

Learn of Me

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Rilke the poet wrote of knowledge as pleasure, “inexhaustible pleasure.” It is, and it is especially true as we learn of Christ. Today’s liberating command is “Learn of me.” It is found right in the middle of one of Jesus’ most beloved sayings:

Come unto me you who are weary and heavy laden, and I will give you rest. Take my yoke upon you and learn of me, for I am gentle and lowly in heart, and you will find rest for you souls. For my yoke is easy and my burden is light.

There are not many words of Jesus more welcoming than these. For life can be a terribly heavy burden—and too often religion piles on, heaping on more rather than lightening the load.

Jesus challenged the religious leaders of his day with these words:

They bind heavy burdens, hard to bear, and lay them on people’s shoulders, but they themselves will not move them with their fingers (Matthew 23:4)

Eugene Peterson translates it this way:

Instead of giving you God's Law as food and drink by which you can banquet on God, they package it in bundles of rules, loading you down like pack animals. They seem to take pleasure in watching you stagger under these loads, and wouldn't think of lifting a finger to help. (*The Message*, p. 1791)

But here comes Jesus saying,

Come unto me you that are weary and heavy laden, and I will give you rest. Take my yoke upon you and learn of me, for I am gentle and lowly in heart, and you will find rest for your souls. For my yoke is easy and my burden is light.

I

The passage hinges on the words, "learn of me." In T.H. White's novel based on the King Arthur stories, *The Once and Future King*, Merlin says, The best thing for being sad is to learn something. That is the only thing that never fails. You may grow old and trembling in your anatomies, you may lie awake at nights listening to the disorder of your veins, you may miss your only true love, you may see the world around you devastated by evil lunatics, or know your honor trampled in the sewer of baser minds. There is only one thing for it then—to learn. Learning is the thing for you.

Quaker writer Parker Palmer writes:

Only when we are open to the grace called learning will we not be ruined
but restored by the great sadnesses life can bring.

The grace of learning is what this sermon is about, especially the grace of learning
Christ, the divine Wisdom made flesh.

II

Jesus invites us to the grace of learning. “Learn from me” is one translation
of his words. “Learn of me” is better. The learning is more than the learning of
facts. It is a personal learning. It is about how to live and how to be. We are
human *beings*, not human *doings*. How then shall we live since Christ has called
us to himself to learn of him?

This learning is about more than hearing Jesus’ words; it is about watching,
watching his life. It is about imitating as best we can this man Jesus.

‘Learn of me’, Jesus said. The word “disciple” means *learner*. It is a deep
personal kind of learning. Dallas Willard says that being a disciple is becoming an
apprentice of Jesus. And he defines apprentice as:

...Someone who has decided to be with another person, under appropriate conditions, in order to become capable of doing what this person does or to become what that person is.¹

So we are apprentices of Christ. And as for “the appropriate conditions.”? A community of apprentices. Church, where people have been learning Christ for 20 centuries.

When we become apprentices of Christ we not only get in touch with the teachings of the historical Jesus, we get in touch with the Christ, in whom, for whom we were made, to use Paul’s words. And this Christ within is gentle and lowly of heart.

Thomas A’Kempis, a Christian mystic and spiritual writer, author of the classic, *The Imitation of Christ* wrote that we are to develop “a familiar friendship with Jesus.” Jesus the friend who says, Come unto me, take my yoke, learn of me.

In my familiar friendship with Jesus I’ve grown to love sayings of Jesus, saying which are joy and rest to me.

Like this one “The kingdom of God is within you (*entos* you in the Greek), among you, in your midst.”

Or this one: “In this world you will find tribulation, but be of good cheer; I have overcome the world.”

Or this one, “whoever drinks of the water that I shall give will never thirst; the water that I shall give, will become a spring of water welling up [from deep within] to eternal life (John 4:14).

Or this one: “No one can serve two masters.” It is advice to all of us who live divided lives and want to live divided no more.

And how many times did he say to us “Fear not”, knowing that fear itself can become a storm that takes us under.

III

How can Jesus’ teaching give us rest. How can the yoke be easy and the burden light? Because Jesus is the Wisdom of God made flesh, and the divine Wisdom is deep within us all.

In Proverbs the wisdom of God is named *Hochma* in the Hebrew, *Sophia* in the Greek; it is personified in Proverbs in the feminine as God’s daughter and darling child. Hochma, Sophia, Wisdom was there by God’s side at the creation of the universe, assisting God in the act of Creation.

