

“The Holy Ministry for the Weak and Heavy Laden”
(Matthew 11:28)

Installation Sermon for Rev. Herbert M. Percy, Jr.

Trinity Lutheran Church & School

Whittier, CA

Twelfth Sunday after Pentecost

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Saint Paul's Lutheran Church of Irvine

Grace to you and peace from God our Father and from our Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ. And may the Lord grant an extra measure of His grace upon you dear brother in Christ, Herb, and upon all the royal priesthood here at Trinity Lutheran Church, Whittier, California. This is the day the Lord has made, let us rejoice and be glad in it! Amen.

Our text is Matthew chapter 11, verse 28. The words of the Lord Jesus not to the wise and understanding, but words revealed to “little children” (verse 25) like the saints of this congregation: ***“Come to me, all who labor and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest.”*** The Word of the Lord! Thanks be to God! These words occur in St. Matthew's gospel in an eschatological -- or end-time judgment -- context and flowing over into the 12th chapter on the new Sabbath. To be ready for life and death and life through death is to be led to the One who is our Sabbath Rest: Jesus Christ. We are here because of Him!

It is striking to hear Jesus' call “come”...as you know dear brother, there are many ideas which abound in the modern church and culture as to how anyone “comes” to God or to put it in more practical terms in the visible church which is in decline: how people are “brought” to Christ; how they are “facilitated” to be able to come to Christ. This is a burning question. The ideas abound and are prolific. The words which immediately follow, however, help us to understand this “coming” to the Lord: the ones invited and called by Christ are those who “labor” and are “heavy laden”...and then *the what* that is given to those who “come” is also stated: the Lord gives “rest” to these who labor and are heavy laden.

It is an astounding realization to see that the “rest” Jesus gives does not alleviate the labor and heavy laden burden of this life here and now, but is the promise of the final rest, the realized reward of eternal life at the end. This is critical to get. Otherwise, how often do we get the impression from some folks that if we do this and if we do that, then the rest will come now in the form of avoiding the holy cross?! This is not to deny God's peace in our hearts, knowing that we are right with God, knowing we are forgiven; knowing we are loved through our Savior; but it also confirms the lack of peace in the world...it confirms that the royal priesthood continues to bear their holy cross; faithful disciples that you are called here to serve will continue to labor and be heavy laden.

In this holy and powerful invitation from Jesus to “come,” *“He invites to himself all who are weighed down by the changes and chances of life, and by their own sins.”* (Jeffrey A. Gibbs,

Concordia Commentary: Matthew 11:2-20:34, 593) Those who are weighed down are served. Our Confessions elaborate: *"Here there are two parts. The 'labor' and the burden signify the contrition, anxiety, and terrors of sin and death. To 'come to' Christ is to believe that sins are forgiven for Christ's sake. When we believe, our hearts are brought to life by the Holy Spirit through Christ's Word. Here, therefore, are these two chief parts: contrition and faith"* (Ap XIIA 44-45 as noted in TLSB, 1603) But does this reveal in what I've already stated previously a contradiction? In pulling the meaning out of the original text, the "rest" is esp. what we receive at the end; but even our confessions attribute "rest" to a current, today rest: the rest of faith. Is there a contradiction? ***Not at all, because to be assured of the final rest is already to experience God's peace and rest today even in the midst of trial.*** But note the caveat: even in the midst of trial; in the midst of Christians laboring and being heavy laden we have this rest.

This foundation is essential to keep before us dear brother and people of God here at Trinity. Pastor Percy does not ride in on a white horse as a gallant knight who will save the day regarding all of the practical problems we face here in Whittier and within the congregation here at Trinity. The new pastor does not mean that the "contrition, anxiety, and terrors of sin and death" cease. They don't. They won't on this side of the glorious second coming of Christ. They continue, but what this installation means is that the Lord has sent His servant, His faithful under-shepherd to sustain and bless you through the labor – the terrors of your sins – your heavy laden condition – your tiredness, your anxiety about the future, your fear about today...your struggle. He has provided a servant for those who are suffering; those who are poor in spirit and often this coincides with those who suffer in other ways: it might include those who suffer financially, with those who suffer in their health, in their relationships and families, in the tremendous loads they bear in life. These are humbled by the Lord so that they thirst for what is beyond this world, but who at the same time know in faith that the Lord is with them: these also rejoice in the mission of the Gospel that they continue to proclaim as those who have been brought from death to life so that the light of Jesus would shine through them upon others who are living in the shadow of death. For such a servant who serves such as these, the Lord equips you dear Pastor Percy to have a heart for people as much as you have a heart for their greatest treasure: the Word and Sacrament. The pastor must love His people and this is what the Lord's love for you dear Herb has already done for you. This fire -- by the grace of God -- we continue to fan into flame. This is the ministry these people need, precisely because they are tired and heavy laden.

