First Presbyterian Church of Soda Springs

7/9/23

Walking the Walk

Matthew 11:16-19 Common English Bible

**This generation**

**16**“To what will I compare this generation? It is like a child sitting in the marketplaces calling out to others, **17**‘We played the flute for you and you didn’t dance. We sang a funeral song and you did not mourn.’ **18**For John came neither eating nor drinking, and they say, ‘He has a demon.’ **19**Yet the Human One came eating and drinking, and they say, ‘Look, a glutton and a drunk, a friend of tax collectors and sinners.’ But wisdom is proved to be right by her works.”

Matthew 11:16-19 The Message

**16-19**“How can I account for this generation? The people have been like spoiled children whining to their parents, ‘We wanted to skip rope, and you were always too tired; we wanted to talk, but you were always too busy.’ John came fasting and they called him crazy. I came feasting and they called me a boozer, a friend of the misfits. Opinion polls don’t count for much, do they? The proof of the pudding is in the eating.”

You may have noticed that there’s a theme running through the liturgy today, especially in the confession and some of the hymns. And that theme is one of being tired and needing rest. Needing rest is something that we can all relate to, given the fast pace of modern society, and taking time to rest is often difficult. It’s something I personally struggle with, so this sermon is as much for me as it is for you.

In today’s reading, being tired and in need of rest is actually a secondary theme, which Jesus uses to underscore the point he’s trying to make. The people aren’t happy with Jesus’ message and it’s beginning to show. John the Baptist is too weird, with his wild clothing and locust eating behavior. Jesus himself is not behaving the way these folks were expecting the Messiah to behave; how can someone like Jesus who eats and drinks with sinners, save us from the Romans, so the thinking went. Things are not going the way the people want them to go and the reaction is what you’d expect from spoiled children.

Now we’ve all experienced what happens when kids get tired. We’ve all witnessed the public meltdowns when even the best-behaved kids are overdue for their afternoon naps. And I’m pretty sure that we’ve all been the parent, grandparent, aunt or uncle who has had to deal with the embarrassment that these types of situations cause. So, Jesus’ obvious frustration with the behavior of the people, is something I know that we all can relate to.

Elisabeth Johnson, Professor at the Lutheran Institute of Theology of Cameroon, sums these verses up this way, *“The problem with this generation, Jesus says, is that they listen neither to John nor to Jesus. John’s austere lifestyle, led people to accuse him of having a demon, while Jesus’ habit of eating and drinking with sinners earned him a bad reputation. This generation finds reason to take offense at both John and Jesus and thus to evade the call of both. They are like children in the marketplace who cannot decide whether they want to play wedding games or funeral games and end up playing neither.”*

At this point, you might be asking yourselves what does Professor Johnson’s commentary have to do with being tired and needing rest? I think the connection lies in Johnson’s argument about finding reason to take offense and then using that reason as an excuse to evade God’s call. And, if I’m totally honest here, being too tired to walk the walk sits pretty close to the top of the list of reasons which I’ve used more than once, to dodge God’s call.

As someone who’s spent the majority of my pastoral career working for social, economic and environmental justice, I’ll tell you that it is legitimately exhausting work. Trying to tear down barriers that are meant to exclude others, fighting for fair economic practices that don’t favor one group of people over another, working to preserve the God given gift of this planet for future generations, all of this can wear a person out. Top this off with being a full-time pastor to a congregation, even one as low maintenance as you all are, and there are times when I simply want to step back and rest.

But here’s the thing; If we believe in the message and mission of Jesus Christ, we ultimately cannot evade God’s call. If we truly want to call ourselves followers of the risen Christ, all of the excuses we may come up with to avoid walking the walk, will not let us off the hook.

