

Lectionary 14 + July 9, 2017

Along with several folks from PRLC, Britt and I were in Wittenberg, Germany a few weeks ago, to participate in a tour celebrating the 500th Anniversary of the Reformation.

We visited the place where Martin Luther was born, the place where he lived, the place where he died, the church where he was baptized, churches where he preached and taught. We even got to see the door! The door where it is believed he posted 95 Theses inviting conversation around important matters in the life of the church. Little did he know such a gesture would begin an extreme make-over in both church and culture.

I guess you could describe the experience as a kind of “Disneyland for Lutherans.”

The wonderful thing about this trip is that I have enough stories and anecdotes to fill sermons for weeks on end.

The not-so-wonderful thing about this trip is that I have enough stories and anecdotes to fill sermons for weeks on end.

Let me know if I’m wearing you down with Germany stories. I do ask your indulgence for at least today.

One of the places we visited that made an impression on me was the Wartburg Castle where Luther was in hiding for almost a year because he was banned by the Emperor and his life was in danger. There at the Wartburg he studied and wrote treatises and translated the Bible from Greek into the common language of the Germans.

We visited the place, the study, where much of this took place. Much to my surprise, I got goosebumps. Rarely does this happen, but for whatever reason the hair on my skin stood up and I was struck with a sense of awe, maybe because it jogged my mind and heart to Luther’s journey with the Bible, for in that journey he experienced great freedom and liberation:

- Moving from a sense of God as a tyrant needing to be appeased to a fresh awareness of God as merciful lover
- Discovering in Jesus the gift of forgiveness
- Moving away from a way of life that is all about getting to heaven and into the liberating good news that God stepped down from heaven to come to earth
- Discovering beneath the printed word the voice of the living God

I wonder if today’s Gospel lesson was an important one for Luther.

Jesus says, “Come to me, all you who 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.”

This is a radical and freeing word. Just when we have convinced ourselves that a relationship with God requires more effort and work, we discover that Jesus is with us to lighten our loads and give us rest!

The service of Compline is the daily prayer service prayed at nighttime, often just before you shut your eyes to go to sleep and this is one of the Scripture readings for the Compline service. Makes sense. At the end of the day, we come to rest and Jesus invites us to rest in him. Good news for any day, but especially when you're tired or burnt out or stressed out, but I think Jesus' invitation to come to him is even more specific than that.

The weariness and heavy burden of which Jesus speaks is the burden of living under bad religion, or being mired in legalism or perfectionism. It's the business that plagued young Luther, where we find ourselves on a never-ending treadmill of trying to make ourselves right or good or spiritual and the result is that we're never good enough.

I have a friend who is a Spiritual Director. She tells me that in her many years of accompanying people in their journey of faith, common themes pop up. One of these themes is healing our image of God. Sometimes people have been weaned on an image of God as a God who is not merciful but angry or rigid. This is a god no one can ever satisfy. My friend tells me that often, when this image of God is transformed in to a life-giving picture of God, lives change.

Come to me, says Jesus. You who are weary and carrying heavy burdens. I will give you rest ... my yoke is easy; my burden is light.

Come to me, says Jesus, especially if you are burned out on religion, worn down and worn out because you're trying to be perfect or feel you're not good enough, embittered because you just can't seem to get it right.

In our earnest attempts at being good, we end up trying too hard and we become fearful, anxious, angry and self-righteous.

And here is the surprise of the Gospel: Jesus says, "Enough. Give it a rest. In fact, I'll give you rest. I take you as you are, not as anyone thinks you should be, not as you think you should be. My yoke is easy. My burden is light."

Now, it isn't as though Jesus doesn't expect anything from us. Naturally, disciples want to learn and follow their master, but here is the difference: the yoke, anciently known as an instrument of work, isn't the measuring rod or a task of duties. It comes in the shape of a Cross. A cross we are commanded to take up, but first of all, a cross that has been traced on our bodies.

As Luther famously said, "Before you take Christ as an example; see him first as a gift."

Do you see, we are yoked to Christ and to one another in the community of Christ. The one who gives us rest, gives us what we need to love others, even at great cost, because we are free.

And so, we come to God always not with a report card, or a tally sheet, or a list of accomplishments, but we come as we are, and often we echo the words of St. Paul – “I do not understand my own actions; I do not do what I want, but I do the very thing I hate.” O, Lord have mercy!

The great gift of confessing to God isn't about feeling bad or guilty, but simply being honest. The entire reason to lean on Jesus even more!

Once again, Jesus has gathered us to himself and to one another around the bath, around the word and soon around the supper and in Jesus we find our rest in Jesus learns from Jesus. And we get to see the true picture of God who is gentle and humble in heart.

It's a good yoke to wear. Amen.