwide Assembly, I met Michael. Michael was a homeless man, living on the streets, who had approached me and asked if I would consider buying him breakfast. So, he and I stepped into the local McDonalds where I bought him breakfast and we chatted. As we talked, he told me about all kinds of events that he had suffered in his life that led him to be homeless. Now, while my heart did break for his story, and while I will never know if he was being completely honest with me, I do know that this man is one I will never forget. As he told me his life



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story (I should mention that, during the conversation, he had no idea I was a pastor), he kept on talking about how his love for Jesus was the one thing that kept him going and gave him the strength to endure great suffering. He held onto the hope that Jesus would continue to help him carry his burdens and that things would get better for him.

Back in the summer of 2010, Kristin and I, along with some of my other seminary classmates, took a group of high school youth to Mexico for a ministry immersion mission trip. As a part of the trip, we visited a slum community called La Estacion. In this community, people were literally living in run down shacks. Their homes had dirt floors, no windows, and was one large room shared by entire families. They had no plumbing or electricity. Their kitchen was a rudimentary fire pit just outside their home. There was garbage and stray, diseased dogs everywhere. Yet, as the youth met some of the people who lived in this community, one of the things they were blown away with was how thankful these people were for all that God had given them. Even though they were suffering greatly, due to extreme poverty, their faith in Jesus, their trust in his love, formed them in such a way that they were grateful rather than spiteful. While our hearts broke for their situation, they showed us that love and trust for Jesus is worth more than anything else in this world.

I share these two stories with you because they are a good reminder (at least, to me) that there is but one hope and assurance in this world that will always be there to help us through our sufferings, no matter how severe or light they are. That hope and assurance, of course, is Jesus. No matter what life may throw our way, Jesus is there in the thick of it with us, making sure we have a solid foundation to stand on so we don't get swept away by the storms that come our way.

And we can trust that Jesus will be there right with us, not only because Jesus tells us to cast our burdens unto him, but also because Jesus knows and understands our suffering. One of the gifts of Christ Jesus walking this earth as the divine-human one; one of the gifts of Christ enduring the cross is that Jesus too has felt great suffering. Jesus too has felt what it is like to be alone and abandoned. After all, Jesus' final words in Matthew's and Mark's gospels are: "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?!" Jesus has felt the great suffering of death.

This all means that Jesus can relate and empathize with any suffering we are going through. It means that Jesus has the ability to walk alongside with us in our sufferings and even carry us through it when it becomes too much for us to bear. It means that Jesus will never abandon us in our dire need.

But we must also remember that Jesus, while he suffered and died on the cross, he was also resurrected. This means that Jesus, better than anyone else, knows that suffering and death comes to an end. Who better to guide us through the darkness of our sufferings than the One who knows that there is light and new life at the end of it? In other words, no matter how often we fall into the pit, Jesus will be there to lift us back out again, for Jesus knows the way out of suffering and into the joy of restoration, resurrection, and reconciliation.



If you're like me, the year 2020 has been quite difficult to endure. Many of us are suffering because of COVID-19 in some way. I have seen quite a few people have to endure the death of loved ones during the pandemic. There are many people who have lost their jobs and are trying to figure out how to make ends meet. Small business owners continue to suffer from lack of sales because of social distancing restrictions. Plus, having to spend so many weeks at home takes its mental and emotional toll on all of us. Of course, this doesn't even cover other personal sufferings that many of us are also going through. Perhaps we are struggling with our addictions; perhaps we are dealing with a strained familial relationship; perhaps we have a physical ailment that is giving us trouble; perhaps we've had to say goodbye to a beloved pet. Whatever any of us are dealing with, it is clear that 2020 has caused a lot of suffering.

It is especially important, during these difficult times, that we remember the words from Jesus in our gospel today: "Come to me, all you that are weary and are carrying heavy burdens, and I will give you rest." The truth of the matter is that, while we might think our salvation might come through other means—food, ordering more stuff on Amazon, alcohol, removing COVID-19 restrictions, movies and TV shows, etc.—what will get us through these pandemic times is Jesus. Jesus is the only one who can bring us true salvation and hope, for Jesus himself is the one who defeated death and has given us the gift of eternal life.

And because we are tied into Christ's death and resurrection through baptism, we can be assured that death will not be the finality of our existence; we can be assured that our sufferings will not be what truly defines us or our lives. Jesus will be there to bring us back to new life, new joy, new hope. Jesus will be with us every step of the way and will even carry us when the burdens become too hard for us. After all, even though Jesus knew he would need to endure the cross, he still tells us in the gospel: "...my yoke is easy, and my burden is light." But there is more good news. Not only will Jesus be present with us in the midst of our sufferings to help us through them, but Jesus has also given us the gift of a faith community to provide extra support. In these troubling times, not only can we turn to Jesus, but we can also turn to each other for prayer, for encouragement, for support. Sure, we cannot gather in person right now, but that doesn't mean we have to stop praying for each other or connecting with each other. Part of the gift of faith community is that God know we cannot walk this life journey by ourselves, so god gives us companions to walk with. Our communal faith in Jesus becomes all the richer when we are willing to help each other carry our burdens.

Yes, we are going through really challenging times right now, but thanks be to God for Jesus Christ. Jesus invites us to find rest in him, to lay our burdens upon him, and to trust that his love will carry us through the darkness and into new life.

Amen.



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