

Pastor Gregory P. Fryer
Immanuel Lutheran Church, New York, NY
The Midweek Liturgy, Wednesday, November 22, 2023
Matthew 11:20-30
Thanksgiving Eve

HOLY GOSPEL Matthew 11:1-19, RSV
Last week we heard about John the Baptist and his question about whether Jesus is “he who is to come, or shall we look for another?” Now we read some of the most beautiful words in the Bible: “Come to me, all who labor and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest.”

²⁰Then he began to upbraid the cities where most of his mighty works had been done, because they did not repent. ²¹

“Woe to you, Chora’zin! woe to you, Beth-sa’ida! for if the mighty works done in you had been done in Tyre and Sidon, they would have repented long ago in sackcloth and ashes. ²²But I tell you, it shall be more tolerable on the day of judgment for Tyre and Sidon than for you. ²³And you, Caper’na-um, will you be exalted to heaven? You shall be brought down to Hades. For if the mighty works done in you had been done in Sodom, it would have remained until this day. ²⁴But I tell you that it shall be more tolerable on the day of judgment for the land of Sodom than for you.”

²⁵At that time Jesus declared, “I thank thee, Father, Lord of heaven and earth, that thou hast hidden these things from the wise and understanding and revealed them to babes; ²⁶yea, Father, for such was thy gracious will. ²⁷All things have been delivered to me by my Father; and no one knows the Son except the Father, and no one knows the Father except the Son and any one to whom the Son chooses to reveal him. ²⁸Come to me, all who labor and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest. ²⁹Take my yoke upon you, and learn from me; for I am gentle and lowly in heart, and you will find rest for your souls. ³⁰For my yoke is easy, and my burden is light.”

In the name of the Father and of the + Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

We have just sung the great Thanksgiving hymn, “Now Thank We All Our God.” It is right that we should sing such a hymn because you and I have much to be thankful for.

So did the Pilgrims back in 1621. Let us cast our minds back to them and imagine their sense of gratitude on that first Thanksgiving. Those New England Pilgrims were a devout people. I trust that the Virginians who had settled even earlier in Jamestown, Virginia, were devout too. Still, there was a difference between these two groups of people. The Virginians had come to America for purposes of entrepreneurship and adventure and to improve

their lot in life, whereas the Pilgrims had come to America chiefly for religious freedom.¹ That, in the mind of the New England Pilgrims, was one of the great blessings for which they gave thanks to God on that first Thanksgiving.

Not only that — not only religious freedom. The Pilgrims had reason to be grateful for many things. The land was fertile. The wildlife was plentiful. There was timber all around. So the poor man in America could have a fire in the nighttime in the way that maybe only the Lord of the Manor could have it back in England. And the Indians had befriended them. The Native Americans: they had shown them how to grow Indian corn maize. It helped save them from starvation. They showed them farming techniques. They joined them in that first Thanksgiving. There was peace. There were many things that the Pilgrims had reason to be grateful for and I'm proud of them that they had their Thanksgiving dinner. It was a feast that went on for three days. But chiefly they were a grateful people — grateful to God.

No matter what the ups and downs of life are, we too have many reasons to be thankful. But in this sermon, I want to lift up one reason in particular: I mean the glorious holy invitation which we read in this evening's Gospel story. Jesus says, Come to me, all ye who are weary and heavy laden and I will give you rest. On this earth, among many good things, there exists this invitation. And I say, let's be grateful for it. Let's examine and admire it. Let's examine it under three headings: First, who is it who gives this invitation? Second, who is invited in this invitation? And third, what is offered in the invitation?

So let's begin with the first question: Who offers this invitation? The answer to that is Jesus — resurrected from the dead, King of Kings and Lord of Lord. He is a good man — thoroughly good, without an ounce of hatred or cruelty in him. And in him there is no deceit. When he says, Come to me, he is speaking the truth, and it is a good man who is speaking that truth.

If any mayor of New York City, for example, had said, come to me and I will give you rest, well, that would be a great thing. If the President of the United States had issued a similar invitation, that would be a great thing. But not as great as this invitation, because it comes from Jesus. He never lies. He never deceives. He never sets up false hopes, and he is never unable to give what he promises.

