

## SHARING THE BURDEN – FINDING IT LIGHT

Matthew 11:16-19, 25-30

First Congregational UCC

Asheville, NC

July 3, 2011

Paul G. Gillespie

Our text today is an interesting one, but part of it gives me real theological indigestion! It is where Matthew asserts that Jesus said, “All things have been handed over to me by God, my Heavenly Parent; and no one knows the Child (Jesus) except God, and no one knows God except the Child and anyone to whom the Child chooses to reveal God.” (Mt. 11:27) I am unapologetically committed to Jesus, but I do not believe people have to believe in and follow Jesus to be authentic children of God (some would use the term ‘saved’). That idea is even stronger in John (14:6), where Jesus is quoted as saying, “I am the way, the truth, and the life. No one comes to God except through me.” When asked to read that at funerals, I usually left out the part, “No one comes to God except through me.” I have come to believe that we belittle God when we limit God’s love for anybody or their access to God. And I have had mentors like Gandhi (a Hindu), a Rhode Island rabbi who was my close, close friend (as he would say, now of blessed memory), and other non-Christian friends who have strengthened my own faith in God as some of you have shared how you have been strengthened by aspects of Buddhism, for example.

Our member and friend Bill Petz often urges us, “Do not follow in the footsteps of the Wise Ones, but seek what they sought!” I have come to believe that honest seekers in many religious traditions find life by seeking what the pathfinders and founders of those traditions sought, by asking the questions they asked. Questions from different cultures and different times give us different understandings, of course. Where we are born in the world often has a lot to do with our

religious conclusions. Seeking what Jesus sought, asking what Jesus asked roots us in the Christian tradition. Being secure in our faith allows us to appreciate insights and spiritual disciplines of other traditions without diluting our commitment to what we see clearly through the lens of Jesus, knowing God through our relationship to Jesus. While I am still very uncomfortable with the idea that only those who believe in Jesus are true children of God, I have come to see the passage in John 14 and in today's Matthew 11 reading in a more positive light and let me explain why.

When comparing the sacred texts of world religions, it is clear that the abiding, living presence of religious founders like Jesus, Muhammad, the Buddha, Confucius, Abraham, Moses, the ancient Hindu sages and others in the hearts of believers is an experience of great mystical union. *Our Christian Gospels picture Jesus as abiding in the hearts of believers and has sent the Holy Spirit to enliven and instill God's love within us.* Jesus and his teachings define the Christian faith. Similarly, the Muslim faith is defined uniquely by Muhammad, who is seen ever beside the believers, interceding on their behalf before the throne of God. The Lotus Sutra declares that Buddha is eternally manifest and is forever saving living beings. The committed believer in most religions is confronted with one individual as the standard of truth and love who defines the true way. So Jesus was not the only one identified with such an idea. It has been said, "Outside Buddha's dispensation, there is no saint." (Dhammapada 254), and "Muhammad is the seal of the prophets." (Qur'an 33:40) (World Scriptures: A Comparative Anthology of Sacred Texts, a project of The International Religious Foundation, 1991)

**This does not mean that all the founders are of equal significance to their religious communities or that all religions are of equal significance to the world. And there seems to be a radical fundamentalist wing of most religions that is mean-spirited and dangerous, willing and sometimes eager to use religious, legal or violent force to impose their views on the larger society. Some of these expressions of religious power, Christian and otherwise, cause havoc in our world today and have caused wars and bloodshed through the centuries. We would be naïve not to recognize that.**

**I celebrate the way Jesus embodied the love he taught. Most of us as Christians are committed to the teachings of Jesus, even if we are not always in agreement as to what they mean. Jesus really did not come to establish a religion, but to gather a community and start a movement. And we find our place in this community and movement by asking the questions that Jesus asked, seeking the things that Jesus sought, finding help that guides our lives in so doing. William Loader suggests that it is not our place to protect God, because Jesus' deeds of mercy and compassion are the true evidence of God's will, or as Jesus said, "Wisdom is vindicated by her deeds." (Mt. 11:19)**

**In today's reading, we heard Jesus asking, "But to what will I compare this generation? It is like children sitting in the market place and calling to one another. 'We played the flute for you, and you did not dance. We wailed, and you did not mourn.'" (Mt. 11:16-17)**

**At first blush, the idea of "children in the market place" invites our concern for the most vulnerable young of our world to the harms of global capitalism, perhaps. But upon further reflection, the**

children here do not represent the least powerful among us. These kids could take care of themselves and no attempt is made to portray them positively. Jesus is using interesting imagery. The children call “let’s play wedding, let’s play funeral” to playmates who will not join them.....Just as we call out to neighbors and fellow citizens of the world community to join us in seeking justice and human rights for all, resolving conflicts non-violently, caring for the poor, caring for mother earth, and living in respect and harmony, but too often they will not join us (or we will not join them) in such worthy goals.

Jesus chastened those who rejected John the Baptizer because his way seemed too hard and who rejected him (Jesus) because his way seemed too easy and unrealistic. “For John came neither eating or drinking, and they say, ‘He has a demon’; and the Son of Man (a term Jesus loved for himself because it emphasized his humanity) ...the Son of Man came eating and drinking and they say, “Look, a glutton and a drunkard, a friend of tax collectors and sinners.” (Mt: 11:18-19)

What is going on here? Both John and Jesus announce that the reign of God is come, the Kingdom or Realm of God is here. But is it a wedding or a funeral? Is it easy or hard? Should we feast or fast? Do we rejoice or repent?

