

July 23, 2011  
3rd Sunday after Pentecost  
Matthew 11:28 – 12:8  
A welcome change

Aren't those first verses I/Andrew read so poetic and lovely! "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." Those words could be the call to worship every week. They speak a welcome of compassion to anyone who comes here to worship. I trust this gospel reading reminds us why we welcome people, why we extend hospitality; because of what we have found in Jesus and here at Bethlehem – a place of rest, renewal, compassion and caring.

But as the second part of the gospel reading shows, finding rest in Jesus, help carrying our burdens, can be a controversial thing. Amazing, isn't it? The religious leaders of Jesus' day weren't interested in compassion – welcome all who are weary, having Jesus share their burden. They were interested only in their version of God's law being followed to the letter. Jesus pointed out to them some examples from scripture that showed that even beloved David allowed exceptions to Sabbath observance laws, if human need required it. Jesus reminded the Pharisees of all the times the prophets and psalmist tried to teach Israel that God preferred compassion over empty sacrifice. So, yes, come all who are weary, bring your burden to Jesus, share his yoke, find rest, and offer Jesus' comfort and yoke to others, and be prepared to defend Jesus' extravagant welcome to those who would rather put their rules and regulations on Jesus' welcome.

Last Sunday we welcomed Emily Batcke, Leo Dillon, and Don Roberts into church membership on Sunday morning. We give thanks that they have felt Jesus' and our welcome here, and will share their gifts and service with us. Church Growth and Publicity committee is working hard on how Bethlehem puts today's gospel reading into practice. Are we as gracious as Jesus, inviting all to come find his peace? Or in our welcome, do we have any hint of what we saw from the Pharisees – having lost their connection to God and insisting on how they did things?

Rev. Alice Mann is an Episcopal priest who has written several excellent books about church growth. She uses a bell curve to describe the life line of a church. In the early days of a

church's life, the energy and ministries and numbers in a church are on the rise. Some people call this the "movement" phase of a church's life. After anywhere from 5 – 50 years, a church settles into a rhythm, doesn't change much, and plateaus at some point. After 5 – 20 years of that, staleness sets in, the Spirit is no longer driving things, doing things the way we've always done them is the rule. That's the "institution" phase. Remind you of this morning's Pharisees? A downhill slide begins; less energy, fewer members and dollars. The church is less connected to the Holy Spirit and more connected to its history. It's energy is in self-preservation, not change or outreach.

You can imagine that in each of those phases the kind of welcome a church offers to guests changes. In the early years, of course every guest and new member is fussed over. They get to define the ministry and mission of the church. They're very much needed and appreciated. But once you hit the plateau, sure, guests are welcome, but welcome to come and do things as they've always been done. And on the downhill side, members may be more warmly welcomed, but because they bring hope for a return to a way things used to be, maybe not because they might bring something new.

Back to the life span of a church curve. Two questions that might be on your mind. Where is Bethlehem on this curve? And if a church is on the plateau or the downhill side, how do they get back to the growing, high energy and creativity side? Let me ask you, where do you think Bethlehem is on this curve? How do you think churches can re-connect to the Holy Spirit?

Bethlehem's Church Growth and Publicity committee has been having a lively discussion about name tags. I know you've been there before, at least once. Most churches have. At last month's council meeting, they got some feedback from council members. It was an odd mix. There was clearly appreciation for the committee's passion and energy, but real reluctance. A sort of "This is my church, why do I need to wear a name tag?" attitude. Where does that comment fall on the curve?

So I laughed out loud this week when an e-mail came through from a member who attended a UCC church in Carmel last Sunday where almost everyone in that church, almost exactly the same size as Bethlehem, wore a name tag. He described their genuine, enthusiastic welcoming spirit. And you know what, they were founded a year before Bethlehem, so somehow they have come off the plateau or downhill side, to reenergize themselves into the feel of a new church. Now of course, I'm not saying that name tags by themselves change a church. But last week

they stood out to me as an important indicator of the kind of welcome a church offers – “Sure, come join us. We’d love to have you. Here’s how we do things.” Or, “My name is Karen, what’s yours? Tell me about yourself and your faith? What do you need from Jesus? How can you help us be Jesus’ followers? I know we’ll be a different church because you are here.”

Once upon a time, long ago and far away, there was a church that had a difficult separation with their beloved pastor, who had done much good ministry, but had also broken some rules. It happens. And it’s hard for everyone when it happens. That good church of about 300 souls, in the conflict over the pastor’s removal, dwindled to about 100 very stressed souls. After 3 interim pastors, about a year later, they welcomed a new pastor who worked very hard to heal their wounds, and to welcome back members who were willing to try to be in community again. After a few years, the church began to grow again. After nine years, they had added a third worship service and had about 600 active members. Doesn’t that sound wonderful! Thanks be to God! People had found rest and a place to bring their burdens, and to celebrate the Sabbath. But some of those original 100 weren’t happy. Who were all these new people? We don’t know them. Things are different. I don’t know the people that go to those other services. Why can’t it be like it used to be, when we knew everyone? And lots of these new folks didn’t even grow up in our denomination! They’re singing different songs and they don’t know the right way that things are supposed to be done. It’s just not our church anymore. Yes, welcoming people to share Jesus’ rest, our hospitality, it can be a dangerous thing. We will be changed.

That’s some of what was happening in today’s gospel reading. Jesus was making changes in his religious community that some of the members weren’t wild about. He and his disciples weren’t keeping the Sabbath the same way some of their Jewish brothers and sisters had kept it for years. And they weren’t amused. Some of us remember days when stores weren’t open on Sundays. People didn’t mow their lawn on a Sunday. Children’s sports events would never have been scheduled on a Sunday. Especially not on a Sunday morning.

We can’t leave this passage without talking about that yoke. I don’t know about you, but all I picture is a pair of oxen, with an incredibly heavy and cumbersome wooden apparatus around their necks, pulling a plow. Jesus’ yoke is of course a metaphor, and like most metaphors, and Jesus’ metaphors especially, it works in several different ways. They might not know it, but two oxen pulling a plow sure beats being the only ox pulling the plow. Yokes help us share burdens. That’s what Jesus was offering. That’s what it means to be a follower of Jesus, to help him carry

the load. That's hospitality. That's what it means to welcome friends and strangers in the name of Jesus. And if you didn't come here with a burden, if life is good, and you're cool with Jesus, fret not, there's still plenty for you to do. That's the beauty of the yoke metaphor, some of us get help, some of us give help. Your simple presence here, your greeting to friends and guests helps them. And God knows there's a multitude of injustices in Evansville and around the world that cry out for God's justice, so after a quick thanks for your blessings, get busy!

"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." Today's gospel reading reminds us why, at our best, we invite friends and family to church. To meet Jesus. To share in his love and work. Let us welcome old friends and new ones with the same warmth. Let us together share the yoke that Christ offers us. Let us be glimpses of the risen Christ to one another, to Evansville, to the world.