



## SERMONS THAT WORK

### Pentecost 5 Proper 9 (A)

#### Come to Me

[RCL]: Genesis 24:34-38, 42-49, 58-67; Psalm 45: 11-18 or Song of Solomon 2:8-13;  
Romans 7:15-25a; Matthew 11:16-19, 25-30

In our Gospel lesson, Jesus says, “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.”

It has been a wearying time to be the church lately. The grief over the loss of so many lives to the coronavirus is a hard weight to bear in our families, in our communities, in our nation, in our world, in our churches. The loss of jobs and livelihoods is devastating. The inability to meet face to face, to congregate, to embrace, to comfort, and to console in person is nothing but a loss – a deep, aching loss. The shutting down of so much and the staying inside so long has felt like a long slog with heavy packs.

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The leadership in our churches has been extraordinary. They’ve done amazing work livestreaming worship, recording sermons, creating virtual choirs, checking in with people via telephone, leading online Bible studies, and attending zillions of zoom meetings.

And yet, we also hear how wearying all this has been. Learning new technologies is frustrating. We spend hours upon hours recording and uploading a fifteen-minute sermon or a four-minute hymn and wonder how can this be. Online meeting formats seem designed to suck the life out of people, leaving us depleted.

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The pandemic has exposed truths about ourselves that are hard to face. Inequalities in health care. Disparities in educational opportunities. The persistent and pervasive racism in our society.

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It has also exposed truths about the church that are hard to face. The pressures on the church in late modern society have been a dull ache that we could ignore in better times. The pandemic has laid bare the ways we have been boxed in, squeezed out, and pushed around by late modern society.

We scramble to respond, but so often, despite our best intentions, we end up speaking in the terms and acting according to the rules that society sets for us, rather than in accordance with the life and truth that we know in Christ, in the church, in the Gospel, in our traditions, in our faith, in our practices.

It is wearying to confront these truths. It is a burden to feel the need to constantly justify ourselves according to the rules of a game we did not choose. It's hard enough to live out the vision of the kingdom that our Lord gives to us. *Blessed are the poor ... blessed are the meek ... blessed are those who mourn ...* Now we are expected to show how this way of life is also reasonable, useful, inoffensive. It's tiring playing by somebody else's rules. Especially when we seem to know better and can't help ourselves.

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One burden the late modern world lays upon us is to treat religion as a commodity. We know better. We worship the Lord who is the source of all truth and value. We reject the commodification of all things. You can't put a price tag on truth, goodness, and beauty; on life, relationships, and love; on forgiveness, reconciliation, and peace; on all the things that make life worth living.

And yet, the pandemic has exposed how often we treat religion as a commodity. We offer user-friendly versions of Christian faith to help seekers round out their journeys to self-fulfillment. Because we could not gather for worship in our church buildings, we fretted about how to provide worship, deliver sermons, and offer pastoral care remotely. In The Episcopal Church, unedifying squabbles over virtual communion have been revealing. How do we get the presence of Christ in the bread and the wine, in the hands and the mouths, in the hearts and the souls of the faithful?

We know better. We know that our Eucharistic sacrifice of praise and thanksgiving is a participation in the eternal sacrifice of Christ before the throne of heaven. Forever, for all times and for everyone, in the triune life of God, Christ offers himself for us and for our salvation. We know this, and yet the pandemic reveals how often we behave as if it is our job to provide the Eucharistic presence of Jesus to consumers.

This weight we cannot lift. We know this, and yet instead of repenting of our complicity in the commodification of communion, we bicker with one another over the delivery system. It is wearying.

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A second way late modern society boxes us in is by saying religion must be a purely private matter. As long as we keep our faith to ourselves, we will be tolerated. Cross the line and dare to speak about matters of public concern and we get labeled as fanatics, or at least as unintentional accomplices to fanatics.

Some Christians have complied with this stricture. The so-called father of modern theology, Friedrich Schleiermacher, said that Christian faith was not a matter of knowing or doing. Rather, Christian faith was, at heart, a feeling: a sense and taste for the infinite; a feeling of absolute dependence.

We know this cannot be true. The Gospels don't give us much insight into the interior lives and feelings of Jesus and the disciples, but we do witness a lot of doing. Jesus moves and acts in public space, healing, teaching, feeding, proclaiming, forgiving, loving. He was turned over to the Roman authorities, publicly executed, and rose again on the third day. The kingdom of God is announced, enacted, and embodied in public. The Gospel is not about the private life of Jesus, but the politics of Jesus.

We rightly push back against the privatization of Christianity. But when we do so we tend to adopt the politics of the modern nation-state instead of the politics of the church. It seems as though we cannot conceive of a politics other than the partisan wrangling over the making and enforcing of laws. We anachronistically apply late modern notions of partisan politics to Jesus' proclamation of the kingdom.

