

“Revelation and Invitation”

Sermon from Matthew 11:25-30

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for the First Baptist Church of McMinnville

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Then Jesus prayed, “Abba God, Creator of heaven and earth, to you I offer praise; for what you have hidden from the learned and clever, you have revealed to the youngest children. Yes, Abba, everything is as you want it to be.” Jesus continued, “Everything has been handed over to me by Abba God. No one knows the Only Begotten except Abba God, and no one knows Abba God except the Only Begotten - and those to whom the Only Begotten wants to give that revelation. Come to me, all you who labor and carry heavy burdens, and I will give you rest. Take my yoke upon your shoulders and learn from me, for I am gentle and humble of heart. Here you will find rest for your souls, for my yoke is easy and my burden is light.”

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Alyce McKenzie gives a little more context to where these verses come from. She reminds us that John the Baptist came preaching repentance, living a life of simplicity, and even denial. He wailed, she said, and the people would not repent and mourn. And he was put to death.

And Jesus came preaching repentance but also grace, living a life of celebration and inclusion. He welcomed everyone - with a particular heart for those who had been excluded and shut out. He sang, and danced, and the people would not join him. And he was put to death.

And she suggests that each of us, like the original audience, have an invitation and a call here. In the presence of John we should repent. In the presence of Jesus we should rejoice. Instead, like these earliest hearers, we condemn both the asceticism and the pleasure. We find

fault with both ways of being. We make excuses for why we can't, why we won't, enter the game. McKenzie says, "Nothing pleases us. We will not play."

And in part, of course, she means, we will not play along. We will not take these suggestions, heed this advice, respond to this invitation that says come, be part of what's happening here; come, be part of what God is doing in the world; come, *be the way* that God is doing it. We get exhausted just thinking about these two characters - about who they were, how they lived, about what we think they want from us. McKenzie writes, "We refuse the kind of introspection that leads to repentance. And we thereby miss the abundant life that lies on the other side."

That's what she means by "we will not play." She means, "we will not enter in."

Yes.

And.

This season, here at FBC, we're talking about another kind of play. About the silly kind of play. About jumping rope and throwing water balloons. In a recent and informal survey of my friends, I discovered that they mostly play with their dogs or by throwing living room dance parties. Ingrid Fetell Lee, in her book *Joyful*, records one woman's (pre-Covid) idea of play, where in some crowded space, she says imagine a world, if you were in a crowded space, and you came up to a stranger, and tapped her on the shoulder, saying, "You're it!" and waving her on to do the same to someone else. She said "imagine if our subway stations, our farmers markets, became giant, sprawling games of tag."

And sure, maybe that's not the kind of invitation to play that Jesus was talking about. But listen closely to what he asks here.

He asks, "Aren't you tired?"

At the end of his lamenting that the people would not embrace John's simplicity, and they would not embrace his abundance, he says, "Aren't you just tired? Isn't your soul weary? Don't these endless cycles of criticism and cynicism and blame just wear you down?"

That's a question that transcends context, right?

Originally, the idea of burden here describes the conditions people are living under. Later in Matthew Jesus will tell his peers that the way they do religion isn't fair. "You tie up heavy burdens," he tells them, "and lay them on the shoulders of others, but you're unwilling to lift a finger yourself. You create laws that are tedious to keep. You make life harder for people whose lives are already hard, and for no good reason, and to no good end." He says, "You get lost in these details and you leave aside what matters: justice and mercy and faith."

But it's also a question - "aren't you tired?" - it's also a question that's explicitly rooted in context. Because for the original hearers of these words, it's not just their personal realities that are exhausting them. It's not just that these people work long hours and have to contend with their own fatigue while they've got families to feed. It's also the structure that governs their lives. It's the fact that they are imperial subjects. That they live as a conquered people, an occupied people, that everywhere there are reminders that they do not belong to themselves, that they are not free. In his book *Matthew and the Margins*, Warren Carter writes, writes: "Rest cannot happen under imperial domination but means the removal of that power. Rome's rule is fated. God's rest is

the creation vision of Genesis, in which God, after creating, rests, with all creation in just relationship with God and itself.”

