

Sermon Pentecost 4

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Holy Trinity Episcopal Church

The Rev. Leslie M. St. Louis

Let Me Hold You
Josh Krajcik

When the dark clouds come your way
When your demons can't be tamed
When your last straw starts to break
And you feel your heart can't take anymore
When your second chance is gone
When you're barely hanging on
When you're tired of being strong, and you don't know where to run anymore

I wanna take away the hurts
But I just don't have the words
Let me hold you
Let me hold you tight
Let me hold you
Just let me hold you tonight...

When the shadow's always there
When you can't come up for air
When tomorrow seems to lead nowhere
And there's no answer to your prayer anymore

I wanna take away the hurts
But I just don't have the words
Let me hold you
Let me hold you tight
Let me hold you
Just let me hold you tonight...

Let me hold you
Let me hold you
Let me hold you tight
Let me hold you
It's all that I can do... tonight.

Let me hold you. This is the message that Jesus is sending to those who will listen today. A clear and distinct departure from the messages we have heard from Jesus in the weeks leading up to today's gospel. What we have heard with clarity and consistency from Jesus to this point has been a rather brutal message about the cost of discipleship and ministry. Jesus has been talking about the cost of discipleship – the certainty of persecution, internal and external conflict, suffering and painful division for those who choose to follow him. “Leave it all behind, pick up your cross, give up your life for my sake.” Strong stuff like that.

Today the tone changes. Let me hold you, tight. Come and rest in the promise of comfort and the assurance of light burdens, come and take upon you my yoke all you who labor and are heavy laden.

Let me hold you for more than just this night.

Jesus is not speaking here to the people who have just any kind of difficulty. By “all you that are weary and are carrying heavy burdens,” or an older translation, “who labor and are heavy laden,” Jesus doesn't primarily mean folks with ordinary problems – such as too many bills, or being unemployed, or sick, or having ungrateful kids, a hard life, or whatever. Jesus has all sorts of things to say about stuff like that, but that's not what he's talking about here. Here, Jesus is talking quite specifically to and about those who are on a religious quest – those who are seeking God, and relationship with God. Those who work to build the kingdom of God. He is calling to himself the religiously exhausted – those who, like Paul has just said, have tried all of the usual ways of finding some peace with the divine and have achieved only frustration.

Let me hold you, all of you who are being pulled under by the ever more weighty and ever expanding demands of the laws of Moses. Those of you who have been harnessed by the yoke of the Pharisees with their demands that you have to do this and this and this..... exactly right and right and right; in order to matter to God, in

order to be a decent person, in order to be loved or counted significant – that yoke Jesus rejects, even though it was the yoke of the wise and intelligent.

That yoke, the yoke of seeking God by keeping the rules, by doing what somebody or anybody or everybody else says is the thing to do, by trying to get it right all the time and so living constantly in fear of getting it wrong, that yoke leads those who wear it to “labor and be heavy laden.” It leads to living in what Paul just called “this body of death.” It leads to a religion and a life of fearful obedience to a multitude of petty dictates where the spirit is deadened, and where some measure of success is more likely to lead you into self-righteousness than into the heart of God.

In my household growing up we had a joke that if you didn’t vacuum the carpet in exactly the same way following exactly the same pattern as you backed carefully out of the room so that there were not footprints left on the carpet just like Mommy did then the room hadn’t been vacuumed. A joke yes but painful just the same. How many of you have a dishwasher in your house? How many of you have seen the sticker on the inside of the dishwasher telling you exactly how to load it? How many of you load the dishwasher just to have it redone or have folded the sheets including the fitted one just to have them refolded. Wouldn’t it be nice if just once the re-doer said “Gosh thanks so much for doing that I really appreciate it.” Even if you know the sheets are going to be refolded ten seconds after they leave your sight you can enjoy the accolades for just that long.

To say to your child, or a friend, or your spouse, or anyone, really, “I will only love you if you do right,” is to ensure a sick and twisted relationship. It hurts everybody involved.

To teach that God says this is not only terrible theology, it can also be devastating. Yet the yoke of the Law, at its worst, did just that. Those who, like Paul, struggled under such a yoke discovered that it didn’t fit; that it didn’t bring them to God; that it didn’t enrich their lives. Yokes like that never do.

To go scurrying about with the notion that if we could only figure out the right thing to do – the right way to act, the right words to say, the right way to do the rituals – then we would be all right, is to skate on the edge of magic, as if we could conjure up God’s acceptance. It will only ensure frustration and exhaustion. God’s presence with us and God’s love for us are never the results of our actions. He is in charge; we are not.

In response to all of this, Jesus says, “Come to me.”

Jesus words, his call to each of us is a call to relationship, relationship with Jesus and with the community of Christ that continues as his body in the world. To be sure that “yoking” is something that the clergy are called into, it is part of the reason we wear stoles to symbolize that we are yoked to Christ in this work of ordained ministry.

But clergy live out their calls to ordained ministry in the context of a parish, a specific and distinct example of the body of Christ and congregation and clergy are yoked one to another as they seek to understand what it is they are being called to do and be now for the building of a church in the future. There is a call and response from the clergy and the congregation of “Let me hold you.” When the burden gets too heavy for one the other carries the strain. While it is true that in ordination the clergy make a covenant with God and the church it is also true that the congregation makes a covenant with the clergy and together clergy and congregation make a covenant with the future.

What we will proclaim and accomplish, imagine and create, receive and learn, plant and nurture in this world depends on these covenants: our covenant with God in Jesus Christ, and our covenants with each other in Christ’s name.

Let us pray that we will hold each other gently this day and this night and in all the nights and days of our ministry together as we seek to build the body of Christ.

Amen!