

Sermon given by John H. Kemp
Pilgrim Congregational Church
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BEYOND REJECTION

Matthew 11:16-19, 25

Today's reading from Matthew shows different sides of Jesus that remind us he wasn't all sweet and gentle. He had a sharp, even caustic, edge that could cut to the quick when he felt that was the best way to make a point.

Apparently some folk - namely the religious establishment - had been shocked by the stark appearance and radical words of John the Baptist, who'd just been tossed into prison by King Herod. Jesus answered them sarcastically: "What did you go out into the wilderness to look at? A reed shaken by the wind? What then *did* you go out to see? Someone dressed in soft robes? Look, those who wear soft robes are in royal palaces." Then Jesus made his point: "*What* then did you go out to see? A prophet? Yes, I tell you, and he was more than a prophet!" "If you have ears, then listen!"

But listen they did not. "Are my words for nothing? To what can I compare you - you who sat before John and had no idea what he was about, you who sit before me and have no idea. You act like children who complain back and forth: "*We* played the flute for you, but *you* just sat there and didn't dance!" "Well, *we* wailed as though someone had died, and *you* didn't join in mourning!" You reject John because he came neither eating nor drinking: so you say *he* must have a demon; on the other hand, *I* came eating and drinking, and you dismiss *me* as a glutton and drunkard. Jesus answered this foolishness and rejection with simple but deft irony, "Wisdom is vindicated by her deeds."

Did you ever give a party and no one came? I remember once in an earlier church our inviting folks to an open house. You know what goes into getting ready for one of those. The appointed time came, and we waited...and waited...and waited. By the end of the afternoon a grand total of three people had come. Talk about feeling rejected! When I first graduated from seminary, I guess I was pretty thin-skinned. Why didn't anyone show up for the course I'd worked so hard to prepare? Why aren't more people in church on a nice summer Sunday? Why didn't more than a handful come to the picnic? And, of course, why don't all those members who've agreed to serve on committees ever show up for meetings? At the beginning I took it all personally - and I tortured myself trying to figure out what *I* was doing so wrong!

It's at *this* point that a lot of colleagues throw in the towel and make a hasty career change. But as time passed and I did not perish in the parish, I learned a few things. First, *I* didn't have to be responsible for the decisions other people made. Second, it wasn't up to all-knowing me to devise

the entire church program and then let my life rise or fall on it - let the folks take a big chunk of the responsibility: after all, we're *all* the church together! Third, I didn't need to feel rejected personally every time someone criticized what was or was not being done in the church. I could separate constructive criticism and suggestions from the perpetual complainers and those with hidden agendas.

Still, who says it's fun to be rejected? Ask the person whose job has been terminated - *down-sizing* is today's gentler euphemism. Or the person whose spouse has walked out on a marriage. Or the hard-working office holder or civil servant who absorbs the constant slings and arrows of a cynical public. Or the child whose rejection takes the form of parental abuse - or the aging parent who feels rejected by an adult child. We well know rejection can breed tragic consequences: the abused child becomes an abusing adult; a person who feels that his opinion on a property line dispute is rejected, murders his neighbor and his children; a young person, desperate for family and peer acceptance, when he feels he doesn't have it or doesn't deserve it for whatever reason, commits suicide. On a more ordinary level, how many of us carry with us feelings of inadequacy or failure or rejection - burdens that can be heavy to bear on life's journey!

However, and that's a *big* however, as people who journey with faith, we hear Jesus' final word in today's passage. You see, while he may have it up to here with those scribes and pharisees he could *never* hope to please, who were *forever* rejecting him, his *final* words to the crowd gathered about him were words of hope and promise: "Come to me, all you who are weary and carrying heavy burdens, and I will give you rest. Take my yoke upon you, and learn from me...and you will find rest for your souls. For my yoke is easy and my burden is light."

Put yourself in that setting. In a time when human beings were beasts of burden just as often as animals, this image held power. For people with no concept of "weekends at the lake," those Jewish Sabbath laws of "rest" were very important. In a world swarming with unpredictable gods, the idea of a safe and secure "rest" through one who spoke of a God of love was compelling.

Now look about our world today. What does our culture offer all of *us* who may be weary and carrying heavy burdens? My mail box is stuffed with gadget catalogs offering me a zillion products guaranteed to make my life easier. Computer programs offer wondrously quick ways to pay my bills, organize my taxes, and escape onto Internet: "Experience the POWER of On-Line!" Cable TV offers me dozens of channels of mindless entertainment, endless sports, a few educational gems, and those horrid infomercials.

What *real* rest do these wondrous gifts offer? How many catalogs can we skim before we've seen it all? How long can we cruise the Internet before the chatlines blur together? How long do we surf the fifty-odd channels, only to conclude there's really not a heckuva lot there?

Jesus' invitation to rest is more than skin-deep. He offers us peace for the soul, nourishment for tired spirits. Our culture assumes that if we punch the right buttons, then we'll get rid of our heavy loads, life will become effortless, void of burdens and duties that weigh us down. Quite the opposite,

Jesus assumes that heavy loads are part of life's reality. He never offers to eliminate them or give us a vacation from them. He offers something better.

The other day a friend reminded me of the yoke Jesus was describing. We tend to interpret the passage as though Jesus were offering to carry our load *for* us by wearing our yoke in our place. But in Palestine of his day, typically a cart or plow was drawn by a *pair* of oxen in a *double* yoke. They pull together; when one tires, the other picks up the slack; together they get the job done, they reach their destination.

What a different image that offers! Jesus promises, not to carry our load *for* us, but *with* us. Putting our trust in God does not *eliminate* our burdens, but we know that we need not depend on *our* strength alone, that God is at our side always, sharing the journey with us! Sure, we endure those times of doubt when we feel alone, abandoned, even rejected by God. But it's exactly *those* times that Jesus calls us to move beyond those feelings of rejection that weigh so heavily: *Come to me...and I will give you rest.* And in faith, those burdens *do* become much more bearable.

Bearable, above all, because God knows and cares for each of us, for whatever persons we are. *This* is the final word of grace. "For my yoke is easy." You see, yokes not mass-produced, but custom-made to fit each ox's neck and back without any binding or pinching that would put the animal out of commission. "My yoke is easy" was spoken by a carpenter's son who well knew the need for custom yokes. He assures us that God knows *our* strengths and weaknesses, and provides us with what we need to carry our load yoked with God on our life journey.

Isn't this the same enduring promise we know in our beloved psalm? *Yea, though I walk through the valley of death, I will fear no evil, for thou art with me, thy rod and thy staff they comfort me.* In this trust may we live, following in the way of our Lord. Amen.