

Sermon Proper 9A 2017
Zechariah 9:9-12
Psalm 145:8-15
Romans 7:15-25a
Matthew 11: 16-19, 25-30
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July 9, 2017

For the first time, I have to say, I'm not happy to be here this morning. I can finally understand the feelings of some children and spouses who feel this way. I am not happy because I was not supposed to be here this morning. Well, I guess on some levels I am happy after having surgery for a ruptured appendix last Friday, I am glad to be well enough to be with you.

But, I wasn't to have been here today. In my place, you were to experience Nina Salmon's preaching. This was her opportunity to support Kim and me on the Sunday that the youth mission teams leave on their respective trips. This was your opportunity to hear from Nina after her year of study at Sewanee's School of Theology.

I was to be sitting right now in the airport in Charlotte with three other sponsors and 15 outstanding high school youth awaiting our flight to Belize City. Or at the 10:30 am service, to already be on the flight. Today will be a long first day for the team. After a three hour flight, they arrive in Belize City and are picked up by Phil in a bus and driven through the city. They will get a local lunch, beans and rice perhaps. Then it is on to the water taxi for the memorable one hour plus ride to Ambergris Caye. And from there walk a mile down the beach to the Hotel Del Rio. After arriving, coordinators from Holy Cross School will greet them and introduce them to the impoverished community of San Mateo. It's a long day. But it will set them up for the experience working with the children who attend Holy Cross Anglican School (HCS) begun by missionaries from the Diocese of Southern Virginia a decade ago.

This week our youth who head out with the hope of changing lives may actually have a tangible impact on the lives of the children of HCS. This week,

they will be working with the students in a summer literacy and math camp. That may produce a tangible benefit for those they meet. That isn't always the case.

On the application for the mission trip to Belize our youth always say they want to participate so that they can help those in need. Then they discover other insights along the way.

They discover that more than helping others, frequently they are the ones who are changed. They have the opportunity to see the world through new lenses, new perspectives. For a week, they leave our world of privilege and live in more limited circumstances. Belize in July is hot and humid and there is no A/C. But they get to experience children who live in conditions that we have trouble even imagining. These children live in one room homes built on stilts over swampy land with no windows or power. They have running water though that is not safe for us to drink. But over the course of the week they will work with the children in the day and see them swimming and playing at day's end. Barefoot, frolicking and enjoying themselves. These children have no electronics, TVs, games or many toys for that matter. An occasional soccer ball or marbles perhaps. Yet, what our youth will notice is how happy the children of Belize appear.

This observation then provides our youth with an opportunity for reflection. Experience without reflection is of little value, I said recently. But experience that one sits with and considers and reflects upon has the power to teach. This insight that the children are so happy is a revelation to our youth. Our youth are acutely aware of what the Belizean children are missing. A/C, toys, games, electronics, side by side refrigerators, eating out, cars, outstanding medical care. They don't possess any of the items that make life here so "happy."

And their's is a fragile existence. On one trip we witnessed a funeral for a child who died of an infectious disease. On another trip we met Brittany, a 13 year-old girl with cystic fibrosis, a condition for which significant treatments have been developed here. But she died a year later. Life is fragile and yet, paradoxically they are happy. A sense of joy radiates from them.

How can they be so happy? This will be the question that I hope our youth will take time to reflect upon. How can they experience what we perceive as

deprivation and still be happy? There are several possibilities perhaps: Perhaps having so little, happiness is easier to come by.

Or perhaps happiness is really a matter of outlook and expectation and choice. Many of these children have fulfilling relationships, families that love them, a school to learn in, and opportunities to play together. Life in all its variable circumstances can be meaningful and happy.

One lesson they may learn is that possessions don't necessarily make a person happy. (Saturday's article on Market Watch on happiness: suggests pets, plays and planes rather than things. Yet, few of these are accessible to the children of San Mateo.) Learning this early in life is a valuable lesson. Advertisers want us to think otherwise. If we just had that one thing we would be happier. But experience has shown that we buy the item only to discover that happiness still eludes us. Reflection may show our youth that things/possessions don't make one happy. Family, relationships, play and learning can do just the thing. Getting back to basics as they say. Happiness is a state of mind. We can cultivate it or not.

Our gospel lesson this morning is an invitation to mission. To begin the mission journey, Jesus says, "Come to me, all you that are weary and are carrying heavy burdens, and I will give you rest." Jesus is calling us to let go of everything that we find so burdensome. Jesus is saying, "lay em down" This reminds me of a song that our talented musicians brought to F@5. The phrase "Lay 'em down" is the title of a song by the group, needtobreathe. Their lyrics go like this:

"Lay 'Em Down" by needtobreathe

Come down to the river
Come and let yourself in
Make good on a promise
To never hurt again
If you're lost and lonely
Broken down
Bring all of your troubles
Come lay 'em down

All you sinners
And the weak at heart
All the helpless
On the boulevards
Wherever you are now
Whatever evil you've found
Bring all of your troubles
Come lay 'em down

We're all tied to the same old failings
Finding shelter in things we know
(We're all dirty like corrupted small towns)
We'll bring our troubles
(Bring our troubles)
And lay 'em down
All you rich men
And the high above
All of those with
And without love
All you burdened
And broken down
Bring all of your troubles
Come lay 'em down

Come all you broken
Come all you helpless
Bring all your burdens
Just lay 'em down

That is what Jesus is encouraging each of us to do. This week our youth will have the opportunity to lay down the burdens of their lives. These might include social expectations, the over-scheduling, the pressure for achievement, the desire for athletic excellence, to always look their best, etc. Instead, they will have the opportunity to be in relationship with a diverse team of students and sponsors

working with some amazingly resilient children. In Belize, they can lay down the burdens from home and engage the world anew.

But the opportunity comes with a catch. In return they will be asked to pick up the yoke of Jesus. To put Christ's yoke upon them. We don't often come in contact with yokes. Yokes join two animals together for work such as oxen that are yoked together to plow or pull together. The yoke unites them.

“Jesus is calling us to move from our solitary effort to a common effort. Becoming an ox with Christ is a striking image. Working in tandem, making a joint effort: this gesture is what connects us to God... in addition he invites us to undertake with him the great work he is accomplishing in the world: to liberate by bearing the burdens of others, especially the self-imposed burdens that are sometimes borne out of self-contempt.” (From Synthesis, p. 2, 7/9/2017 quoting from Taize commented Bible passages).

Putting on the yoke of Jesus isn't just for those who go to Belize. Joining the mission of Jesus doesn't require us to leave our environment. Jesus is calling each of us from a solitary effort to a common effort. Yet, I mentioned that putting on the yoke of Jesus comes at a cost. That cost is that the yoke of Jesus makes us vulnerable. Vulnerable to the demands that God will present to us or that will cross our path.

The author Madeleine L'Engle writes about Christian vulnerability in this way. “Vulnerability is something we instinctively reject because we are taught from kindergarten on that we must protect ourselves, control our behavior and our lives. But, in becoming man for us, Christ made himself totally vulnerable to us in Jesus of Nazareth, and it is not possible to be a Christian while refusing to be vulnerable.” (Madeleine L'Engle in *Walking on Water* [Wheaton: Harold Shaw Publ. 1980]).

Our youth are willing to be vulnerable this week and the opportunity may just be life changing. I hadn't planned to be here today. But to believe that I am in control would be delusional. The best we can do is take Christ's yoke upon us and then live our lives. Uniting with Jesus we carry Jesus's love into the world

encountering those whom God brings into our lives. Open, available, and vulnerable. Opening our eyes to the opportunities that Jesus will bring our way.