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We don't live under those same rules. But we also don't live free from systems of domination. We also are not yet out from under the rule of fear, or despair, or hierarchy, that position us against one another and even against our own selves, our own good. We are still bound by lies that tell us we have to earn our place in this world, we have to earn our right to be here, we have to earn our status as worthy, as beloved, as those who belong. We have to earn our rest.

And that - maybe that is tiring above all else. It is a lie we live in continual subjugation to. Because they are standards we can never meet. We can never work hard enough, be good enough, to merit the fullness of shalom.

And in a context like that, play is necessary. Play is resistance, even. Audre Lorde, talking about racism and sexism and homophobia in 1979, said - in essence - that we have to play new games. “The master's tools will never dismantle the master's house. They may allow us to temporarily beat him at his own game, but they will never enable us to bring about genuine change.”

Beat him at his own game.

There is more than one game to play.

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I want to read to you a little bit from Ross Gay's *The Book of Delights*. He's writing about loitering... he says, what his mom used to call lollygagging. Which to him, he says, implies “having the best kind of day.” But he notes people accused of lollygagging and loitering often

look like him. He says, “For instance, the darker your skin, the more likely you are to be loitering. Though, a Patagonia jacket could do some work to disrupt that perception. A Patagonia jacket, colorful pants, Tretorn sneakers with short socks, and Ivy League ball cap, and a thick book not the Bible and you’re almost golden. *Almost*. . . . It occurs to me that laughter and loitering are kissing cousins, as both bespeak an interruption of production and consumption. And it’s probably for this reason that I have been among groups of nonwhite people laughing hard who have been shushed – in a Qdoba in Bloomington, in a bar in Fishtown, in the Harvard Club at Harvard. The shushing, perhaps, reminds how threatening to the order are our bodies in nonproductive, nonconsumptive delight. The moment of laughter not only makes consumption impossible (you might choke), but if the laugh is hard enough, if the talk is just right, food or drink might fly from your mouth, if not, and this hurts, your nose. And if your body is supposed to *be* one of the consumables, if it has been, if it is, one of the consumables around which so many ideas of production and consumption have been structured in this country, well, there you go.”

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Easy, some will say, is not a great translation for what Jesus says here. My yoke is easy, and my burden is light. Because note that there’s not *no* yoke. There’s not *no* burden. We are always tied to something. John Petty says the word can translate to goodness, benevolence, a state of being pleasant, worthy, loving, kind. What would it be if the invitation wasn’t, “Come to me, my yoke is easy” but “Come to me, my yoke is lovingkindness”? Join yourself to that. It will weigh on you but it’s lighter than the way you’re trying to live now.

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A former student of mine at Ottawa University is now practices law in Chicago, and has gathered around him a group of friends and they went out the other night to play. My former student is gay, and so were these

guys, and most of them had a pretty rough time of it in high school, some also in college. Only in their late 20s, early 30s did most of them come to a sense of peace with their identity.

And when I asked about playing lately, he told me that a few weekends ago, these guys, all queer, and all fairly local to Chicago - he's the only transplant - he said they made this plan, and they all went home, and they got their letter jackets from high school. And they came back together one Friday night, and put them on, some of them kind of ill-fitting, some of them kind of looked silly, and they did a "bar crawl" - went from place to place on the north side of Chicago, in these colored wool jackets bearing their letters from debate or cross country or marching band or nothing their academic achievement. It was really goofy, he said, and really funny, to see these men donning their teenage uniforms again. But those years can be really hard on a gay kid - fraught and lonely were the words he used, those years can be fraught and lonely - "so it was empowering to be able to play like that, on the other side, and feel like we had overcome."

I might add, to feel like they could finally rest, secure in the knowledge of their own belovedness.

For all of us, may it be so.