

## Matthew 11:16-19, 25-30

An image I saw in the paper this week keeps coming to mind as I read Jesus' words about things hidden from the wise and revealed to infants: it's actually a video of a chimpanzee named Vanilla who was born in a laboratory and used in experiments until 2015. She lived in a cage all her life. Now, at age 28, Vanilla is released into a new habitat run by a chimpanzee rescue in Florida. You see her come out of the building and look at the sky, and her jaw just drops. She has the purest expression of awe on her face you've ever seen.<sup>i</sup>

It's this simplicity that Jesus ends his discourse with: what is in front of you is miraculous. All of Matthew 10 was his instructions to the disciples whom he was sending out—and therefore to his followers across time—about how to enact the kingdom, how to deal with adversity, and so forth. He wound up, as you'll remember from last week, by making it super-simple: those who welcome the least, welcome Jesus himself. Then in Chapter 11 John the Baptist bobs up momentarily, and Jesus points out how dense people are at recognizing God's messengers: John presented as an ascetic, wearing skins and eating forage, and they thought he had a demon. Jesus came, all sociable and eating with every kind of person imaginable, and they thought he was a glutton and a drunkard. "There's no winning with you people," he says, "yet wisdom is vindicated by her deeds."

Jesus is going to go from complication to simplicity, through wisdom. The nerdy among us will take pleasure in knowing that Matthew, who sees Jesus as the new Moses, is here ringing changes on the first giving of the law, which told people what it took to live well, fully, faithfully.

The declaration that the Father and the Son know each other in an exclusive fashion harkens back to Exodus 33, where God knows Moses and Moses prays that he might know God. In the Exodus passage, we also find the promise of rest (Exod 33:14: "I will

give you rest”). Moreover, in deeming himself to be “gentle” (v. 29), Jesus is taking up a chief characteristic of Moses (see Num 12:3), and in speaking of his “yoke” (v. 29), Jesus is using a term often applied to the law given through Moses.<sup>ii</sup>

Pretty slick, right? But wait, there’s more: Jesus’ reference to “wisdom” reminds us of the personification of Wisdom in the book of Proverbs, in which Wisdom, who’s prepared a feast, calls from the highest places in the town, “You that are simple, turn in here! . . . Come, eat of my bread and drink of the wine I have mixed” [Proverbs 9:1-5]. So Jesus, the new Moses, is teaching ancient wisdom, and the ideal hearers are “simple.” Moreover, receiving the wisdom for living a good life is like eating a delicious feast: it’s a gift, not a burden.

So Jesus is pointing out, in a layered way, that we human beings tend to complicate life. John comes as an ascetic and we think he’s crazy; Jesus comes as a hobnobber and we think he’s frivolous. We want to slice and dice and make fine distinctions about things that are not important, while we miss what’s right in front of us. As C.K. Robertson says, “While we continue to enmesh ourselves more completely in an ever-tightening web of clever ways and means to please ourselves and others, Jesus suggests that we have it all backwards. It is, as he bluntly puts it elsewhere in the same Gospel, an impossible task. **There is no magic key**, no secret formula to take the pressure off of us. Indeed, trying so hard to find such things will only add to the pressure.”<sup>iii</sup> “it is far easier to add to a resume than to stand before the mirror naked. It is far simpler, or so it seems, to work harder to be loveable than to **recognize how beloved we already are.**”

And there we have it, I think. We just feel *compelled* to operate from a place of inadequacy rather than from a place of belovedness. Remember the older son in the story of the Prodigal Son? His reproach to his father was that he had worked hard and never been given

even a goat to have a party with his friends, while his good-for-nothing little brother trashed his inheritance and Dad killed the fatted calf. The older brother assumed that you earn parties as a reward for what you've accomplished. The father says to him, "All that is mine is yours," meaning that he could have had a party any time he wanted, just because his father loves him. The problem with the older brother was that he had internalized a complicated algorithm of reward and punishment and operated out of that instead of operating out of a warm and joyous heart.