I think it would be proper to substitute the word Wisdom for “Word” in the prologue of John’s gospel:

In the beginning was Wisdom
 and Wisdom was with God and was God.
 Wisdom was in the beginning with God.
 All things were made through Wisdom
 and without Wisdom was not anything made that was made
 In Wisdom was life,
 and the life was the light of all.
 And Wisdom became flesh and dwelt among us...
 full of grace and truth.

Here is a startling theological move. Hochma, Sophia, Wisdom, God’s daughter became flesh as Jesus the son. He is the Divine Wisdom made flesh.

In the book of Sirach, or Ecclesiasticus, written between the Old and new Testaments in the set of writings called the Apocrypha which is included in some Bibles, we hear these words:

Come unto her (Wisdom, Sophia, Hochma)
 like one who plows and sows and
 works for her good harvest...

Put your feet in her fetters,
and your neck into her collar...
Come to her with all your soul
and keep her ways with all your might.
And when you get hold of her
do not let her go.
for at last you will find the rest she gives,
and she will be changed into joy for you...

(Sirach 6:19, 24-28)

Did Jesus see himself as the Wisdom, Sophia, Hochma of God?

The reason the wisdom of Jesus give us rest is because it is the Wisdom planted deeply within us. It is congruent with our deepest nature.

Poet Robert Frost said that freedom is “being easy in your harness.” This is the yoke Jesus was talking about. Maybe the yoke Jesus offers us is one fashioned especially and only for us. That is why when we place it on it is easy and the burden light. Wisdom is becoming who we down deep are. Thomas Merton, the most famous American monk wrote:

There is in all things an invisible fecundity...a hidden wholeness.

The wisdom of Jesus unites us with our hidden wholeness.

IV

As such Jesus the teacher is gentle and lowly of heart and we will find rest for our souls.

You may be familiar with the award winning children’s novels by Katherine Peterson—books like *Bridge to Terabithia*. In a more recent novel, *the Same Stuff as Stars*, Paterson describes the main character a girl named Angel, as she for the first time falls in love with learning. Here is the passage:

She stretched out on her bed and opened the worn paperback called *Know the Stars*. “Few people,” it began, “can tell one star from another, yet it is not difficult to know them.”

Angel blinked at that wonderful first sentence. She was ignorant, but she was not alone. The writer of this book, H.A. Rey, thought she could learn, not like the guy who wrote the encyclopedia article, who thought she has to know everything first before she could understand anything, The writer went on: “Simple shepherds 5,000 years ago were familiar with the heavens; they knew the stars and constellation—and they could not even read and write—so why don’t you?” A feeling totally unknown to her flooded her with warmth. Maybe it was what some people called “love at

first sight.” She loved this writer. She loved his book. He knew her and didn’t sneer...he loved the night sky, and he wanted to teach us all about it.²

Jesus knows the night sky of God and wants to teach us all about it. He knows us and does not sneer. He invites us to a knowledge—O, inexhaustible pleasure—available to all of us. He doesn’t think we have to know everything before we can understand anything.

Learn of me, he says, for I am gentle and lowly of heart, and you will find rest for your souls. For my yoke is [oddly] easy and my burden is—can you believe it?—light.

Learning of Christ means not only attending to his words—which we are doing this Lent. It also means, as I suggested above, watching him, observing his life, his actions, how he treated people. Eating with tax-collectors and sinners, lifting up the fallen and those bowed low, befriending Nicodemus the searcher and Zaccheus the tax-collector, and the woman at the well, and the Syrophonecian woman with the sick child, and the woman taken in adultery, and the leper who cried out “Lord you can heal me, if you want”, and Jesus said “I want” and healed him, and inviting Mary Magdalene and other women to be disciples, and picking up children in his arms and saying “It is to one such as this child that the kingdom of God belongs.”

Listen to him, watch him, imitate him as best you can and you will learn of him. Here is one whose commands are liberating because he knows our frame and is gentle and lowly of heart.

Will you come, learn of him?

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1. Dallas Willard, *The Divine Conspiracy* (San Francisco: Harper San Francisco, 1998), p. 282
 2. Katherine Paterson, *The Same Stuff As Stars*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002), pp. 128-9.