

Matthew 11:28-30: Questions!

"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 heart, and you will find rest for your souls. For my yoke is easy and my burden is light."

It is not difficult to know for whom these words are meant. They are meant for Valerie, for Sadie and for Seth. They are meant for all the church family gathered at Valley Presbyterian. They are meant for me and for my colleagues who also mourn the loss of our friend and colleague.

We all want the comfort and rest of Jesus, especially at times such as these. We long for it. We pray for it. We weep when it will not come. And why is it that, at times, Jesus' promised comfort will not come? Perhaps there are many reasons why Jesus' rest can *seem* elusive, but at least one possibility is that all of our doggone questions keep getting in the way.

Let's be honest here. Can I be honest with you? You know the questions to which I refer. They are the Psalmist's questions, too:

"How long, O Lord, will you forget me?" and,

"What gain is there in my destruction, in my going down into the pit?" and,

"My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?"

And let's get even more honest. Can we be *really* honest together? There are others, too, less the timeless questions of the Psalmist but more personal questions that haunt us:

"Could I have done something to prevent this?" and,

"Did I see the signs and just miss them?" and,

"What if I had done this and not that or done that and not this?"

And let's get absolutely real in our honesty. Can I be *really, really* honest with you? There are, for some of us, in the dark corners of our minds, questions that lead to blame and accusation:

"Whose fault is this?" and,

"Why didn't the presbytery do something more or something different?" and,

"How much responsibility does this person, that person, another person have?"

My friends, my dear brothers and sisters, I understand that asking questions in the shadow of tragedy is natural, even inevitable; as old as Job and as common as a winter's cold. And I understand that now *is* the time for asking questions, that today is *not yet* the day to let go of this cherished, time-honored ritual of the grieving process. But I also know that at some point, perhaps sooner, perhaps later, the time *will* come to move beyond our questions because the Savior's comfort and rest will still call to us.

"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 heart, and you will find rest for your souls. For my yoke is easy and my burden is light."

How do we turn into Christ's comfort? He himself tells us how to lean into this turning: "Take my yoke upon you and learn from me..." In the ancient culture, a yoke was what a farmer put around an ox or a mule to guide the beast of burden to plow straight paths, to be utilized in the service of the Master, to plant and to grow the harvest. The rabbis used the yoke as a metaphor for a rabbi's teaching: guidance for life and a good harvest of righteousness.

We know all about the yoke of Rabbi Jesus, don't we? It is his yoke that has been laid upon us and which has led us to act as we have acted this past week: to pray, to listen and to love; to weep and to mourn but to do so as those who know a hope that lifts us above the temptation to despair. Can I be honest with you? I have seen God's Spirit at work this week in the ways you have loved one another.

We know also there are still other lessons we must heed from rabbi Jesus, too: to be gentle with one another and to give space, lots of space, for each to grieve as one needs; to recognize that you all are together this week but half your membership will drift in in twos and sixes and twelves, week after week over the next four months, and their grieving journey will be in a different place from where you are when you encounter one another; and so to be merciful and forgiving when emotions fray and tempers run short; indeed, to forgive all manner of sin – perceived or real, of omission or commission – that has led us to this wearisome place in which we find ourselves and one another. Can I be really honest with you? This will be a difficult journey; to live into obedience to Rabbi Jesus is not work for sissies!

Yes, we know all about the yoke of Rabbi Jesus and how it alone can lead us to his comfort and his rest. And yet there is still a deeper invitation from Rabbi Jesus. Can I be really, really honest with you? His invitation is to take up his cross. We ordinarily don't like to think much or talk much about the cross. Oh, we believe in the cross, or so we confess, but what we tell ourselves is that it was just fine for Jesus but I'll take a pass, thank you very much. After all, we are "Easter people," we tell ourselves, people of the resurrection! Yet Rabbi Jesus will not be denied: before we get to the empty tomb we must endure the cross; before Easter comes Good Friday.

It is always difficult to embrace Good Friday. We prefer to deny or to deflect, to look elsewhere or to so busy ourselves with caring and doing. This is how we avoid having to confront the pain that seems too great to bear. Yet Rabbi Jesus will not be denied: it is he himself who invites us to dwell with him at the foot of the cross.

In a book called *A Grace Disguised*, Gerald Sittser describes his personal journey through the heart of darkness after watching his wife, his four-year old daughter and his mother die in a car accident. He tells of a dream he had shortly after the funeral in which he ran frantically west toward the setting sun. He could not catch it, of course, and soon found himself standing in the

twilight. He was filled with the darkness of despair. He glanced over his shoulder to the east and saw a vast and terrifying darkness closing in on him. Sittser told his sister about the dream. She listened, and after listening for a time, she said, "Gerald, the quickest way to reach the sun is not to chase after it in the West, but to plunge into the darkness and through the darkness until one encounters the rising sun. Don't go west, Gerald, go east." My friends, it seems to me that this is a metaphor for this most terrible of all weeks, for during this week we have been invited to journey to the Cross, invited to go east.

This week brought up for me memories of 22 years ago. I was the associate pastor for youth in San Antonio. Five days before his high school graduation, leaving church, Clint died in a single car rollover – a senseless accident, a terrible tragedy. Perhaps you are like me and have been reliving your own memories of tragedy and loss this week; death, it has been said, is cumulative and we take with us all the losses we have ever experienced. Dietrich Bonhoeffer, a German theologian from the last century, once wrote that there is a hole in the human heart when someone we love dies and that God holds so sacred our communion with our loved one that he allows the void to remain empty, that even He Himself will not fill the void so sacred is our communion and our love, and that, even at the cost of pain, the hole in our heart shall be allowed to remain until our communion with our beloved is restored in the fullness of God's kingdom.

Twenty-two years after Clint's death, Bonhoeffer's words seem about right. We made it through that week; his mother gave a beautiful testimony at the service. We couldn't believe she could manage it, yet knew she was being upheld by Spirit's breath. No, it was not that week following the accident but the months that followed that were hardest. Dealing with grief is a marathon, not a sprint, after all. I still see Clint's parents from time to time, when we travel to San Antonio where our son goes to Trinity University. When we see each other we hug and share sweet memories, and we long for that day when our communion will be restored, even as we know that today is not yet that day.

Karl Barth, a Swiss theologian from the last century, once wrote that we can live without knowing the answer to all our questions of why. Why did the plane crash? Why did the child drown? Why did he die so young, or, we might add, the way he did? Barth went on to write, "We can live without knowing the answer to all of our questions of why. But we cannot live without knowing the answer to the one, essential question: is it true? The resurrection from the dead and the life everlasting: Is it true? The person of Jesus Christ as God with us: is it true? The comfort and peace of the Holy Spirit: is it true?" This, ultimately, is the only question that matters.

"Come to me, all you who are weary and burdened, and I will give you rest." It is to our humanness that Jesus speaks in the gospel. It is to that part of us that needs comfort and consolation. It is to that part of us that knows with our head the gospel hope of resurrection to eternal life, but which still needs to be able to trust in our hearts that this hope is for Larry and for Valerie and Sadie and Seth, and for you and for me.

The quickest way to discover if what I have just said is true is the way of the cross; the quickest way to reach the sun is not to chase after it in the West, but to plunge into the darkness and through the darkness until one encounters the rising sun. Let us, therefore, ask all our questions, and when we're *finally* spent, don't look for the light but plunge into the darkness of our pain, our turmoil, our sadness, our anger and everything else we feel whenever we encounter a loss too great for us to bear. It is there, in the darkness, we will find the S-o-n.

May God's grace, mercy and peace be upon us all.