

Sermon July 5, 2020

“Why Is the Easy Way Hard for Us?”

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First Lutheran—West Allis, WI “Why Is the Easy Way Hard for Us?”

Grace and Peace to you in the name of God our loving Creator and Our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ!

Our texts today make things pretty easy on me as a preacher and you as a congregation if you've been listening to any of the last sermons I've preached online. The texts allow for a reminder and emphasizing of some of the points the texts have addressed the last few weeks. Jesus says his yoke is easy and today let's take him at his word rather than get stuck too long in what the prophet Zechariah calls a waterless pit!

Last week we were talking about what it means for “All” to be welcome at First and our psalm today Psalm 145 emphasizes the concept of “all” not only with its words but also its structure. Do any of you remember a book from your childhood that taught you the alphabet, from A to Z? What does it mean to go from A to Z? In Greek, the terms Alpha and Omega are used in the book of Revelation to show that Jesus is the beginning and the end and has been there from the beginning of creation and at the re-creation. Connecting all things and all time.

Psalm 145 is one of the psalms where each line starts with a different letter of the Hebrew alphabet from aleph to tav. If you look closely at the text you see one word repeated over and over that starts with the letter “A”. The word “all” or “kol” in Hebrew is repeated 17 times in this psalm to remind us God is “good to *all* and his compassion is over *all*” in verse 10 and in verse 13 that the Lord is

faithful in “*all* his works and gracious in *all* his deeds”. And finally, it says “The Lord upholds *all* who are falling and raises up *all* who are bowed down”.

All the “alls” of this psalm are there to represent the character of God for us. God has created all things. God's goodness and grace is for all. And it is central to God's character to be with those who are falling down—those who need help will be held up and supported by God, and those who have been forced down by others will be lifted up by God. This is a signal about the type of God we have and the type of messiah Jesus will be. These are words of support for those burdened by the world and subjugated by others will be relieved of their burdens by a God who comes to them as Jesus reminds us later in Matthew to show he is that messiah.

Jesus talks about setting the prisoners free in Matthew and he echoes words of Zechariah who describes the type of messiah who will come as “humble and riding on a donkey”. “Humility” is characteristic of the messiah of Zechariah here actually means that the king that is to come will be representing the impoverished and socially vulnerable. This Messiah does not come from power but from the streets, from the poor, and represents their interests, not the interests of the powerful or privileged.

The idea of Jesus being humble often coincides with ideas of a passive savior who is there to serve our needs and doesn't want to cause trouble, but anyone who knows Jesus knows he didn't avoid trouble-- he made trouble. Jesus didn't make trouble in terms of violence or war, Zechariah signals this is a different type of messiah. He will represent the powerless and overthrow the powerful who seek to protect the status quo and the false peace of empire. When Zechariah says that he will free the prisoner from a waterless pit and that “prisoners of hope” will be restored double, we may say “oh that's nice,” but

this is a signal about God's character and in contrast to human sin. If we ask who are those people in prison and why are they there, we recognized that Zechariah is describing prisoners of the empire, prisoners who are being held because they make trouble for those in power or don't have power in society. They are not guilty of God's law, but are prisoners of hope, waiting for the truth to set them free. In Toledo, I knew a man who was exonerated by DNA evidence after being in prison for two decades. That's who Zechariah is saying will be restored double because people in power abused the law in order to convict them and hold them. Those that have done this will be punished and the people in the prisons will be freed.

Zechariah says this messiah does not come to conquer in a war horse that will triumph over enemies, but he seeks to triumph over war, not perceived enemies. His enemy is war itself. In verse 10 it says he will "command peace to the nations". Even though he brings peace, we may bristle with reactions to someone who sounds like a revolutionary. So what do you think do you still want to follow this guy?

The peace he is bringing is something that needs to be commanded otherwise we would always find a way out of it. We like blaming others. In any conflict we are always right, doesn't Jesus know that?