Rabbi Hillel, roughly a contemporary of Jesus, famously said that to love God and one's neighbor was the whole of the Torah, and the rest was commentary. The Muslim mystic poem Rumi says something adjacent in this poem:

The way of love is not  
a subtle argument.  
The door there  
is devastation.  
Birds make great sky-circles  
of their freedom.  
How do they learn that?  
They fall, and falling,  
they are given wings.<sup>iv</sup>

The way of love is not a "subtle" argument. It's not complicated. But it is scary. "The door there is devastation" because we can't tweak and adjust and position ourselves; we can't figure out the algorithm. We have to just throw ourselves onto the knowledge that we are beloved, the way birds throw themselves into thin air. But it's when they do that, let go of their stable perch and fall into space, that they are given wings.

Well, this is all very elegant, and it's always a good day when you can quote Hillel *and* Rumi in the same breath. But what do we call it when it's at home? How does it help us live

faithfully and well?

It helps us avoid overthinking. I know when my husband was working for the Department of Education, he was constantly entangled with competing interests and agendas, personalities, regulations, geography. He eventually came up with a mantra to guide himself: “What’s best for children?” That didn’t mean the task got easier, but it usually clarified things. Jesus is telling us that living well and faithfully means paying attention to God’s goodness first.

In the next chapter of Matthew, Jesus and his disciples famously pluck grain to eat on the sabbath and the Pharisees reproach him. What if they didn’t do it because they were so terribly hungry, but because it is a pleasure to eat ripe, sun-warmed grain? Is it necessary for them to be in dire need, to make this story okay? How about if they just take pleasure in the good gifts of God? Isn’t that, in fact, what the sabbath is really about, relinquishing other agendas in order to enjoy the goodness of God?

In today’s reading Jesus wraps up by inviting all who are weary and heavy-laden to come to him, and he will give them 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.” Well, he just finished telling the disciples how to deal with adversity, so I don’t think he’s telling them that discipleship is easy. I think he’s telling them that it’s not complicated. “When Jesus says, “learn from me,” he is calling us not just to read further in the Gospel or to mull over theological ideas but to **incarnate for ourselves the virtues** demanded by his speech and exhibited in his actions” [Dale Allison]. If we can operate out of the confidence that we are beloved, and that God’s gifts are simple and free—like the sky—we will still meet our responsibilities, but without anxiety or fragility. We have responsibilities to one another, to our

broken world—but we can carry them out with the father’s warm heart rather than with the older son’s sense of fairness.

Joy in the abundance of God is not some kind of self-indulgence, nor is it a denial of the real pain in this world. It’s a touchstone, the reality that we sometimes feel and sometimes don’t, but it’s always there. We should allow God to nourish us with all the good things that are available, and, so nourished, enact that same gentle hospitality in the world.

Let us pray:

In times of weakness and hour of need,  
yours is the strength by which we carry on,  
the shoulder we rest our head upon.  
When our load is heavy and too much to bear,  
yours are the arms stretched out to help us  
the grace that we depend on.  
In times of weakness and hour of need,  
your voice is heard,  
‘Come... find rest.’  
This is grace divine,  
the path we tread to wholeness  
of body and spirit,  
the path that leads to you,  
and for which we offer our offering of praise.

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<sup>i</sup> <https://www.msn.com/en-us/news/us/vanilla-the-chimp-was-born-in-a-lab-at-28-she-saw-the-open-sky/ar-AA1dmo0h>

<sup>ii</sup> <https://www.workingpreacher.org/commentaries/revised-common-lectionary/ordinary-14/commentary-on-matthew-1116-19-25-30-3>

<sup>iii</sup> [https://day1.org/weekly-broadcast/5d9b820ef71918cdf2002e23/never\\_enough](https://day1.org/weekly-broadcast/5d9b820ef71918cdf2002e23/never_enough)

<sup>iv</sup> <http://sage-ing.org/wp-content/uploads/Rumi-TheWayofLove.pdf>