

The Wild Gratitude and the Broad Way that Leads to Life

Matthew 11:25-6, 28-30

This sermon has been brewing in me for a long time—ever since I read a small book by a 19th century French priest, Abbe de Tourville, entitled *Letters of Direction*. In it he writes: “Never follow any narrow way; but on contrary the broadest, the most generous way.”

Well, how does this square with what Jesus said in the Sermon on the Mount, which I preached about a few weeks ago:

Enter by the narrow gate; for the gate is wide and the way is easy that leads to destruction, and those who enter it are many. For the gate is narrow and the way is hard, that leads to life, and those who find it there are few (Matt. 7: 13-14).

And yet today Jesus invites us to rest and to take up his yoke which is easy and his burden which is light.

Sometimes the deepest truths are paradoxical, and we hold in our minds and hearts at the same time, two truths that appear opposites. In the comic “improv” world they work with the “Yes, And” technique. A person starts the skit,

then the next person plays on it not with a “Yes, But”, instead with a “Yes, And”. This is a “Yes, And” sermon.

The first part is about the “wild gratitude” of Jesus and his prayer of thanksgiving when the tide had turned against him. The second is about the broad (not narrow) way that leads to life. These are for me two of the most luminous saying of Jesus, and they both come in Matthew 11.

I

In the first passage Jesus prays a prayer of thanksgiving when he has realized that the tide had turned and that he most probably was facing death on a Roman cross. Thanksgiving amid the ruins.

I thank you, *Abba*,
 Lord of heaven and earth,
 that you have hidden these things
 from the wise and learned
 and revealed them to the little ones,
 yes, *Abba*, such was your gracious will. (Matt. 11:25-6)

Wild gratitude characterized his life all along. “I thank you, *Abba*”, was the beating of his heart, his very pulse saying, “I thank you, *Abba*. As a boy romping in the flowers strewn hillsides of Galilee, “I thank you, *Abba*”. He gave thanks for

God's daily provision, for the wheat springing from earth and the grapes ripening on the vine. He gave thanks for the sun and rain given to *all*, the good and the not so good, the just and unjust, what Reinhold Niebuhr called "the impartial goodness of God." He gave thanks for the lilies of the field and the winging flight of the birds.

Some people saw his joy as unseemly, but Jesus said, The wedding is here, and the bride and bridegroom; shall we not dance?! "I thank you, *Abba*."

But now there was a terrible reversal, the wise and learned, the big shots and power-brokers had turned against him. And, the little ones of the world were following him with joy. And Jesus gave thanks.

Jesus brought what John Dominic Crossan called "a brokerless kingdom", and the religious leader were loathe to give up their exclusive franchise on God. (They still are!) A Harvard degree, a Ph.D. in theology do not ensure an openness to Jesus. They may get in the way. The wise and learned often do not know their need of God. My many books are my fortress against my need, sometimes against my need of God.

But look who were responding! The *nepioi*, the little ones. He was talking about more than the children, about all who were powerless, of no significance, the shunned and shut out.

“Unless you change and become as a child you shall not enter the kingdom”, Jesus said. Jesus called *everybody* to change, change in the ways they most needed to change. But this change was *always* needed. To change and become as a child is to live with wide-open need and wide-open wonder. It is also to live feeling powerless, confused, sometimes afraid.

I see parents following right behind their toddler beginning to walk. The toddler takes those brave steps, and then something changes under their feet—carpet, or uneven ground. They instinctively reach up their hand for the parent to catch. As a child we enter.

But now the baffling word about God having *hidden* the gospel from the wise and learned. Was God actively hiding the truth of the gospel to some? I think not; the gospel Jesus brought was hiding in plain sight. It was hidden in the lowliness of it, the simplicity of it. Their eyes and expectations were looking elsewhere.

But Jesus wouldn't let his heart dwell on that. Instead he joy-ed in those saying yes. “I thank you, *Abba*.”

This, he said, was his *Abba's* gracious will. The beautiful Greek word for it, both in its sound and in its meaning, was *eudokia*, literally, good pleasure. *Eu*, good, *dokia*, pleasure. Often the “will of God” is associated with bad things

happening. But here Jesus turns it all around. It's about God's good pleasure, *eudokia*, the *good* that God wants and wills for us all.

II

Now to the broad way that leads to life. And to these beloved words of Jesus:

Come unto me, all you who are weary and heavy laden, and I will give you rest (Matt. 11:28).

