

# SERMONS FROM ST. FRANCIS

July 3, 2005

Rachel Hoobing, MTS

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

Grace and peace to you from God our Mother-Father and Jesus Christ our brother and friend.

In today's gospel we get a taste of perspective, relativity, irony and paradox. We hear echoes of the beatitudes contained within a few blessings and some curses. In this text, Jesus offers comfort to people who have been discarded, used, and abused by others. Jesus also confronts the groups of people who refuse to listen to his teachings, his examples and parables. Jesus confronts those who would easily write Jesus and John off.

Imagine, if you will, hearing this gospel from a perspective of a person who has no power or position in society, a person with quite a bit of power and position in society or better yet how about someone who sits somewhere in between. Indeed even our realities of oppressor and oppressed, powerful and powerless keep this text alive for us today. This gospel text that we heard today brings comfort and discomfort or both depending on where you sit in the spectrum of powerful to powerless. The paradoxes in this text abound and may seem troubling to grapple with because Jesus turns the balance of power on its end.

Jesus points out some truths that are often overlooked and neglected because these truths, these wells of knowledge threaten to unravel and embarrass the positions of power as constructed by the structures of religious and social institutions.

People who are marginalized, oppressed and without voice often know more because they are able to see a larger picture. People who are marginalized understand the systems of oppression better because they must know how the system works in order to survive living under that system.

For example:

Who better to understand the privileges that able-bodied people have than people who are or have become disabled?

Who better to understand the power and privileges that people who own or rent their homes have than someone who is or has been homeless?

Who better to understand the privileges of being white than people of color?

Who better to understand the constraints of gender than people who are transgender?

Who better to understand the vast impact of patriarchy than women and especially women who are lesbians?

When Jesus says that wisdom has been revealed to those who are “infants” meaning those who are meek, without voice, and who are without power, Jesus is speaking to the knowledge learned through life experience and social context. The value of God’s wisdom stands in direct contrast to the wisdom, intelligence and power valued by the world. For God values life and the fullness of life for all persons and all of creation. God values just and right relationships with our neighbors and within our own self.

Christ’s value of humanity extends in his call:

“Come to me all who are carrying heavy burdens and I will give you 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.”

The invitation come and rest to all who are carrying heavy burdens concerned the laws, expectations, rituals and other such burdens placed on people by religious leaders of Jesus’ time, the Sadducees and Pharisees. Jesus at the same time was sharply critical of those who placed these burdens and did nothing to ease the burdens. Today, these heavy burdens may be expanded to include governmental laws and policies as well as religious expectations and policies.

Christ’s invitation to *Come for rest* and to *Take my yolk* is multifold.

First, Christ’s invitation is to rest. Unlike what the world has to offer God’s rest is deeper than just physical rest. It is an offer to whole rest-spiritual, mental, psychological, and physical.

Second, Christ’s invitation is to do God’s work in the world. Christ calls us to work with, to learn from and to be made disciples by him. Christ teaches through love and we are to learn and embrace the same.

Third, Christ invites us to look around at the unnecessary burdens placed on ourselves and our brothers and sisters. We are called to stand up for all and any who have become oppressed in this world through injustice, shame, neglect, and ignorance.

Fourth, Christ’s invitation is to a life in Christ. A life lived through, by and with love.

Fifth, Christ's invitation is for all. Christ is not exclusive about who is welcome to come and find rest.

Scandalous as it sounds Jesus even invites those of us who are oppressors. Thank God, otherwise where would we fit in?

An oppressor is disconnected from humanity in him or herself and the entirety of humanity by acting above and against another.

Jesus calls all of us to his teachings on the ways of God. Together, wise and foolish, oppressor and oppressed we are called to be made disciples of Christ. We are called to listen to each other, to love each other, to ease the burden of each other, to forgive one another, to teach each other, to learn from one another, and to be in community with one another. Christ's teachings are not exclusive to the oppressed or to the oppressor. For if Christ's teachings were exclusive then we would all be lost from our own humanity- from each other and from our own selves. God calls you and me to be disciples with him. We are called into the freedom of God and with that the responsibilities of life together.

