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The Uncomfortable Comfortable Words

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." Matthew 11:16-19, 25-30

There is a lot going on in today's gospel. It reads more like a three-act short story. We hear a parable first. This parable is harder to crack open than tales of good Samaritans and lost sheep.

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.' Many read this passage and see that the children are Jesus himself and his cousin John the Baptist. They were both preaching and teaching and not everyone was listening and following. And that would still be true today.

We hear about wisdom and the things that only God knows, then we finish up with what are called "comfortable words." "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." Matthew 11:16-19, 25-30. For our second reading we hear a raw open confession of St. Paul in the passage from Romans.

Let's talk about being comfortable and comforted.

Are we comfortable this morning? Not too hot? If the pews are too hard, we do have cushions in the back.

My sister's church in Florida, considered a 'megachurch' because it has thousands of members, they don't have wooden pews at all. They have movie theatre size over-stuffed chairs equipped with cup holders for morning coffee. No comfortable seating for us!

Many of us might say that we come to church to be inspired, challenged, and nourished, but to be made comfortable? That's probably not the first thing we would list. Our old school wooden pews make sure of that.

You may know the oft-quoted phrase (attributed to American humorist and writer Finley Peter Dunne) that was first used to capture the purpose of journalism: Comfort the afflicted, afflict the comfortable. It has also been used for politicians, teachers, and a long list of professions to sharpen their purpose. And it has been used by preachers to talk about the mission of the church.

What is learned from Scripture and heard from the pulpit should not cause us to doze off but call us to respond. The message of the Gospel is always about transformation and change.

Why are the words of Jesus "come to me, all you that are weary and are carrying heavy burdens" called the comfortable words?

The answer goes back to nearly 500 years ago. The Episcopal Church in this country is a product of The Church of England. And in the 16th century there was an Archbishop of Canterbury who found himself in the crosshairs of many powerful people: mainly King Henry VIII and the Pope. And in his spare time, he was the main author and editor of the first Book of Common Prayer in 1549, a revised version sits in every pew in Episcopal and Anglican churches around the world.

Cramner added four sets of comfortable words to follow the absolution after the general confession we say most Sundays: "most merciful God we confess that we have sinned against you...."

Most Sundays – except in the Easter season and on feast days -- we make what is called a general confession. A private confession, or Reconciliation of a Penitent, is available to all but rarely practice in our denomination. We kneel or stand with others, in public, to say what we've done and left undone. And then we are absolved and forgiven. Cramner added four sets of comfortable words from the New Testament to make the point even more emphatically. It was almost as if he was saying: if you don't fully believe the priest, then here are words from Scripture the hit home the point. Our burdens are many, God knows, and we cannot carry them along forever.

Come unto me, all ye that travail and are heavy laden, and I will refresh you. (Book of Common Prayer).

We all carry around baggage and burdens. We each have our own histories and narratives of our lives.

We see how in today's passage from Roman how the apostle Paul was coping with his burdens. He lays it all out there, doesn't he? We see his inner battle between his inner saint and sinner: light and darkness. His discomfort can make us feel uncomfortable.

15 I do not understand my own actions. For I do not do what I want, but I do the very thing I hate. 17But in fact it is no longer I that do it, but sin that dwells within me. 18For I know that nothing good dwells within me, that is, in my flesh. I can will what is right, but I cannot do it. 19For I do not do the good I want, but the evil I do not want is what I do. 24Wretched man that I am! Who will rescue me from this body of death? And then in vs. 25 Thanks be to God through Jesus Christ our Lord! Romans 7:15-25a

Say what you will about the often-maligned apostle to the Gentiles whose writings make up so much of the New Testament, the man was not shy about sharing where he struggled. He wore his heart on his sleeve, as we might say today. And yes, to our ears he can come across as both excessive and compulsive. If we could put the apostle Paul on the therapist couch, what might we learn?

"Calling Dr. Freud" as the expression goes. What little I know about this famous psychiatrist, was how developed his theory of the id, ego, and superego. A basic refresher or introduction.

The id is the primitive and instinctual part of the mind that contains inner drives and hidden memories, the super-ego operates as a moral conscience, and the ego is the realistic part that mediates between the desires of the id and the super-ego. (Saul Mcleod, PhD).

I could be wrong, but what I read in Paul's open struggle between the Law and grace, between who he would like to become and what he would like to do gets caught up and trapped in his sense of failure. He so wants to do what is right. Paul seems to be bouncing back and forth between his id and superego until he finds a place in the middle. He turns to the only force and answer he knows: Who will rescue me from this body of death? 25Thanks be to God through Jesus Christ our Lord!

Paul, so very personal, human, flawed and gifted, found his comfortable words in the manageable middle where his gifts could be channeled outward and beyond to build up the church we know today. This middle where he found that he was not alone – confined by his own his thoughts.

Was he Saint or sinner? -- probably a little bit of both. Our inner journey and the outward expression our faith is often held in balance and tension.

It was the evangelical progressive writer Jim Wallis who said: 'Faith is always personal, but never private.'

British homelessness and poverty activist Jon Kuhrt adds to this description: “Personal convictions are the engine-room of faith. We are each called engage with the world around us and to seek an encounter between our beliefs and a world of desperate need. This is what faith is. A privatized, individualized belief system is not authentic Christianity.”

Here is the hard thing about the Gospel. Many still do not believe that they are worth recuing and saving. How could this all of this be true? I am forgiven again and again when I come before an invisible God with an open heart. Doesn't that only encourage more sin and bad behavior?

I view the confession that we say together as a weekly reset. It reminds me to be honest with myself and more compassionate with others.

It is clear that I am not alone because I am joined by others. We confess. We have not loved. Have mercy and forgive us.

The confession experience and process does not leave me bowed down but anticipates getting lifted up. Joy follows and rest is possible. We pray: That we may delight in your will, and walk in your ways, to the glory of your Name.

Before we are comforted, we should be uncomfortable with the ways of the world. As one Christian magazine put it: “Look around. Every pot on the world's stove is boiling!” (Clyde Kilough, an editor of a Christian magazine based out of Texas).

And God is only willing and ready to help.

28“Come to me, all you that are weary and are carrying heavy burdens, and I will give you rest.