All, not some. And rest, blessed rest. Rest for our bodies, and for our minds which sometimes will not give us rest, and for our spirits too often heavy laden. Is there not a more welcome word than "rest"?

"Take my yoke upon you", he said. It is a voluntary yoke, not forced upon you. "And learn from me, *of me*", Jesus said. Not just his words, but his way, his heart. "For I am gentle and lowly in heart." How many make Jesus a hard master?! Later in Matthew he is described as one who doesn't "break the bruised reed" or "quench the flickering wick." Too often Jesus' followers are all too ready to pounce on the weak and fragile. But not Jesus. We, he says, find rest in him. Not a hard regime of religious requirements. Rest.

His yoke is easy. It is fitted just to you. And his burden is light. Abbe de Tourville was trying to teach me this 20 years ago as I began to read his little

book. He was a French priest in Paris who so exhausted himself in eight years of duties as a parish priest that he had a breakdown. He went into the countryside for the rest of his life where people came to him for spiritual guidance. His *Letters of Direction* show you why so many came to him.

I remember when I first read his words and their opening to me a new way of thinking about Jesus and of our following of him. Listen to these words with me.

Never follow any narrow way; on the contrary choose the broadest, most generous way. That is the only one for you, the only one which will lead you into the Truth. And apart from that there is nothing good.

Go straight ahead then and reach for you true equilibrium through the tranquil and wholly generous instinct which brings back nature [including your nature] as God has created it....

Shall I go on?

Let us be able to depend quietly on ourselves. Let us gladly judge for ourselves which things most help, guide, and teach us, by observing the degree in which they fit our own particular temperament, learning by experience those things which help us and which we most need.

Then he went on with these words which sounded brand new to me:

And then do not let us trouble about anything else.

He's talking about worrying about other's judgment and opinion about how we live out our spiritual lives. He concludes:

For when we are being true to ourselves, we are in the best relationship we can reasonably expect to be in with everything else.

Everyone's spiritual path is unique to them. There's no one way of following Jesus. Are you beginning to feel a bit easier in your own spirit? I do, as one who grew up earning all those "100% Attendance" pins!

I think Abbe de Tourville's words came from his view of God. He says later in the book:

Be bold enough always to believe that God is on your side and wholly yours, whatever you think of yourself.¹

Somedays you may not think much of yourself. But God is always on your side and wholly yours. Here is the broad way that leads to life. Wherever you get in step with your most generous instinct, you are in synch with God.

I have at various times in my life tried some pretty demanding spiritual regimens to help the state of my soul. Usually they did not work and most were short lived. I was following someone else's dictates—and it wasn't *Jesus!*

Years ago I read a novel about a Protestant American missionary in China, *The Call*, by John Hersey. In it described the life-long inner struggle of the missionary. And this was how he described his life-long struggle:

...to subdue the greater but sicker saint in himself and give himself to a more modest state of being: one of balance, sanity, serenity and realized human love....²

I've lived that struggle even to this day—which may be no surprise to you. That's why the words of the French priest struck so deeply years ago, and to this day. I am learning Jesus' heart, lowly and gentle and I am discovering his yoke, and his burden as "kindly and light".

The German theologian Jurgen Moltmann entitled his autobiography *A Broad Place*, taken from a verse from the Psalms that I had not read: "Thou hast set my feet in a broad place." (Psalm 31:8). In it he tells of his life moving from narrow places which were stifling him to the broad places that had brought him life. From a Nazi youth serving in the war, to his conversion in a Scottish prisoner of war camp, to his training to be a theological professor, to his embrace of the liberation theologies arising in the southern hemispheres, all which he named a "Theology of Hope."

The Hebrew word for salvation means literally “to make wide”. Like, make wide for the Hebrew people to move from slavery to freedom, and from Exile back home. It is moving from the narrow suffocating spaces to the wide-open spaces where you are able to breathe again. God wants you to breathe easy, deeply, to find the broad way that leads to life, the way that gets you in touch with the generous instinct inside you and following a God that is on your side and wholly yours. Breathe free. Open your minds, your hands and hearts.

This feels like the way to daybreak.

Amen

1. Abbe De Tourville, *Letters Of Direction* (London: Dacre Press, 1954), 15-16, 78.
2. John Hersey, *The Call: An American Missionary in China* (N.Y.: Alfred A. Knopf, 1985),17.