

Lectionary 14A 2017, July 9, 2017, Matthew 11:16-19, 25-30, Emmanuel Lutheran Church, Lancaster, Pa., Kurt S. Strause

The Owl Hill squad was always looking for another gang to play a game. Owl Hill Road outside of Lititz was where I grew up. In the spring and summer we played baseball. In the fall we played football. There were about six or seven of us: Jeff Feiler and Curt Oberholtzer, Steve Gibbel and the Martin boys, Rick and Ron. We'd call up guys we knew who lived at the top of Kissel Hill and try to get them to come out and play football. There were plenty of fields and open lots in those days before all the houses got built. Or we'd try to arrange a game for after school. Sometimes we'd succeed in recruiting another gang to play and we would play until it got dark or we'd get hungry for supper. Other times we couldn't get them to come out. Rick and Ron Martin were big, even in those days. Both went on in high school and played on the offensive and defensive lines in football.

Trying to get others to play is what Jesus is referring to in this morning's gospel. Children playing games; wedding games and funeral games. Happy dancing and mournful wailing. Jesus is comparing children trying to get others to join in with the generation of people who heard but did not respond to either John the Baptist or even himself. Jesus is saying that these people are like those children. The voices are heard calling people to repent and believe in the good news of Jesus, people like the John the Baptist preaching in the wilderness, "the kingdom is near." But this generation doesn't always listen, Jesus says. They are like those who refuse to dance when they hear the joy of the gospel, or refuse to mourn when they hear the wail of repentance.

Jesus continues his analysis. No matter how convincing the speaker, or compelling the prophet, some will always find an excuse not to believe. First John the Baptist came, this prophet of strange dress and diet and fiery speeches. He devoted himself to fasting and prayer, refusing to drink any alcohol and dining on locusts and wild honey. He was an otherworldly ascetic and eccentric. Some did listen and repent, but many more did not. Apparently John was accused of being demon possessed. If so, he could easily be dismissed. Jesus, on the other hand, was not like John. He didn't fast. He was willing to raise a glass of wine at festive occasions. He would sit and eat and drink with all the wrong people; notorious sinners and evil tax-collectors. The same people who denounce John as demon possessed also denounce Jesus as a glutton and a drunkard. Imagine the Son of God, Lord of all creation, enjoying a hearty meal, good wine and wonderful conversation! Of course I can imagine it. These are the good things of his creation, made even more blessed by his participation. Yet, some found his eating and drinking an excuse to dismiss him and his message. No matter who proclaimed the coming Kingdom; John who fasted, or Jesus who ate and drank, some simply refused to believe.

If it was true then, it's almost doubly true today. For if there were those who refused to believe while they had the actual persons themselves among them, so much more true is it that there will be those who simply refuse to believe Jesus' disciples today. Each age is filled with its own scoffers, and people who will find every excuse in the book to follow something or someone else other than Jesus. "This Jesus is a glutton," other used to say. But what do they say today? "Oh, the church is only ever interested in money." "I've never met a Christian who isn't a hypocrite." "Who knows which church is correct, I just won't go to any of them." "I believe in God in my heart, but I don't need to go to church. Besides, I need the day off." Or, "someone once offended me at church so I've never gone back." "All the wars in history have been fought over religion, I'm not having any part of it." Or here's one I hear quite often, "How can I believe

in a loving God if there is so much evil in the world?”

Nevertheless, Jesus continues to say to us we must be like children who call out in the marketplace, even when people scoff, or find excuses not to turn to him. Calling people to dance by the sounds of our joy, our hymns and songs, and kind words and invitations and most importantly, our actions which mirror the servant like character of Jesus. We will encounter resistance, and excuses, and all sorts of made-up and real reasons for people refusing to join in the dance of Christian faith. But we are disciples of the living Lord, whose life beyond death vindicates his willingness to be persistent in calling the world to be his disciples. Jesus lives. That’s the good news the world constantly needs to hear. That’s the invitation to the dance. That’s the child-like summons to join in the joy of faith. And it must never cease to be heard in the world, in spite of how it may be received.

I believe this is one of the reasons Jesus spoke so reassuringly to his disciples in the last words of our gospel today. “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.” The tasks of discipleship can seem so overwhelming, where it almost seems harder to believe and follow than otherwise. We look out onto a world that doesn’t seem to care for those on the margins, that it’s easier to care for oneself than it is for others, and we think, “that would be so much easier. I wouldn’t have to concern myself with going to church, with contributing my hard earned money, sacrificing my time and energy for a church that doesn’t always measure up, giving myself to meet the needs of others.” It’s an interesting thing, this yoke Jesus speaks of. Just about everyone knew about yokes. There were two kinds of yokes, and I’ve included a sheet of paper in your bulletin to illustrate them. There’s the single yoke that a person would use to carry heavy loads, water or fuel for a fire. It was heavy, with two weighted sides balancing across the neck. The second yoke joins two animals together, usually oxen who would work in plowing a field. It’s this second yoke Jesus refers to. He bids us take on a yoke in which we are joined to him, and we work together. We draw our strength from the one with whom we are yoked, and we work side by side with Jesus.

This easy yoke is the yoke of Jesus’ own presence. Even in the midst of the greatest pain or heartache, when it seems like God is most absent and silent, we may trust the words which come to us, “I will give you rest.” And these aren’t empty words of an empty promise, they are words spoken by one who experienced all the silence, all the absence God could give. For on the cross, utterly alone and forsaken, God was silent in the face of evil. That same Lord is always present, even in the silences and the dark nights of our lives.

As children we are called to believe and proclaim this word of hope to a world in which this word remains hidden. It remains hidden unless there are those who call with the flute of joy and hope and faith, to join in the dance of life, and take up the easy yoke. Amen.