

Hidden in Plain Sight 7-6-08

Matthew 11:16-19; 25-30

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Weights and measures, law and judgment, doctrine and discipline...

how does one know if they have been saved? By what criteria do we judge?... Ourselves?... Others? We do judge, don't we? We do want to know where we stand. We also probably want to know how we compare to others. Maybe for some, that is the motivation to get up so early on a Sunday morning and come to worship. We want to calm our anxieties and our fears and our restlessness about our lives and our future and our very existence. Maybe for some, that is the motivation to be loyal to the traditions we have received and to cling to the familiar ways.

Paul Tillich, a German-American theologian as well as a Christian existentialist philosopher, was considered one of the most influential Protestant theologians of the twentieth century. In an article entitled, "The Shaking of the Foundations" Tillich eloquently describes this very human tendency, though very much in the language of his day.

He writes, "This is man; and because this is man, there is religion and law. The law of religion is the great attempt of man to overcome his anxiety and restlessness and despair, to close the gap within himself, and to reach immortality, spirituality and perfection. So he labors and toils under the religious law in thought and in act. The religious law demands that he accept ideas and dogmas, that he believe in doctrines and traditions, the acceptance of which is the condition of his salvation from anxiety, despair and death. So he tries to accept them, although they may have become strange or doubtful to him. He labors and toils under the religious demand to believe things he cannot believe. Finally he tries to escape the law of religion. He tries to cast away the heavy yoke of the doctrinal law imposed on him by Church authorities, orthodox teachers, pious parents, and fixed traditions. He becomes critical and skeptical. He casts away the yoke; but none can live in the emptiness of mere skepticism, and so he returns to the old yoke in a kind of self-torturing fanaticism and tries to impose it on other people,

on his children or pupils. He is driven by an unconscious desire for revenge, because of the burden he has taken upon himself."

Do you hear the truth of Tillich's words? This is a man obviously under the influence of the Jesus we see in our gospel lesson this morning. How often have we heard those words taken out of context, "Come to me, all you that are weary and are carrying heavy burdens, and I will give you rest." These are much beloved words of comfort. I'll bet there are many among us here who even have them memorized. Just hearing these words releases tension and brings a sense of calm. And that is good. But when they are heard in context, we realize that there is much more at work than Jesus wanting people to feel good. In fact, in context, these words of comfort have a sharp edge as well.

You see, for all the good it can do, religion can also create unjust systems that fail to serve God adequately and which fail to offer good news at all. That is the reality Jesus was facing in his day and which we continue to face in ours. You see, the religious leaders of Jesus'

day were all about weights and measures, law and judgment, doctrine and discipline. They were the ones with the power to judge. They were considered wise. They were the ones controlling who was in and who was out... who was clean and who was unclean... who was righteous and who was unrighteous. They were the ones who were benefitting from the religious rules, and from enforcing the law. They gave their tithe and said their prayers and offered their sacrifices at the right times and in the right places and could account for their goodness before God.

Others who tried to measure up were sure to fail because it was a heavy burden... and what about the poor and those who no longer owned any property and what about those who had to choose between the temple tax and food for their families or who had to do work that was dishonorable just to stay alive? It was these wise ones who questioned John the Baptist and Jesus. In all their wisdom, the religious leaders of Jesus' day determined that neither John nor Jesus

could be who they said they were because they didn't follow the religious protocols used to judge. John and his disciples fasted, Jesus and his disciples feasted, so John must have a demon and Jesus must be a glutton and a drunkard. After all, he is a friend of tax collectors and sinners! "Yet," Jesus says, "Wisdom is vindicated by her deeds."

In the beginning of the 11th chapter of Matthew, messengers from John the Baptist come to Jesus asking, "Are you the one who is to come, or are we to wait for another?" Jesus' response is telling... it exposes and vindicates the wisdom of God. Jesus replies, "Go and tell John what you hear and see: the blind receive their sight, the lame walk, the lepers are cleansed, the deaf hear, the dead are raised, and the poor have good news brought to them. And blessed is anyone who takes no offense at me." (Mt. 11:4-6)

Do you see the stark contrast of the two kinds of wisdom? On the one hand you have Jesus who is operating not out of law, but out of love, not out of judgment, but out of grace. On the other hand you

have the religious leaders who write off both Jesus and John because they don't obey the religious laws to the letter. Never mind all the good that is being done in God's name. John is too strict and Jesus associates with the wrong people. In the wisdom of weights and measures, these religious leaders are offended by the very signs of God's kingdom breaking forth all around them. Because their hearts are closed to the wisdom of God... because they are so certain they have complete understanding... because they need to believe that they are the good and righteous ones, God's truth is hidden in plain sight from them.

As one commentator wrote, "The blessings, of the kingdom are not unlocked by the application of wisdom, power, status, goodness, piety... but by humility." The second part of Jesus' "come to me..." message says, "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." (Mt. 11:29,30) Jesus' way of

living was to be a full participant in the world, willing to get his hands dirty, willing to mix with the unclean, not concerned about weights and measures as about people receiving the life-changing word of God's love and grace, not to be earned, but a gift, given freely to all who could receive it. Jesus' life and ministry was all about living in the light of God's love. Jesus wanted to replace the yoke of law with the yoke of grace.

The yoke of grace offers rest from unrealistic and unjust burdens, rest from legalistic expectations, rest from perfectionism, and rest from human wisdom. And as we take on the yoke of grace with the humble spirit of Christ, we are free to take risk and act because we can experiment and make mistakes, we can admit when we screw up and change our course or our attitude, we can see God calling us to something new and be free from the tyranny of cynical sideline judgmentalism which weights us down and keeps us from taking on Jesus' burden-relieving yoke.

A burden-relieving yoke may sound odd. But if you think about being yoked with Jesus, you are now linked to one who can guide you and keep you focused on what really matters and who can provide the extra strength needed to be a participant in God's kingdom proclaiming good news to the poor and recovery of sight to the blind and releasing the oppressed.

Jesus criticized those in his day who piled up burdens upon people in the name of religion creating a system of injustice and burden for those on the bottom. That system also gave a false sense of who were the faithful ones because it was based on artificial weights and measures. Jesus came proclaiming God's love and grace to each of us. If we are open to receiving that good news then we will not want to put burdens on others, but rather see the wisdom in those deeds that reveal God's loving kindness toward others. If we take up the yoke of grace then we realize that Jesus didn't bring in a new religion, but rather a new way of being which comes from the very heart of God.

At the end of Paul Tillich's article I mentioned earlier he writes,

"Let me close, as I began, with a personal word. Believe me, you who are religious and Christian. It would not be worthwhile to teach Christianity, if it were for the sake of Christianity. And believe me, you who are estranged from religion and far away from Christianity, it is not our purpose to make you religious and Christian when we interpret the call of Jesus for our time. We call Jesus the Christ not because He brought a new religion, but because He is the end of religion, above religion and irreligion, above Christianity and non-Christianity. We spread His call because it is the call to every man in every period to receive the New Being, that hidden saving power in our existence, which takes from us labor and burden, and gives rest to our souls."

May we have eyes to see God's wisdom hidden in plain sight and in humility find rest for our souls in taking up the yoke of Jesus Christ.

Amen.