

Gloria Dei Meditation 7/6/08

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Zechariah 9:9-12; Romans 7:15-25a; Matthew 11:16-19; 25-30

In the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

We must not confuse the life in the Spirit with a political campaign. Many of us seem to be running for something. We want to be the best, the brightest, the most gifted, the envied, the admired. In short, in our confusion and in our striving, we want to be the chief in charge of everything. We are running for the office of "center of the universe." Let others worry about such mundane things as who will be the next President of the U.S.. We have bigger fish to fry. And, having gotten ourselves on this bigger-than-life treadmill, we keep moving and are more tired, finding ourselves hanging on to the bar in front of us for dear life. Everything that the world promised us, if only we tried harder, is slipping away.

Is there another way to live? Is it possible to set and achieve our own agendas in life? Our lectionary passages say 'yes' to the former and 'no' to the latter.

We have been following the Roman road the past several weeks. Paul, the exquisite lawyer by training, is writing his gospel of Jesus. It is not about the life of Jesus, but the message and truth of Jesus. He spends the first seven chapters of the letter pleading his case before the jury of humanity. He has been describing the human situation and it isn't lovely, to say the least. In today's passage, he offers pictures of someone who tries to do what is right, but just can't get it accomplished. The flesh wins out. And Paul says that as humans we cry as with one voice, "Who will rescue us?" He responds with an affirmation of praise, "Thanks be to God through Jesus Christ our Lord." God offers us a way. And it is the way of Christ.

In today's gospel Jesus looks upon the human condition and says that we are like children who really don't know their minds. They think they want to play wedding, so a flute is played, but know one dances. They didn't want to play that after all. Then they thought let's play funeral and someone begins to wail like professional mourners, but they don't join in. They don't want to play that either.

We can fast forward that scenario to today's culture. In our consumer society, we can always find fault or point out something not offered in our schools, churches or even families as reasons for not participating. But in so doing we miss out on the treasure contained in those communities.

Jesus has an answer for our human condition, for our striving that does not satisfy, for our trying to do it on our own power. It is a gracious invitation to come try life in 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."

Jewish rabbis used the phrase "the yoke" for "entering into submission to." They spoke of the yoke of the Law, the yoke of the Kingdom, the yoke of the commandments, the yoke of God. But Jesus took the words of his invitation from a source much closer to home than that. He says, "My yoke is easy." The word 'easy' is from the Greek 'chrestos' meaning 'well-fitting.' In Palestine ox-yokes were made of wood; the ox was brought, and the measurements were taken. The yoke was then roughed out and the ox was brought back to have the yoke tried on. The yoke was then carefully adjusted, so that it would fit well, and would not rub the neck of the beast. The yoke was tailor made to fit the ox. It may very well be that Jesus is using a picture from his thirty years of experience as a carpenter in Nazareth.

He says, "My yoke fits well." What he says is this: "The life I give you to live is not a burden to rub you raw: your task, your life, is made to measure to fit you." Whatever God sends to us is made to fit our needs and our abilities exactly; God has a task for every one of us, which is made to measure for us. Jesus said, "My burden is light." It is not that the burden is easy to carry, but it is laid on us in love; it is meant to be carried in love, and love makes even the heaviest burden light. When we remember the love of God, when we know that our burden is to love is to love God and people, then the burden becomes light.

The prophet Zechariah spoke the word of hope to a people who were

discouraged. The return from their exile in Babylon, so full of anticipation and promise was not the glorious event envisioned by the prophet Isaiah. They were surrounded by existing kingdoms that had enjoyed a missing Israel and now threatened to not let the walls and gates be rebuilt. Zechariah envisioned a Kingdom of God where people are invited to participate in the work of Kingdom building. He invited them to return to the safety of the walls of Jerusalem. There was work to be done and God would empower them in their work. It would be accomplished because they were prisoners of hope. How exactly do we participate in this building project? How do we turn our hope into action? Well, it is not the work of armies or politicians. It is the work of each of us empowered by the Holy One to be fully what we are created to be. Love is the key to all the machinery we will need for the task of rebuilding life the way God intended.

Today I want to share with you the five phrases of Kingdom building. These are the phrases we encourage our hospice families to use as they experience the final months of their life together. They are non-denominational, not very churchy, but important spiritual work. I believe when we use them we broaden the highway of our God. While our lives are much more than any illness we might have, sometimes an extended illness affords us the opportunity to use these words to enlarge God's love in the world. We do not have to be dealing with a terminal illness to use these phrases. Here they are.

"I am sorry." No one lives life without falling short of our goals for ourselves and others. We fail. We have both victories and losses. These words open us up to the forgiveness from God, others and even ourselves. They acknowledge both our highest hopes and the most humbling of realities. The psalmist reminds us that God's love and mercy surrounds us, removing our sin from us.

The next phrase is related to the first. "Please forgive me." The love intended by God is to be experienced within community. True community can only be found when people are accepted and affirmed as they are. The power of forgiveness makes it possible for people to move on into the future. In the Christian faith we celebrate the full acceptance by God as Jesus came to fulfill the intent of God's love. "I am come that you might have life and life abundant." There are no exceptions. God's intention is that the covenant established in Jesus Christ is to be for all.

The next phrase completes the previous one. "I forgive you." Any relationship has a history. When two people share life together both will need forgiveness from each other. When we embrace the Holy One in life, grace becomes a part of every relationship that is ours. The holy covenant binds us together. The cords of love are strong and flexible.

The next phrase is a lifestyle. "I love you." How many times and in how many ways do we share love? There is a magnificent tapestry that hangs behind the high altar in the modern cathedral of St. Michael's in Coventry, England. It was made by three Belgian artists over a four-year period. It is ninety-feet tall and depicts Christ in glory. The tapestry is without seam. The artists used their skills and gifts to create a masterpiece that tells of God's glory. In like manner when we love we are creating a masterpiece. We weave into that work of life the very best we can and when death comes, part of our pain and sorrow is the tearing of that fabric that has been created and fashioned with love. "I love you" is an important part of life.

The last phrase of true Kingdom building is "Good-bye." It is from the old English "God be with you." It is a blessing that both acknowledges the present and trusts

in the future. As we say "Good-bye" to one another we are inserting God into the picture. When we do that the picture is transformed. It becomes larger than our pain and grief. It becomes larger than any battle with cancer or heart failure. It becomes larger than our human frailties. It is filled with God and God's love. We carry that practice into our worship life and our life together when we say, "The Lord be with you. And also with you." It is reminding us that we are God's people, not unclaimed, not unloved, but graciously invited to walk in the way of Christ Jesus, offered a life that fits us, that brings peace and joy. And that is the good news of the gospel.

In the name of the Father, and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.