Here I would like to read from Bishop Desmond Tutu's book No Future Without Forgiveness. In his book Bishop Tutu writes about the Truth and Reconciliation

Commission formed at the end of apartheid in South Africa. The idea was to help a country to heal and to live together after the horrors and atrocities of apartheid.

He writes on his reflections of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission:

"God does not give up on anyone, for God loved us from all eternity, God loves us now and God will always love us, all of us good and bad, forever and ever. {God's} love will not let us go, for God's love for us, all of us, good and bad, is unchanging, is unchangeable. Someone has said there is nothing I can do to make God love me more, for God loves me perfectly already. And wonderfully, there is nothing I can do to make God love me less. God loves me as I am to help me become all that I have it in me to become, and when I realize the deep love God has for me, I will strive for love's sake to do what pleases my Lover. Those who think this opens the door for moral laxity have obviously never been in love, for love is much more demanding than law. An exhausted mother, ready to drop dead into bed, will think nothing of sitting the whole night through by the bed of her sick child.

As I listened in the TRC (Truth and Reconciling Commission) to the stories of perpetrators of human rights violations, I realized how each of us has this capacity for the most awful evil—every one of us. None of us could predict that if we had been subjected to the same influences, the same conditioning, we would not have turned out like these perpetrators. This is not to condone or excuse what they did. It is to be filled more and more with the compassion of God, looking on and weeping that one of His beloved had come to such a sad pass. We have to say to ourselves with deep feeling, not with a cheap pietism, “There but for the grace of God go I.”

And, mercifully and wonderfully, as I listened to the stories of victims I marveled at their magnanimity, that after so much suffering, instead of lusting for revenge, they had this extraordinary willingness to forgive. Then I thanked God that all of us, even I, had this remarkable capacity for good, for generosity, for magnanimity.

Theology helped us in the TRC to recognize that we inhabit a moral universe, that good and evil are real and that they matter. They are not just things of indifference. This is a moral universe, which means that, despite all the evidence that seems to be to the contrary, there is no way that evil and injustice and oppression and lies can have the last word. For us who are Christians, the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ is proof positive that love is stronger than hate, that life is stronger than death, that light is stronger than darkness, that laughter and joy, and compassion and gentleness and truth, all these are so much stronger than their ghastly counterparts.

We were seeing it unfolding there before our very eyes as we sat in the commission. Those who had strutted about arrogantly in the days of apartheid, dealing out death and injustice and apartheid’s excesses with gay abandon, had never imagined in their wildest dreams that their involvement in machinations and abomination hatched out in secret would

ever see the light of day. They had fondly expected to rule the roost for as long as they wished. Now it was all coming out, not as wild speculation or untested allegations. No, it was gushing forth from the mouths of perpetrators themselves: how they abducted people, shot them and burned their bodies or thrown corpses into crocodile-infested rivers. They helped us exhume over fifty corpses of those they had abducted and then killed and buried secretly. Those ghastly and macabre secrets might have remained hidden except that this is a moral universe and truth will out.

During the dark days of the struggle, when the morale of our people was often low in the face of rampant evil, I used to say: “ This is a moral universe—the upholders of apartheid have already lost.” I also used to appeal to our white fellow South Africans: “We are being nice to you. Join the winning side.” Those of us who struggled against apartheid have been vindicated in the most spectacular fashion. And the victory was for all of us, black and white together—the rainbow people of God. It was theology that enabled me to assert that this was a moral universe. That theology undergirded my work in the TRC.”<sup>1</sup>

May the God of rest comfort and restore you. May God’s yoke be worn with pride and with humility. May you find peace and nourishment at this table. May you be girded with love, grace, and peace. May the blessings of God shine in and through you. Amen.

*Amen*

St. Francis Lutheran Church  
152 Church Street, SF, CA 94114-1111  
Phone: (415) 621-2635; Fax: (415) 621-8819  
E-mail: StFrancisSF@sbcglobal.net  
[www.st-francis-lutheran.org](http://www.st-francis-lutheran.org)

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<sup>1</sup> Tutu, Desmond, *No Future Without Forgiveness*, (New York, NY: An Image Book by Doubleday, 1999) pp. 85-87.