We know better than this. We know that the body politic for the early church was not the nation-state (it didn't exist) nor the Roman empire, but rather the church. If politics is about humans living in a storied community with a mission that enables them to flourish and to discover their true destiny, then the *polis* for Christians is the *ecclesia*. The body politic is the body of Christ.

We know this. We also know that the massive machinery of the modern state is not designed to form people of Christian character. And yet as the pandemic has revealed, when the church tries to get political, it usually adopts the role of advisor to the nation. We rightly insist that Christian faith is not private. It is political as well as personal. But in claiming a political dimension, the church too often skips over the politics of the body of Christ and primarily engages the partisan wrangling of the state.

Sometimes it seems like we cannot even imagine another way to claim the politics of Jesus. We extract principles of justice or love from the scriptures and use them to make statements about the hot topics of the day. For the most part, these statements are true and well said. There are too many guns in our society. There is too little access to health care. There are massive inequities in education.

More often than not, lawmakers simply ignore our advice, if they are even aware of it. We must frankly admit, when people in power do not heed our council, we can sometimes grow shrill and strident. If the nation fails to take our political advice, perhaps they will hear our prophetic outrage.

We know better than this. The politics of Jesus' love and justice are first to be lived out in the body of Christ. The most eloquent witness we may make to the state is the public display of a community that is formed by the story of Jesus, embodied in lives poured out in service to God and the world. The politics of the church is lived out in witness and mission.

And yet we can't seem to help ourselves. We confuse the politics of the kingdom with the politics of the nation. We want to be trusted advisors or prophetic figures. But people in power don't listen or care. So we try again, more loudly, more persuasively, more realistically. It is exhausting.

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A third way late modern society squeezes the church's ministry is the reduction of pastoral care to a form of therapy. Therapy is more concerned with the techniques of treatment than with the goals of human life. Therapists help not by judging the rightness or wrongness of people's visions of the good life, but rather, through the practices of presence, acceptance, listening, and empathy, they help people in their journeys toward healing and wholeness. In the chaos and confusions of modern life, some may find it helpful to talk to their priest about their problems, while others may seek out a therapist.

We know pastoral care is more than therapy. It is the cure of souls. Of course, priests and pastors will learn from therapists. Pastoral care givers need to be competent. Many therapists are gifted professionals. Yet, we also know that much of the pain in modern life is not only caused by people hitting roadblocks on the way to achieving their self-appointed goals, but also because people don't know the goods they should seek, the values they should cherish, the vices they should abhor, and the virtues they should practice.

Late modern life is chaotic. Our suffering is not just emotional, but also cognitive. There are ways that are life-giving and there are ways that are death-dealing. Surely pastoral care is not helping people become more well-adjusted to the ways of denial, degradation, destruction, death.

In the cure of souls, healing is about reconciliation, God's reconciliation. It is not about adapting better to the problems and perplexities of late modern life, but rather about participating in the story of God's redemption, the God who brought the Israelites out of bondage in Egypt, the God who raised Jesus Christ from the dead. Healing and reconciliation in light of this story may make us appear more peculiar and odd in modern society than well-adapted and well-adjusted.

The pandemic is revealing the pressure put upon churches to reduce pastoral care to therapy. Churches, communities of faith, priests, pastors, and other caregivers are being called upon to help people to deal with the staggering amount of death, loss, grief, and suffering unleashed by the spread of the coronavirus. Yes, of course, one hundred percent agreed.

But the rhetoric is revealing. We are to help people “get through” these tough times until life “returns to normal” and we can get “back to business.” Here we want to push back. We know pastoral care ought not to be simply applying spiritual bandages. What is the “normal” and the “business” we are returning to? Why should we help accommodate people to the despoliation of creation, the sin of racism, the human wreckage of wealth inequalities?

We know better. We know that true healing only comes from the God who promised a new heaven and a new earth, a time when the veil that separates the nations will be pulled back, when all peoples will share in the abundance of God’s creation, when all tears will be wiped away, when pain and mourning and death will be no more.

We know this and we remember it as we are called upon to help communities and people through this hard and confusing time. In our pastoral care, we try to point to this vision of healing and hope, and yet we fear we may also be co-opted by forces and powers we don’t fully understand, to apply a little spiritual salve to our collective wounds so that we can be sent out again into the churning void. It is wearying.

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This is a wearying time for the church. Our Gospel lesson offers genuine comfort to those of us who are weary and carrying heavy burdens. Yet we must guard against turning Jesus into someone or something he is not. He is not a commodity that we distribute to consumers. He is not a professor of political theory. He is not a modern therapist. He is the One whom we meet in Matthew’s Gospel: the personification of Wisdom, the Son of God, Israel’s Messiah, the Crucified and Risen Lord, the founder of the Messianic Kingdom, the One who promises true rest, sabbath rest, foretold in creation, made flesh and blood in his person, fulfilled in the Messianic banquet.

It is his yoke that is easy. It is his burden that is light. It is in him that we will find rest for our weary souls.

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