

## **Gentle and Humble in Heart**

The Rev. Roderick McAulay: Church of the Incarnation, Santa Rosa  
July 9, 2023: Sixth Sunday after Pentecost, Proper 9, Year A

Children love to play pretend games. It is their way of rehearsing adult roles, mimicking the world that they see about them. My granddaughter, Maya, loves to set up stores or dental offices or theaters and pull us into roles to play if there are no other children around. It seems it was no different in Jesus' time. He accuses the adult crowds of being like children who call other children to play at being at a wedding and are rejected: "we played the flute for you, and you did not dance." Then when children call others to play as if attending a funeral, they are again rejected. "We wailed and you did not mourn." Jesus is comparing himself with his cousin John the Baptist. John, dressed in skins and living on locusts in the desert, called the crowds to repent or suffer. The crowds said John was possessed of a demon. Jesus calls the people to a life of love and generosity. He heals the sick and teaches them to temper the law with love. The crowds scorn this message as well. John wailed and Jesus played the flute, but the people turned away from both.

Jesus is not done with holding up children as examples. He goes on to say of his Father, "you have hidden these things from the wise and from the intelligent and have revealed them to infants." This is not just a rebuke of the crowds but targets the scribes and pharisees and temple priests who posture as experts of religious law and practice. Jesus is saying that they all are too clever by half. Then he goes on to say, "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." The Jewish law was often described

as a heavy yoke. A good Jew trying to obey all the precepts of the law had to strain under its weight. Jesus' words that his yoke and easy and his burden is light are repeated in our Prayer Book. When we celebrate the Eucharist using Rite I they may be said following the Confession and Absolution. They come under the heading of comforting words, and they are comforting. They are good news for all of us who struggle to live a Christian life. Jesus teaches us that his way is simple and accessible. You do not need to be clever to walk this path, but, yet we struggle.

Our struggle mirrors that of the crowds who gathered about Jesus. We are burdened by a self-imposed negativity. We are burdened with the belief that if we could only get this whole salvation thing to make sense we could be happy. We are mystified by God's love. My own story comes out of this tension. As some of you know, I was raised in an intensely Presbyterian family. My father was a Presbyterian pastor and church official. My mother was deeply immersed in the Presbyterian church: they met at the Presbyterian seminary in San Anselmo. The Presbyterian Church came to America from the Church of Scotland, a branch of the Reformation inspired by John Calvin. Just as Lutherans look back to Martin Luther, and Methodists look back to the Wesley brothers, Presbyterians draw their tradition from the writings of Calvin. The hallmark of the Calvinist tradition is a severe intellectualism based on Biblical authority and nothing else: all mind and little heart. The dinner table in my home was the venue for a constant critique of Christians who engaged in flabby, shallow, sentimental theology, or simply primitive theology. The Catholics were primitive. The Evangelicals were

sentimental. Nobody measured up. In my own mind, it was clear that I probably didn't measure up either.

The austere intellectualism of Calvinist Presbyterianism left me cold. It seemed to me that understanding Jesus required, at the least, completion of graduate studies at some University or seminary. It required rigorous academic discipline. More disturbing to me was that this made the love of God unavailable to the vast majority of humanity. That did not seem right. It did not make sense.

This austere faith left me with a hole that I needed to fill. In due course, newly-wed and welcoming a babe into our lives Mary and I wandered into our local Episcopal Parish in Seattle. I was confused by the liturgy and sometimes bored with its repetitiveness, but this parish had an incredible choir. The first thing I did as a new member was join the choir. Music was a language that kept my brain occupied but spoke to my heart. Music was about feeling, deep feeling. Choirs were about physically becoming part of a community in an act of creating something beautiful. In due course, the music began to pour life into the liturgy. I found the rhythms and themes of the spoken words addressed more than the intellect, they also talked to the gut and the heart.

Jesus' comments that God's truth is hidden from the wise and intelligent, but revealed to infants speaks directly to this issue. The wise and intelligent believe they can open the mystery of divine love with words and rules. It is an exercise in vanity. There is an arrogance in trying to cage God in a net of words. Not that we shouldn't seek understanding, but we should always bring a large dose of humility

to these efforts. You can stack every tome written about theology, one on top of the other, and you will not penetrate the mystery of God's love, you will certainly not reach heaven. Jesus not only engaged the Scribes and Pharisees, he not only interacted with the powerful: he brought hope and light to the most common people of Palestine. His disciples were fisherman and others who were likely illiterate. The struggle that we experience is not because God is being evasive, playing hard to find. It is not because there is some puzzle we need to solve to understand Jesus' teaching. The struggle is the result of our own fears, and the barriers imposed by our culture and by religious practices and doctrines. As with the crowds that turned from Jesus and the healing power of his love, we often use our religion as a carapace, and tough shield, to protect us from hearing or seeing the work of the Divine in our world. The very institutions meant to put us in touch with God, can seal us off from God.

I came into the Episcopal Church, not because it was perfect, or had a more exquisite and compelling theology, but because it provided a home where I could hear and see God in multiple languages – word, music, art, liturgy, friendships, food, and simple acts of kindness – each of these spoke to me, each expressed a depth of love. Each communicated in different ways. Each spoke to different aspects of my being. Each said, in its own manner, that God saw me and saw all of us at our core and said that we are good. The Episcopal Church did not claim to have an exclusive lock on truth. In the Episcopal Church we are all pilgrims on a journey. Jesus plays the flute and we can dance.

In church, like children we can rehearse our parts that we are assigned in God's kingdom. Like children we can hold a simple trust, we can accept the abiding, healing love that Jesus shared with his disciples and with all the people who crossed his path. Every time an angel appears, in our Bible, their first words are "do not be afraid." Like children, simply listen for the flute and join the dance.