I think of all of the valuable things on this earth. You know, the pastures the farmland, the beautiful mountains, the streams, technology, the cities, the artwork, music... there are so many precious things on this earth. But can anything be more precious than this invitation: come unto me, says Jesus and I will give you rest. It is among the greatest treasures on earth because it comes from Jesus.

¹ Johnson, Paul. *A History of the American People* (p. 28). HarperCollins. Kindle Edition.

Let's move on to my second point: Who is invited in this great invitation? Well, notice that word "all" — that universal quantifier: Come on to me, *all* ye who are weary and heavy laden, and I will give you rest. All. That is a universal idea. No matter what you might think of yourself. No matter whether you imagine yourself to be the kind of person Jesus is inviting to come to him, or whether you doubt that about yourself. Or whether you might think you are the kind of person who is often overlooked. Well, none of that matters. Because the invitation of Jesus is steady. It is directed to all. That means it is directed to you and me.

Now, there can be two sorts of people to whom this invitation is especially important. First, there are people who are weary, and second, there are people who are overburdened with sin. They are conscience of their guilt. That are sin sick souls. So we have two kinds of people: people who are simply flat out tired in this life. And second, people who are burdened by the consciousness of sins; they are aware of guilt in their life. To both kinds of people Jesus says, come.

Think of all the people in this world who are simply weary. It is not a passing week or two in their lives. Rather, they are tired in a way that they can no longer imagine themselves ever recovering from. They are exhausted, they are played out. They have been worked to their limit. They have been working all of their lives so that their youth and their strength is gone. And they are weary, physically weary. Perhaps mentally and emotionally weary too because, well, life just has not worked out beautifully for them. They are disappointed. They were not weary when they were young. They had joy back then. They skipped. They danced, they joked, they had hope for the future as we want all young people to have, but by now some of them are just flat out weary.

And then there are people who are heavy burdened by memory of sin they have committed or burdened by the memory of wrong choices they made. They tried to do their best but looking back they now realize that they were wrong. And in the process, they have done some damage. When Jesus says Come to me, all ye who labor and are heavy laden, he is asking all of suffering humanity to know that in Him they have hope — hope that otherwise they wouldn't have. Our medicine is good. Technology is good. But when our human skills reach their limit, still Jesus says, come to me and I will give you rest. He will surely do it. So, let us not go wandering away from him. When he say, Come, let us come and abide with him. Let us make discipleship a crucial part of our life. Let us make our walking with Jesus to be a big matter for us. We do not want to turn our back on him because this Jesus is the one who is able to give us rest.

So that's the second point. The first point was, *who* gives this invitation? Answer, Jesus. Second point, *to whom* is the invitation given? Answer, to all — to every weary and heavy-burden soul on this earth.

Third, what is offered? Answer, rest. Now, when we were young and were full of energy and full of beans, rest didn't seem all that important to us. But even when we were young, if we exerted ourselves to the utmost, then at the end of the football game or the end of the basketball game or the end of the cross country race, we could be just about exhausted. We might even just fall down there on the ground for a while because we need some rest. We human beings can become played out. Both when we are young, and when we are middle aged and when we are old, we all need some rest. We need a chance to replenish ourselves. We are not machines. We are not robots. Those are cool thing. They can just labor and labor and labor and don't seem to need rest. But we are creatures of God who in this fallen world, and we need rest. Gravity is always tugging us. It is always pulling us downward. It causes our backs to stoop. It is a resistance to be overcome every instant of the day. Besides gravity, there are all kinds of other forces pushing on us, holding us back, depleting us of strength. There are economic forces and the troubles of poverty or the fear of poverty. There are social forces in which the community and our friends or colleagues seem to forget us or to break our hearts. Sometimes we find ourselves in a lonely world that does not seem to be giving us strength. We are not gaining strength from those around us. Rather, we're losing strength. We know it. We do not have the spring in our step that we used to have. But Jesus says I will give you rest. It means he will replenish us. He will renew our youth. Even if we are threescore and ten years or even fourscore or fivescore: He will renew our youth. He can do that. The one who can make the lame man leap for joy can also make the old man or the old woman leap for joy.

So those are my three points. On this old earth of ours, one of the great and precious things is that there is an invitation meant for you, meant for me. It is an invitation to rest and it comes from the One who can surely make it so, even Jesus Christ our Lord to Whom belongs to the glory, with the Father and the Holy Spirit now and forever. Amen.