

COME WITH ME, YE THAT LABOR
Sermon by +John S. Thornton
Sunday, August 2, 2020 - 9th Sunday after Pentecost
St. Martin's Episcopal Church, Lebanon, OR

For the past month – since Pentecost Five – I've puzzled over the last lines in the Gospel text for that Sunday. Here it is, in the King James Version: “Come unto me, all ye that labor and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest.” Ever since I was a kid, in the First Congregational Church in Elgin, Illinois, I've heard those words. I love those words. I believe them. But, all these decades later, I still wonder what they really mean. The commentaries aren't a big help. I'm on my own.

Always a little suspicious about translations, I've been poring over the Greek text a whole month now. I've come to some conclusions.

First of all, it isn't a direct quote, not words out of the mouth of Jesus.

Second, it's the phraseology of First Century evangelism. Matthew, the Gospel writer, a Jew, was appealing to his fellow-Jews to come “over” to Jesus, whom he and others had experienced as the long-awaited Anointed One. Some did come over. Most didn't. It goes on to say, “My yoke is easy and my burden is light.” Religion can be hard. It can become a burden. It can slow us down, make us heavy (and joyless and judgmental and no fun to be around). But it's meant to be our sacred play. The love of God and neighbor should be the lightness of our being. It should have the lilt of wonder, of mercy, of forgiveness, the lilt of love.

Third, most importantly, it's an accurate account of Jesus' political agenda.

I'll take a little liberty with the Greek text and change the translation of one little preposition (*huper*) from “to” to “with.” So... “Come with me, all ye that labor and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest.” Maybe Jesus was a labor leader in the same way that Moses was a labor leader. Come with me! (Let my people go!) We're going to Jerusalem!

Who was this Jesus?

Well, he was a Semite, short (5'1”, 5'2”, archaeologists' surmise), olive-skinned, dark-haired, bearded, the whole DNA of Semites. He was as human as you and I.

He was a Jew, a devout Jew, a learned Jew, who believed that the salvation of persons and societies and the whole human race is found in the Torah and the Prophets.

He lived and worked in a tiny rural village in Galilee, Nazareth. For thirty years, before setting out as an itinerant rabbi, that's the only place he ever lived.

He was a laborer. The Greek text says “*tehton*,” which the scholars translate “artisan.” He worked with his hands. He worked with tools. And he worked with other laborers, could speak

their language, shared their lives, knew all about their faded dreams of living any other way.

He was, literally, one of the “unwashed.” The aqueduct, ingeniously engineered and constructed, by-passed Nazareth and went to Sepphoris, the capitol of Galilee, just four kilometers away. That's where the public baths were; so that's where the “washed” were, the land owners, the government officials, the lawyers and judges, the tax collectors, the physicians, the religious leaders, all scrubbed up and polished – and disdainful of those who weren't, the dusty, the dirty, like Jesus and all the laborers who lived down there in Nazareth. (“Can any good come out of Nazareth?”)

Maybe that's what was in his craw the day he read from the scroll of Isaiah in the local synagogue. “The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because he hath anointed me to preach the gospel to the poor; he hath sent me to heal the brokenhearted, to preach deliverance to the captives, and recovering of sight to the blind, to set at liberty those who are bruised, to preach the acceptable year of the Lord.” (That's the King James Version). Then he said, “This day is this Scripture fulfilled.” What? Where'd he get that idea? You know, he lives right here in town. He's just a laborer. The authorities aren't going to like this! How does he get to be the fulfillment?

From Isaiah he got the nerve, from God the gumption, to be a labor leader. Lastly, he went to Jerusalem, where his message and he, the messenger, were not welcome. And you know how the story ends.

Jesus lived in a society in which there was no middle class. There were the haves and the have-nots. Jesus was a have-not. He saw how the haves would squeeze the life out of the have-nots. It brought out the prophet in him.

Among the Hebrew prophets, one of the most dehumanizing things in the world is slavery. It was unjustifiable. It was detestable. It was abominable. And it would not, eventually, escape God's judgment. Remember who you are, the prophets said. You're the descendant of slaves. What was done to them you must never do to anybody else. Of course, they did anyway. Of course, we do too.

They say that there are more slaves in the world today than at any time in history. Many of them are our slaves. Our slaves? We don't see them, not that they're hidden from us. We just don't want to look. We want to believe that everybody's acting in “good faith.” It would be more realistic to believe in Original Sin. We still have the haves and the have-nots, the washed and the unwashed – and we still have the God who must weep and rage and hunt for Jesuses to raise hell on behalf of the oppressed. “The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because he hath anointed me to preach the gospel to the poor... to set at liberty those who are bruised....”

We Christians aren't going to make much of a contribution to our country unless it's the Risen Christ who rises in us. If we're going to remake America, we'll, first, have to remake ourselves. And while we're remaking ourselves, we'll have to consider the mechanism of death that keeps

us alive. That mechanism depends on virtual slaves, Black, Latino, immigrant, refugee, the poor, the “bruised,” who work in the slaughterhouses across this country.

I know, we don't call them slaughterhouses any more. They're “processing plants.” What they do in processing plants is slaughter and dismember birds and animals and package them up for us to eat. To date, this year, nearly thirty-two billion chickens, ducks, turkeys, pigs, lambs, cattle, bison have been slaughtered. By the end of the year, it will be twice that. I'm reminded of some lines in Alice Walker's *The Color Purple*: “The animals of the world exist for their own reasons. They were not made for humans any more than black people were made for white or women for men.”

Working in a processing plant is dangerous, more dangerous than coal mining and saw milling, they say. The workers have to work fast, flaying and cleaving all the while. (The Department of Agriculture recently increased the BPM – that's “birds per minute” – from one hundred forty to one hundred seventy-five in the poultry plants.) They have to work close together, often only two feet apart, often facing each other. And many have to work in COVID-19 “hot spots.” For that, they're paid, on average, fourteen dollars an hour, with no benefits. They have to make a living, even if it means dying. This isn't an “I Love Lucy” episode in the chocolate factory. This is *The Jungle*, Upton Sinclair's 1906 book about the destruction of the lives of Lithuanian immigrants in the stockyards and slaughterhouses in Chicago. A hundred and fourteen years later, we're just as thoughtless, just as heartless, just as blind.

The current administration has designated the whole industry an “essential service.” It's essential because we make it essential. We consume all those birds and animals. Tell me, is it really essential for you? Why?

As we consider remaking ourselves, here are two questions:

WHAT HAS TO DIE SO THAT WE CAN LIVE?

WHO HAS TO SUFFER SO THAT WE CAN BE SATISFIED?

“The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because he hath anointed me...to preach the acceptable year of the Lord.”

What moral decisions and actions on our part will make it a year “acceptable” to the Lord?

What will be “acceptable” to our souls?

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