All too well! That's why the Apostle Paul in Romans reminds us even when we try to do right we get stuck in sin. A couple of weeks ago I preached about how Jesus saw the law and rule following and enforcement as becoming an idol that separated people from the relationship with God and others that the law was supposed to lead them too. When the law becomes primary it can become our God, and that makes God mad. That law leads us astray, while Jesus' law reminds us we are dependent on God. I know that this is the day

after Independence Day, but with Jesus true freedom comes with the truth that we are dependant on God.

Paul continues on this theme saying that "I do not do the good I want but the evil I do not want is what I do!" It's a trap! Paul is revealing the truth of human sin. Humans cannot invent our way out of sin. The more we try, even the more we try to get it right, the deeper we get stuck and the further away from God we end up. How can that be? When we rely on the law, when we trust the rules will get us to the reward, we aren't relying on God and we aren't trusting God the way Jesus taught us. The goal is the relationship. The goal is living in and sharing the grace of God, not teaching people how to get it right with something outside of that relationship. When the law is bringing you into relationship with a living and loving God that is what God wants. This is Jesus' way of understanding the law.

Jesus didn't offer a hard law but a gentle one. When Jesus talks about his easy yoke, he's using an expression of a teacher, a rabbi. Rabbis taught people how to understand God's law and when you followed a teacher you were yoked with them. When you experienced the world, you would imagine that teacher with you in those experiences.

And that relationship with God, means being with the people God cares about and the people God is with. That means going to the sinner who is stuck in sin, especially the people trying to dig themselves out of a hole, when asking God for help is the easy yoke right in front of them. But throughout these texts and the ones we've read in the last few weeks, we've been reminded that God is with the poor and those that are overlooked, or locked away, out of sight and out of mind from the well to do.

Jesus is the fulfillment of Zechariah's prophecy and he is coming to free the humble, the bowed down, the imprisoned. If you want to know the truth about the world, the truth about yourself, the truth about justice, lean into the wisdom of those who have been on the road with Jesus, and those that have been pushed to the side of the road. To be yoked with Jesus is being called into relationship with those that God names as the first people he's coming for. I always think of that First when I think of churches like this one that are named "first", because with Jesus the last shall be first!

The yoke that connects us with God and our neighbors is an easy one because it is reminding us that God is with us and will lead us to those God wants us to see and hear! If we are with Jesus, we are with those the world looks away from, puts in boxes and lock away in stereotypes. The same way others try to lock him away in a stereotype in the text because he eats and drinks with sinful people. For us, we may be called a fool to follow a God that leads us to them, when we are truly wise.

Jesus says that those people who would call us fools...those who pretend to know how the world works and how to get it right, are just playing games like children. They try to avoid responsibility and the prophet's mirror that shows them the truth about themselves, by finding excuses to put people and prophets in boxes and ghettos, and then they think they can teach others how the world works. Jesus says that they are just children playing games. Last week, I had my cousin Jake read the prophet Jeremiah's words sarcastically and Jesus has some of that sarcasm in his voice when he says to God in front of those supposedly seeking the truth, "Thank you Father, Lord of heaven and earth, because you have hidden these things from *the wise and intelligent* and revealed them to infants".

What is the lesson that has been revealed to infants that the people that think they have it figured out don't get? Infants know they need help. They wouldn't make it very far on their own and neither can we. All God wants from us is to ask for help. All God wants is for us to learn the ABCs of Jesus' love for all people. If all you care about is what other people think, you carry a heavy burden in this world. You will always find some way and some reason you are falling short, and some way to pretend you are right, that hurts other people. But if you have humility of a God who stands with those that know they need help... If you can admit that you also need help, then we are brothers and sisters, not enemies. Then we are ready to listen to the commands of the only authority that matters...the One who commands peace to the nations and commands us come to him, if we are tired and weary from the world. We have a teacher who commands us to trust him, and to take his gentle yoke and share in his humility, so we may find true rest, true peace, and the truth that sets all the prisoners free.

May the Peace that Passes All Understanding Keep Your Heart and Your Mind in Christ Jesus Our Lord. Amen.