Why do I mention any of this? Because in the church we are losing pastors who desire to serve the weary and heavy laden. We are losing pastors who love their people as much as they claim to love the Word and Sacraments. We are all familiar with the caricatures of house cleaners who protest: "I don't do windows!" Too many pastors are proud to say the same thing, "I don't conduct visitations, I don't provide pastoral counsel; I don't hear confession and give private absolution; I don't do hospitals; I don't help the poor; I don't help my people with their practical needs...in my own way, I don't do windows!" What we're talking about now is the pastor with a truncated view of the holy ministry and they defend themselves with a false piety going on about not giving into a "social gospel," etc.

Walther quotes Johann Gerhard: *“There are in general seven duties or tasks of the minister of the Church, to which the rest can be easily reckoned: 1. The proclamation of the word of God; 2. the administration of the sacraments; 3. the intercession for the flock entrusted to them; 4. an honorable life; 5. the administration of church discipline; 6. the maintenance of church rites; 7. The care for the poor and the visitation of the sick.”* (from Walther on Mercy: *Selections on the Pastoral Office, the Congregation and the Church’s Corporate Diakonic Life*, LCMS World Relief and Human Care, page 3 where Walther refers to Gerhard’s *Loc. Th. De Minister. Ecclesiasti. Para 265*)

“Luther remarks: ‘If a faithful shepherd or one who cares for souls is concerned above all with the preaching of the Gospel to his little flock, then he should be concerned with nothing else so much as that the poor also may be nourished and preserved. For it never fails that where a church or community of God is, there must certainly also be poor people, who are commonly only the real disciples or followers of the Gospel, as Christ himself testifies in Matthew 11:5. For the poor will have the Gospel preached to them; and 1 Cor. 1:27-28: ‘What is foolishness before the world’ etc. For evil people and the devil persecute the church and the community of God and make many poor people, who are afterwards so destitute that no one will care for them or give them a thing.’ (Ibid., pages 3-4 from Luther’s *Church Postil* VIII, 1762)

Such an insight means that the local congregation is concerned about the real lives of people – both within the congregation and in the community – the church itself develops a heart for people...a love for both the Gospel proclaimed for our salvation *and* for the real lives of the people receiving it. Uhlhorn in his astounding work *Christian Charity in the Ancient Church* puts it this way: *“The whole work of our Lord may be summed up in this, that He founded upon earth the kingdom of heaven, the kingdom of God. But the kingdom of God is the community of men, in which God is absolute and undisputed Master. God is love, and therefore the kingdom of God is a kingdom of love: and the community of those who have been reconciled to God in Christ must hallow its whole life and conduct by love.”* (57)

And love acts. Not under compulsion, but precisely because one has received the saving Gospel proclaimed: that Jesus took on our flesh and became our sin, took our curse; traded His holiness and righteousness (which we have received) and put our burdens and heavy laden sufferings upon Himself and then covered them – all – with His blood. He receives the weary and heavy laden precisely because He joined them...He joined all of your sin-laden and suffering parishioners Herb and took their frightful burdens upon Himself and then rose from the dead to show His victory over all of it, so that all who “come” through the faith created by this Gospel – by the Holy Spirit – would know the rest of God through faith and esp. experienced when we meet Him face-to-face in glory, the friend of sinners; the lover of those who suffer; the most merciful One who hears even the whimpers of those who despise their own imagined strength; of those who are desperate for mercy; for those who are horrified by their sins...these receive rest for Jesus loves sinners.

But know this: if you take the Word of God to heart about those who extend this ministry; if you accept Gerhard’s list of 7 duties and tasks, then you will out of necessity despair

of yourself. You will pray and feel, "Lord, how can I?! For I am a sinful man and so full of failures and weaknesses – how can I do this? Dear Lord Jesus, I cannot! Save me! Help me!" And know this dear Herb: He will save you again. He will help you again! The true Christ is no Jesus who "calls you to a reckoning for your sins nor bids you trust in your own good works," (Pieper quoting Luther, Volume II, 519), but the Jesus who begins with you, pastor, – a poor one in spirit and often poor in many other ways – and He will continue to have mercy on you.

In this mercy; in this grace; He will lead you to preach the Gospel and administrate the saving sacraments, and...to do windows...to live with your people, to walk with them, to weep with them, to rejoice with them, to see them in their weakness; to join them in their despair; to serve them as they are weak and heavy laden, and behold the Lord Jesus will be with you and make you and your people strong when you are weak; rich when you are poor; and blessed as you bear His holy cross. Do windows Herb...do windows...as He equips you in His rich mercy for you, Pastor Herb Percy, and for the shining flock at Trinity Lutheran Church, Whittier. In Jesus' Name. And now may the peace of God which surpasses all understanding guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus until He comes again in glory. Amen.