**Proper 9A 2014 sermon**

***Matthew 11:16-19, 25-30***

*Jesus said to the crowd, "To what will I compare this generation? It is like children sitting in the marketplaces and calling to one another, `We played the flute for you, and you did not dance; we wailed, and you did not mourn.'*

*For John came neither eating nor drinking, and they say, `He has a demon'; the Son of Man came eating and drinking, and they say, `Look, a glutton and a drunkard, a friend of tax collectors and sinners!' Yet wisdom is vindicated by her deeds."*

*At that time Jesus said, "I thank you, Father, Lord of heaven and earth, because you have hidden these things from the wise and the intelligent and have revealed them to infants; yes, Father, for such was your gracious will. All things have been handed over to me by my Father; and no one knows the Son except the Father, and no one knows the Father except the Son and anyone to whom the Son chooses to reveal him.*

*"Come to me, all you that are weary and are carrying heavy burdens, and I will give you rest. Take my yoke upon you, and learn from me; for I am gentle and humble in heart, and you will find rest for your souls. For my yoke is easy, and my burden is light."*

"Come unto me, all ye that travail and are heavy-laden, and I will refresh you.”

It is one of the more familiar Scripture verses for Anglicans, for it appeared in the First Book of Common Prayer of 1549 and has continued to appear in successive Prayer Books down through the centuries, being found in our Rite I Eucharist today. In today’s Gospel lesson, we find these words in their fuller context. Jesus says, “Come to me, all you that are weary and are carrying heavy burdens, and I will give you rest. Take my yoke upon you, and learn from me; for I am gentle and humble in heart, and you will find rest for your souls. For my yoke is easy, and my burden is light.”

It is helpful to note that this word “yoke” was commonly used in Jesus’ day to refer to the requirements of the Jewish Law (Acts 15:10), which were so numerous and complex that the average person who had to **work** for a living could never possibly have fulfilled all those laws. The religious leaders, however, *insisted* that only if you understood all the subtleties of the Law and obeyed them could you be righteous in the eyes of God. Righteousness before God consisted of knowing the laws and adhering to them.

Jesus, however, had a very different understanding of what it meant to be right with God. Bible scholar Tom Wright explains:

“You just need to be a little child. Jesus had come to know his father the way a son does: not by studying books about him, but by living in his presence, listening for his voice, and learning from him as an apprentice does from a master, by watching and imitating.” (Wright, T., 2004. *Matthew for Everyone, Part 1*: Chapters 1-15, pp. 136–137. London: Society for Promoting Christian Knowledge.) Jesus came not to teach **about** God, but to *reveal* God, living in and through himself. In Jesus’ acts of healing, he revealed God’s desire to heal and reconcile; through Jesus’ compassion for society’s outcasts, he revealed God’s compassion for the least and the lost. By pouring out his life for us all, Jesus revealed that the persons of the Trinity are continually pouring themselves out for each other, and that when we are living in our essential God nature, we, too, will be continually receiving the love of God and neighbor and pouring it back out into God and neighbor. “Take **my** yoke upon you,” Jesus said, “and learn from me…” **What** are we supposed to learn from him? Jesus does not teach a new set of doctrines, but rather a new way of *experiencing* God – as a loving, caring, forgiving father. When Jesus says, “learn from me,” he is calling us not to learn **about** God, but to *experience* God, to participate in the life of God, the Spirit of God.

Today we began a new course in our Adult Class (what we will be calling from now on our “Adult Forum”). The course is titled: *Embracing Spiritual Awakening: Diana Butler Bass on the Dynamics of Experiential Faith*. Dr. Bass is an author and researcher who has been studying the sea-change in Christianity which is happening right now, in our time. Every 500 years, there has been a period of great upheaval in the Christian faith, often called an “awakening”. In roughly 500 A.D., the fall of the Roman Empire meant that much of the structure of the Church was falling apart. 500 years later, what is called “The Great Schism” occurred, when Western Christianity and Eastern Orthodox Christianity went their separate ways. 500 years after that was the Protestant Reformation, when what *had* been **one** Christian Church in the West splintered into at least 5 main Christian traditions, distinguished largely by their differences in belief and doctrine. We are now living in a time 500 years *after* the Reformation, in another period of radical change. Dr. Bass believes that, while we cannot be certain what Christianity will look like after this period of upheaval, the general shape of this emerging Church is already clear: it will be less focused on **what** we believe (creeds and doctrines), and more on **how** we believe (experience and reason); less focused on **how** we do things (rules and techniques) and more on **what** we should be doing (discernment and purpose); less focused on who **we** are (membership and choice) and more on **Whose** we are (Relationship and community).

