

A Sermon by Fr. Wood

Pentecost VIII

Genesis 24.34-38, 42-49, 58-67

Psalms 45.11-18

Romans 7.15-25a

Matthew 11.16-19, 25-30

✠ In the Name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Ghost. *Amen.*

IN TODAY'S GOSPEL, Jesus does what I call "reading his culture." When he asked "to what shall I compare this generation?" (Matt. 11.16), Jesus was reading them, casting about for a metaphor for the generation he lived in. If we do the same and turn our attention to the culture around us, one image that comes to mind as a metaphor for our life is an anthill; a constant bustle of work and activity. Samantha Slater wrote an article for the *Politico* newspaper entitled "Overworked and underpaid in the capital." It began:

Unwind. Unplug. Relax. Not words you hear often in Washington, where overwork is not only accepted but embraced. Just take the Metro home on a Friday night at, say, 9 p.m. and notice the fair share of people carrying briefcases, loosening ties and incessantly checking their BlackBerrys. Washington – or at least political Washington – is a 24/7 work culture.¹

And it's not just in DC, nor is our busy-ness confined to the office. From an article in the *New York Times Magazine*: "Our relationship to work is out of whack. Economists, psychologists and sociologists have charted our ballooning work hours; the increase in time devoted to competitive shopping; the commercialization of leisure that turns fun into work Ours is a society that pegs status to overachievement"²

A cursory reading of contemporary urban American culture reveals we are a society addicted to activity and achievement. Even when we're not at work we train for marathons and learn second languages, or we wash laundry and the car, run to CVS and the cleaner's, doing the maintenance on our already hectic lives. Seldom, if ever, do we stop running and be quiet. I think what we're working so hard to build are "selves" for ourselves. What do I mean? Have you heard yourself say, even if only to yourself: "I'll know I've made it when I get that job,

1 Samantha Slater, "Overworked and underpaid in the capital," in *Politico* (18 July 2007) <<http://www.politico.com/news/stories/0707/5013.html>> (last visited 5 July 2008).

2 Judith Shulevitz, "Bring Back the Sabbath," *New York Times Magazine* (2 March 2003) <<http://query.nytimes.com/gst/fullpage.html?res=9404EEDE1F3DF931A35750C0A9659C8B63&sec=&sp on=&partner=permalink&exprod=permalink>> (last visited 5 July 2008).

finish this project, marry that person or make enough to afford that house.” The things we think will make us successful, keep our anxiety in check and help us sleep at night are our “selves,” the things that make life worth living and justify our existence. But building a self on those things alone wears us down and can come between us and God. Promotions and houses and relationships aren’t bad in themselves, but if they become *ultimate* things, and we think we have to have them to justify our existence, then our pursuit of them becomes dehumanizing and actually sinful. Tim Keller writes:

Everyone gets their identity, their sense of being distinct and valuable, from somewhere or something. [H]uman beings were made not only to believe in God in some general way, but to love him supremely, center their lives on him above anything else, and build their very identities on him. Anything other than this is sin. Most people think of sin primarily as “breaking divine rules,” but . . . the very first of the Ten Commandments is to “have no other gods before me.” So, according to the Bible, the primary way to define sin is not just the doing of bad things, but the making of good things into *ultimate* things. It is seeking to establish a sense of self by making something else more central to your significance, purpose, and happiness than your relationship to God.³

Today’s gospel has two commands for people like us. First, the “Come to Jesus” command: “Come unto me, all ye that labour and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest.” (Matt. 11.28) Jesus gave that invitation to people who were “weary,” “burdened down” by “endless regulations and duties” of Jewish faith.⁴ Elsewhere in Matthew’s gospel Jesus says the teachers of the Jewish law “tie up heavy loads and put them on men’s shoulders” (Matt. 23.4). To people with shoulders slumped under the weight of religious obligation, Jesus said “come” and he would give them “rest.” The word Jesus uses really means a resting-*place*,⁵ a place to lay down all your striving, stop working to build a self, and rest.

Ironically, maybe the hardest thing to rest from is the idea that God really wants us to be “good people.” John Gerstner was a professor of Church History, and he’s reputed to have told his students “The thing that really separates us from God is not so much our sin, but our damnable good works.” He meant that the more we try to curry God’s favor by saying our prayers, going to mass, feeding the poor or “witnessing” about Jesus, the farther we really get from God. There’s a sense in which the road to hell isn’t so much paved with good intentions as it is with good works, and Jesus offers relief from that kind of religion and rest from trying to be good enough for God. The reason the lame enter the kingdom of heaven first is that they know they can’t get there by themselves; they know they

3 Timothy Keller, *The Reason for God: Belief in an Age of Skepticism* (New York: Dutton, 2008): 162.

4 Michael Green, *The Message of Matthew* (BST) (Downers Grove, Ill.: Intervarsity, 2000): 142.

5 BDAG, “Anapausis,” p. 69.

need carrying. We think we have to work hard to hear the applause of heaven, but Jesus says “No – just come to me, and find rest.”

But Jesus doesn't just call us to inactivity. There is a second command: “Take my yoke upon you, and learn of me; for I am meek and lowly in heart: and ye shall find rest unto your souls. For my yoke is easy, and my burden is light.” (Matt. 11.29-30) A yoke was a sort of “wooden collar that ran across the shoulders of a pair of oxen and enabled them jointly to pull enormous weights.”⁶ The rabbis spoke of “‘the yoke of Torah,’ the heavy burden of the Jewish law with all its commandments,”⁷ but what Jesus tells us to carry isn't the yoke of justifying ourselves before God. If we put his yoke on our shoulders, the weight won't overwhelm us he pulls alongside us; the burden is light because the one who put it there had human shoulders, too, so he knows what it's like to be where we are.

A few years ago I was having coffee with a friend and complaining that there weren't enough hours in my day. I was in seminary; I was a new husband; I worked at a bookstore for extra cash, I was an intern with high school students at our church, and I helped lead a community group, all the while being sure to pray every day and read the bible. My friend, under what I'm convinced was the leading of the Holy Spirit, asked me “Man, whose yoke are *you* wearing?” My first response was: “*God* gave me this yoke. He's the one who said go to seminary; he led us to this church and these students; he could've made me win the Lotto, so he must want me to work part-time at the bookstore to make ends meet.” But my friend was right: I was either wearing someone else's yoke, and pulling all the weight myself, or I was doing the right things but trying to justify myself. Either way, something was off.

How heavy is whatever you carry? Of course, human beings work; that's what we do, and there is great dignity in work done for God's glory and in service to our families and our world. But if being a good lawyer or accountant or legislative assistant or priest is where we get our “selves,” maybe we haven't heeded Jesus' invitation to “come” to him for the rest our souls need. And the best medicine, our *only* medicine, is the Eucharist, the “Great Thanksgiving” for the heavy lifting Jesus did to reconcile us to God. We stand before God on the basis of his merits of Christ, not our own. That's what makes the yoke Jesus asks us to carry one “of love, not of duty” and the work of our lives “the response of the liberated, not the duty of the obligated.”⁸

✠ In the Name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Ghost. *Amen.*

6 Green, 143.

7 Tom Wright, *Matthew for Everyone: Part 1, Chapters 1-15* (Louisville, Ky.: Westminster John Knox Press, 2002): 137.

8 Green, 143.