

Fifth Sunday after Pentecost

July 8-9, 2017 Grace Lutheran Church, Lancaster, PA

Zechariah 9:9-12, Romans 7:15-25a, Matthew 11:16-19, 25-30

Leading Harold Evans memorial service today/yesterday made me think of my Grandfather in several ways...they were physically alike but also in temperament. As I heard Harold's grandson's describing his impact on them,

I was thinking about my grandfather too.

I heard them say:

Harold Evans was a can do guy – so was my grandfather.

Harold was a gentle man – so was my granddad Reichter.

Harold was very moderate...that was one of my grandad's favorite sayings!
"Everything in moderation" were words he liked to live by.

He said it so often I once heard my grandmother say –

I think it was in relation to the amount of ice cream
in someone's bowl –

"Yes, Ed, but sometimes it would be nice if
you could be more moderate with your moderation."

Maybe my grandfather and Harold could have helped Jesus with his dilemma.

We hear him today, talking about the people's rejection
of both John the Baptist's message
and his own ministry.

"John came neither eating nor drinking,"
in other words he denied himself worldly pleasures,
surviving on a diet of locusts and wild honey.

Were the people impressed? No says Jesus, "they said, He has a demon."

Now Jesus, the Son of Man, comes eating and drinking,
enjoying the bounty of God's creation,
and they call him a glutton and a drunkard!

"What do you expect?" Grandad would say, "Everything in moderation..."

Well, unfortunately, Jesus was not a moderate.
But what was he?

Extremely conservative on divorce (Matt. 19),
Extremely liberal on crime and punishment (John 8:7)
Advocate for the needy, the poor, the widow, the orphan,
friend of tax collectors and sinners, (Matt. 11)
But tough on morality: If your eye causes you to sin,
pluck it out and throw it away! (Matt. 5)

But hey, only your own eye -- Don't try plucking out anyone else's for the sake of justice or revenge, as in an eye for an eye, a tooth for a tooth...
Then it's: "turn the other cheek; if someone asks for your coat,
give them your cloak as well." (Matt. 5)

It can get confusing trying to tie Jesus down.

The portrait we get of Jesus in the gospels is, as they say, enigmatic.
We don't know what to make of him at times.
But we know that he is not a moderate.

As one of us he was a man of passion, of passionate feeling for
truth and righteousness, for people in all their predicaments,
passionate for the absolute rule of God in the lives of his
people, for the sake of the world.

As the only Son of God the Father, he is absolute in his lordship,
his power, his sovereignty over all of us and over all things,
and yet he comes among us not as that extreme,
but at the other, humble -- in the prophecy of Zechariah:
"humble, riding on a donkey" (Zech.9:9)

He teaches that he is "gentle and humble in heart" (Matt. 11:29)
and he takes up his crown of glory by emptying himself
by dying for the sake of the truth for which he came to speak,
and for the salvation of all who turned to him
for such a word of truth.

In the course of reading this week at the lake,
I came across a description of a psychology experiment
in which the subjects were shown pictures of playing cards
and told to name them. "3 of clubs, jack of hearts" etc..
But in the deck they colored some of the cards opposite,
so the three of clubs was red, and the jack of hearts was black.
When the cards were going by quickly, people just made
mistakes, like saying the Jack of hearts was a jack of spades.
But as the series of cards slowed down, and people
began to really see the cards, they had different reactions.
Sometimes they insisted on using the wrong symbol
Others said they didn't know what it was
Others actually said the cards were brown
and they couldn't tell what it was.

Still others said their eyes were tired and they couldn't see.
One said "I'm not even sure now what a spade looks like - my God!"

Faced with information that doesn't fit our categories,
we tend to ignore it for as long as possible, explain it away,
until the information is too glaring to ignore, and then we
have a crisis, a "My God" reaction.

"What did you come out to the wilderness to see?"
Jesus asks the people just a moment earlier.
What does a prophet look like? How does a Messiah behave?
What are you expecting?

Whatever it is...well, it doesn't seem to be moderation.

"Come to me, all you that are weary and 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 light."

To be sure, we all have our burdens, and so it is easy to claim Jesus' words
for ourselves. We are glad to welcome him into our lives as long as
we are still in charge.

We are glad to claim his love for us as long as it is an easy yoke to bear
and a burden light enough to live with.

We don't want to change our habits,
or the few prejudices we have come to hang onto.

We like a reasonable amount of peace of mind,
we don't like to lie awake at night worrying about the
problems of the world, or the state of our soul.

And certainly most of us are prone to that strange perspective
which allows us to see and envy the greater wealth of our neighbors,
while hiding from view the faces of need pressed against our own windows.

Is that what we expect from an easy yoke and a light burden?
Can we really think that when Jesus tells us to "learn from him"
that all he really has to tell us is that life can and should be
easier than the time we are having of it now,
and that it WILL BE if we would just sign on as Christians?

Our relationship with this Lord, our acceptance of his gracious
invitation to "Come to me..."
this relationship must first involve us in a life of extremes,
as we struggle with his whole life and word to us.

The extremes of our own failures, our own sins, our own inner darkness
and confusion, and the outer darkness of life in this world,
along with the extremes of love and passion,
our experiences of beauty and truth and goodness
in the face of all the evil, the ugliness and deception
that wait for us...

It is in the midst of such a life, real life as it is,
that Jesus comes to offer rest, not instead of life as it is,
but in spite of it!

He offers the rest which comes from the revelation of
his power in the midst of weakness,
his strength in the midst of gentleness and humbleness
his forgiveness and love in the midst of judgment
his life in the midst of death.

It is a revelation that mocks all our attempts to make sense
of this life and solve all its problems and mysteries
without the fundamental risk of faith,
of trust that this Jesus leads us to know the God who saves us,
and so to know anything about who we really are.

Moderation may be great training for life in this world.

It is in many ways a great virtue, even a Christian one,
as we seek to pace ourselves and pick priorities
and maximize our impact or our outcomes.

But when the ultimate realities enter our lives,
when we acknowledge the burdens that we carry,
when we face the challenges of discipleship and love,
thankfully, our faith is not simply learning that moderation
is the key to a happy life!

Thank God instead for the gift of faith in which truly heavy burdens
of love become bearable, in which the paradoxes of sin
and mysteries of life, and willpower, become bearable,
in which, our own shortcomings and the ones
in our loved ones that annoy us the most become bearable.

The metaphor of the easy yoke and the light burden
is not that we will have an actual easier time of it as Jesus' people.
We may actually have, in many ways, a harder time, if we take
seriously his call to love our neighbor as ourselves.

Put simply, there is NO yoke that makes life easier – a yoke is a yoke
and it's always hitched to something, just ask an Amish horse.
a burden is a burden, and it's always harder to carry it
than to not take it up in the first place.
a promise is a promise, and it's always harder to keep it
than to renegotiate the terms in our favor.

Jesus does not come to moderate the lives we have chosen,
but to establish a new relationship with God for us,
in which the taking on of yokes
and the bearing of one another's burdens makes sense,
since he has born our greatest burden before God
and set it down.

When we are forced to ask with St. Paul:

"Who will rescue me from this body of death?
We do not want to hear someone say, "try moderation, it works"
How can we moderate what we have already broken?
How can we choose a lighter grief?
How might we cast off the burden of our commitments?

Instead we can answer with him: "Thanks be to God, through Jesus Christ
our Lord!" – our distinctly immoderate Lord. Amen