Remember now that this is a parable .....and in some sense the answer is that it doesn’t matter. Or the Realm of God is like both a wedding and a funeral. For Jesus, the way of the bridegroom became the way of the cross.....and John’s demanding call for repentance is filled with a passion for life, not death.

It may not matter that the call we hear most clearly is to rejoice or repent. What does matter is that we not sit by and refuse to lift our fair share of the load and commit ourselves.....to each other and to God to care for each other and the earth, to make a better day, a better world. It does matter that we not just sit by and refuse to get into this struggle. It is important that we be thoughtful, engaging in theological and social reflection on the important issues of our time, marked by a passion for our faith, respect for intellectual inquiry, and openness to the variety and complexity of God's world. Important for our nation as we celebrate our freedom tomorrow, on the 4<sup>th</sup> of July! Important to our world in these difficult times! (How I do wish politicians tomorrow would end their July 4<sup>th</sup> speeches with the words, 'May God bless the United States of America.....and all the other nations of the world!) When God's children wail, let's feel their pain and weep with them. When they celebrate, let's rejoice with them! When asked to help, let's get to work and share the burden.

I have come to appreciate the part of this lesson that used to give me so much theological indigestion! "All things have been handed over to me by God, and no one knows the Child except God, and no one knows God except the Child and anyone to whom the Child chooses to reveal God." (Matt.11:27) I appreciate the perspective of Catholic theologian Hans Kung who, like many of us, sees both authentic Christianity and authentic democracy being misused and abused ..... by the present structures of the church and the present governmental structures in place around the world. Through the lens of Jesus we see a God who is for human-kind, not against us. "Immanuel: God is with us." God is a God of liberation, of mercy, of salvation, of grace. A God beside whom there are no other gods.

**I believe this one and only God is the very first reality which, together with Christians and Jews, Moslems also worship in Allah. God is the reality which Hindus also seek in Brahma and Buddhists in the Absolute Dharma (Nirvana), and that many Chinese seek in heaven or the Tao.** (Why I Am Still a Christian – Hans Kung)

Jesus shows us that God is good and looks on human beings with loving kindness. We can place our trust in God even in times of doubt, in all personal distress and social and world affliction. Before God we can “pray and sacrifice, fall on our knees in awe, make music and dance”, as the philosopher Martin Heidegger wrote as he developed his own basis for hope. In a world with confusing, often distorted values coming out of a variety of political and religious systems, I hope you can join me in saying: **I know who I can rely on and will rely on, because I believe in the living God.**

We used to think in terms of Christendom as the worldwide community of adherents of Christianity, where for good or ill, Christian majorities and their ideas exercised considerable power over others. But the Alban Institute is not the only group that tells us that any reality in that notion is dead (though some still try to force their values such as opposition to abortion and gay marriage on others). The end of Christendom means the end of an era, a sea change in the religious ecology of North America and the role of congregations in our society. The church and the minister do not have as prominent a place or value in society as they once had. No longer is the church seen as **the authority** on moral issues.

But with any death or end is opportunity for rebirth and resurrection. The church must redefine our role in the community,

redesign Christian formation in light of other religious options, and re-energize our mission. It is a time for us to look more kindly on other religious traditions and on people of no religious persuasion. Like the Hebrews who were learning what it meant to be Israel during their long journey in the wilderness, like the church in the Book of Acts learning what it meant to be church, we are in a time of new learning. This time of major shift calls me, perhaps you, to be faithful to God and Jesus' mission for the world. I don't know what you heard today's text saying, but it says to me that God wants us to work together in families, in churches, in our communities, across cultural, political, national and religious boundaries to work with all the people of the world, and to do this as a vibrant act of faith and service to God. *Our text calls me to be faithful to Jesus and the mission Jesus established.* Certainly *it calls all of us to be faithful to the Light we have seen.* Christendom may have died but the movement Jesus began and still guides is much alive. And as we share the burdens of our brothers and sisters of the world, (with God doing most of the lifting) we find them becoming light!

Some who share my faith perspective on our relationship to God and other world religions call themselves "trinitarian universalists". Not being comfortable with either of those terms, that is not a designation I claim for myself. But I believe our God wants us to be as narrow in our commitment to Christianity as our commitment to Jesus requires.....and as broad and as inclusive in our love and respect for people of other religious faiths (and no religious faith) as the wonderful love of God allows and requires. God and God's abounding grace is larger than can be explained by any religious dogma or sacred text. Let us embrace the good work of making a

**difference for God's sake in this life, using all our talents, gifts and opportunities available to us. Faithful to our own understandings, open to new spiritual insights, patient with the questions of others, respectful of those who come to different religious conclusions, let us work together to make ours a better world, for the betterment of the whole human family and for the glory of God.**

**Today let us say, "May God bless the Christian community, people of all other religions of the world, and people of no religious persuasion!" And on tomorrow's 4<sup>th</sup> of July, let us say, "May God bless the United States of America and all the other nations of the world!" Because God loves us all!**

**Amen.**