What strikes me about Diana Butler Bass’ description of the “awakening” which is taking place today is that it seems so similar to the “awakening” which Jesus was bringing about in his own day, as exemplified in today’s Gospel reading. The religious leaders of Jesus’ day were focused on creeds and doctrines, rules and techniques, and membership (whether you were “in” or “out”, circumcised or not). Jesus, on the other hand, was focused on how people experience God, discerning God’s will and purpose, and being children who belong to a loving heavenly Father and care for one another. We might even say – using terms which are current – that Jesus was “spiritual but not religious”, as opposed to the Pharisees, who were “religious but not spiritual”.

Of course, after this “awakening” which Jesus brought about, it didn’t take the Christian Church too long to become like the Pharisees: those who established the right creeds and doctrines, rules and techniques, and membership requirements. It is never the **whole** Church that does this, of course; there are always some, in every generation, who are able to hold together the tension between the “religious” and the “spiritual”. But make no mistake about it: it is a difficult tension to hold together!

St. Augustine said, “[God], You have made us for yourself, and our heart is restless until it finds its rest in you.” There **is** that part of us which longs to return to the intimate relationship with God that God intended when he created us. “Come to me, all you that are weary and are carrying heavy burdens, and I will give you rest,” Jesus says. There is that part of us which deeply yearns for such rest! To come to Jesus and find rest, however, means, in the end, that we are going to have to be open to being changed – for no person can come to him and NOT be changed.

And therein lies the rub: while there is a part of us which longs for the rest to be found through union with God in Christ, there is that other part of us that desperately wants to keep things constant and unchanged.

Why?

“Because to change is to lose something,” answers David Lose, “and so to change can feel like dying. And more than anything else the people who listened to Jesus – and the people who [continue to listen to] Jesus – want desperately to grow but not really to change. Change, you see, brings the unknown. Change is not certain. Change implies risk and even potential loss. Which is why we often stay in failed jobs and relationships – they may not be much, but at least they’re something and at least we know what to expect.

“But here’s the difficult truth about life in Christ,” Dr. Lose continues. “You cannot enter into it and expect to be unchanged. Which means a precondition of receiving Jesus – perhaps the only one! – is to recognize your need for Jesus [your need to be changed]. Forgiveness, when you think about it, is meaningful only to those who have sinned, grace avails only those who are broken, and the promise of life abundant and eternal is only attractive to those who know they are dying.” (…*In the Meantime*)

That is why Jesus’ ministry resonates so strongly with those in great need: the lepers, the dying, the maimed, the prostitutes, the poor. They *know* their need of God, their need to experience God’s love, God’s mercy, God’s healing, God’s forgiveness. The religious leaders, on the other hand, do not admit to any experienced need for God. They know all **about** God, but they do not **know** God – or they would have recognized God in the person of Jesus. They are, in the modern parlance, “religious but not spiritual”.

“A message that is good news only to those who can identify their need,” notes Dr. Lose, “will be of little appeal to the **self-made** man or woman of the first or twenty-first centuries. But it **is** good news – *unbelievably* good news – to those who know their brokenness, can admit their need, and who turn to God in Jesus to be known, understood, and accepted.” (*ibid*.)

My friends, for those of us raised in the period of the last 500 years of the Church, the changes we see in the Church today can be unsettling, indeed. We had thought that if we learned our Sunday School lessons, attended Church regularly, believed certain things about God, said grace over our meals and prayers before bed, we had met all the requirements of being a good Christian. But the Christian Church which taught such things is no more. What will emerge in its place is still to be seen, but the general shape of this emerging Church is becoming clearer. The change Christ is bringing about in his Church today is the same change he tried to make 2000 years ago in the religious structures of that time. To follow Jesus **then** meant to focus less on written laws, dogmas, and sacrifices and more on experiencing “the Way, the Truth, and the Life”. To follow Jesus **then** meant to focus less on following rules and techniques and more on discerning and living out the will of God in one’s life. To follow Jesus **then** meant to focus less on being a card-carrying member of the synagogue and more on living one’s life in grace-filled relationship with God and neighbor.

My friends, , the awakening we are experiencing in the Christian Church today is remarkably like the awakening Jesus himself brought about 2000 years ago. And we are remarkably like the people Jesus encountered then, who were faced with the decision of how to respond to the great upheaval Jesus was bringing about. How will we respond to the awakening Christ is bringing about in our time? We can choose, like the Pharisees did, to resist these unsettling changes any way we can; or we can welcome these emerging changes with courage and faith, knowing that what is really happening among us is a **re**-awakening. For Jesus walks among us even today, calling us beyond creeds and rules and denominational membership into an experiential participation with him in the life of God transforming our world in love.

AMEN