



making God's love visible in downtown Memphis

The Weight  
Proper 9, Year A  
Sunday, July 5, 2020  
The Rev. Amber Carswell

Sitting in the car the other day, Missy and I were chatting about the takedown of monuments and the difficulties of honoring figures in the past. I could probably find a more incendiary way to start a sermon if I tried, but actually, my point is that I veered off on a long tangent about how well Jesus has aged. Considering the vast differences in societal views between then and now, concerning women or the disabled or belief of the worth of human lives in general, he comes out remarkably clean. Don't misunderstand: our age is certainly not the banner-bearing standard for judging the morality of ages past; each era of history has its own great sins that they are largely indifferent to, ours included. But considering Jesus through my admittedly flawed modern eyes, I don't know of an ancient philosopher or messianic figure that does so well all the way through, though I hope one has immediately come to mind for you and that you'll argue with me about this. Truly.

There's one story where you see Jesus using an ethnic slur when addressing the Syro-Phoenician woman, and you get to watch him be checked by this woman, you see him pull back in astonishment as he discovers her faith and worth. He changes his mind instantly, almost gleefully.

And when I read this week's gospel, is there a word I need to hear more, from anyone, right now than this: "Come to me, all you who are weary and heavy-laden, and I will give you rest." Is there anything your soul craves more than to see the image of God, gentle and humble, who says that you don't have to carry this weight? This word is for you.

The weights are myriad right now. Every day, I read a new article about them, about the working moms, who struggled for generations to be allowed to envision a life beyond child-rearing, relegated to the status of inessential workers; moms who already bore the heavier load of household management now being told that they'll have to make a choice. Parents and pediatricians worrying about children's development in isolation, the need to reopen schools; and all of you who work for schools scrambling to reinvent in a calculus of risk, while our technological hubris at "just doing this online" has been proven to be a technological nightmare. And with all of this, every scenario has an outsized effect on the poor, the alone, the ones who were already behind.

The way this pandemic felt in March, when the world ground to a halt for so many, the only redemptive piece for me was this glimmer of a common willingness to make ourselves small and simple on behalf of others. But as James Baldwin wrote, "Where all human connections are distrusted, the human being is quickly lost."<sup>1</sup>

Are you weary? Do you need rest for your souls?

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<sup>1</sup> From *Nothing Personal*, an essay which is well worth your time. <<https://scholarworks.umass.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=1042&context=cibs>>

I was talking with a man last week who asked me to pray for a difficult situation his family is in, two hard diagnoses, one after the other. He quoted Psalm 23 — “It tells me that there is a valley of the shadow of death, even with God,” he said. “Yes,” I said, “and also that we don’t get to go around the valley. We go through it.”

This is the heart of Christianity. That in your darkest hours, at times you’ve sensed Something present, maybe especially present then. That in each of us, there is a strange inkling of gratitude for the beauty and wonder of life — and we say that this gratitude exists because there is a Giver. That we know things are not as they should be, our urge to petition someone to set it right finds a divine audience. And as we search for this divinity, often times it surprises us to find that this good and giving Other is actually doing the searching, for you. And this is the perfect image of God, Christians have declared: a human being who bears the weight with us, who gives you rest.

“Where all human connections are distrusted, the human being is quickly lost.”

Now, every commentator on this verse wants you to know that Jesus’ invitation to rest is not an excuse to have a faith which you lounge on contentedly while the world decays around you. But when I think about the difficulty of this hour we find ourselves in, I remember that this verse has moved me deeply before. The litany of weights may have changed form, but not function. “The poor will always be with you,” Jesus said, and I might add, “So will the anxiety.” It is a little ironic to me that the stress of over-full calendars has now morphed into the stress of empty calendars, but my amusement ends pretty quickly there. What this says to me is that there’s a restlessness in our hearts, that our many milleniae of efforts at constructing a world that answers our longing for peace hasn’t actually got us that far, that the teachings of Jesus have aged well because they speak to something at our core.

How to learn rest in this weary world?

A certain monk came to the Abbot of a monastery and said: “What ought I to do, Father? I am in great sadness.” The elder said to him: “Never despise anybody, never condemn anybody, never speak evil of anyone, and the Lord will give you peace.”

Tradition speaks of sin as a weight, a heaviness. To clear your soul of spite, condemnation, of evil words: every step would be a relief.

Amen.