Friday afternoon, I received a text message from a number I didn’t recognize, asking if this was the number for the pastor of the Presbyterian church in Soda Springs. “Oh, oh,” I thought, “what’s this about?” I replied “yes, how can I help?” It turned out the text was from someone named Steve who was passing through. He was parked down at the Flying J in McCammon, and looking for assistance with gas and food so he and his family could get home to Kentucky. These types of calls are not uncommon, and its part of the job. I’m happy to do what I can, but this time I kind of resented the interruption. Now, understand, it was Friday afternoon at 4:00 PM. It’s my day off, I’m in my ratty gym shorts and a tee shirt, I haven’t even shaved and I’ve just sat down to watch the next episode of the TV show that I’m currently totally obsessed with. The week hadn’t been particularly stressful, but I was tired. The thought crossed my mind that it was probably a scam and I could simply say “sorry we can’t help you,” and gone on with my evening. But something told me that it wasn’t a scam and so, after debating with myself, I reluctantly decided to engage a bit further. So, after a few more text exchanges, I found myself in my truck heading towards McCammon to offer what help I could. Even after I agreed to help, I was still feeling resentful. “Grrr, why do I have to drive all the way down to McCammon?” (As if that’s such a long drive.) “Why couldn’t they meet me here in town?” “Thanks for ruining my evening, dude.” All of these very unchristian thoughts, along with some others that I won’t share here, were running through my head.

I eventually realized that I was acting like a spoiled child, who wasn’t getting his way, and that realization caused my thoughts to shift a bit. “Well,” I began to think, “if it is a scam, that’ll be on him. If Karma exists, then it’ll take a big ol’ bite out of his backside soon enough.” Then my thoughts started moving in the direction of, “What if it’s not a scam and I didn’t help?” “What would it say about me as a pastor and, more importantly, “what would it say about me as a person, if I refused to assist someone in need?” Long story short, when I got to McCammon, it was very obvious that Steve wasn’t trying to scam me. His car was filled to the roof with what looked like everything he owned. Steve, his wife and mother-in-law all looked exhausted and my heart broke. I gave them what I could, prayed with them and left. Driving back up the hill, I felt ashamed at all of the not nice things I had been thinking and I was really glad I hadn’t given in to my resentment at being interrupted on my day off.

Please understand, I don’t tell this story to get a pat on the back or to make myself seem better than anyone else. I don’t tell this story as a backdoor attempt to get reimbursed. Instead, I share this story because I truly believe that walking the walk is absolutely essential if we are serious about wanting to be counted as a follower of Jesus. And, in this case, I almost let my feelings of being tired and my resentment about an interrupted evening stop me from walking the walk.

Now, let me be clear. There are times when being tired is a valid reason to say no. There are times when resting is the appropriate action. Scripture tells us that even God rested after the act of creation and we should follow that example when it’s the right thing to do.

Here’s the thing, though, too often folks who want to claim Christ as their own, spend more time talking the talk rather than walking the walk. We’ve all run into these types of believers. Oh, these folks talk a really good game. They can quote Scripture chapter and verse, they may never miss a Sunday service, they might sing in the choir, and their words give the appearance of piousness and holiness. But when it comes time to actually do the work of tearing down barriers, that are meant to exclude others, doing the work of fighting for fair economic practices that don’t favor one group of people over another, doing the work to preserve the God given gift of this planet for future generations, they are nowhere to be found. These types of Christians are all talk and no action.

Does all talk and no action mean these folks are bad people or bad Christians? No, I don’t think so. And at the same time, I think this type of behavior is foolish, especially when lack of action is justified by excuses: “I’m too busy,” “I’m too tired,” I’m too old, “I’m too…,” fill in the blank.

I think that we call all agree that there is wisdom in following the teachings of Jesus Christ. And our reading makes it very clear that the wisdom of being a Christ follower is proved to be right by our works.

We are called to talk the talk *and* walk the walk. Yes, that can be exhausting, so make time to find rest on the journey. Jesus said “Come to me you who are weary, and I will give you rest.” So, find those activities which renew, refresh and reconnect us to the faith we claim. And above all else, don’t let excuses become a roadblock to doing the work that God calls each and every one of us to do. AMEN