

Matthew 11:25-30

Lately I've been receiving invitations in the mail. It's not that I'm ungrateful, but I've tossed every one of them into the trash. AARP, which was known as the American Association of Retired Persons, has been inviting me to sign up as a member, but I have no interest in them. I've been turning down their invitations because, for one thing, I'm not anywhere close to retiring, and I'm not even fifty yet! It's probably a psychological thing with me, but I associate AARP with getting old and slowing down, and because I don't feel old or see myself slowing down, I want nothing to do with their invitations.

And this attitude that I have toward AARP is one that dwells within all of us to some extent toward the kind invitation of Jesus in our text. "Come to Me," He says, "All who labor and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest." And we may say to ourselves, "Well, that's nice, but I'm too busy to lie down and rest right now. Yes, I labor and at times am heavy laden, but I can handle it. I've got too much living to do than to heed Jesus' invitation and plop down and rest with Him." This kind of attitude associates Jesus and His church either with children or with those who are in the later stages of life. "Church is for kids and for seniors; it's for those who depend upon others in life." And those who see it this way typically take Jesus' words, "Come to Me," and respond: "Are you kidding? I am a productive member of society. I've got things to do, places to go, people to see. I'll come to You when my life slows down."

People who think this way see Jesus' church as a daycare facility or as a rest home. They'll drop off the kids for Sunday School and assist their grandparents in making it up the steps into church, but they themselves have better things to do. These are the same people who would not ever relate with St. Paul in our Epistle text for today: "I know that nothing good dwells in me," he writes in anguish, "For I have the desire to do what is right, but not the ability to carry it out...I do not do the good I want, but the evil I do not want is what I keep on doing...Wretched man that I am! Who will deliver me from this body of death?"

Now there's a man, we might think, who really needed Jesus' invitation. Paul must have been a troubled man. He was really dealing with some issues. "If I ever get that way in life then, yes, I'll heed Jesus' invitation and come to Him." But honestly, when was the last time that you and I struggled within ourselves the way we see Paul struggling here? Last night? Last month? A few years ago? How about never? Here in America we're taught to have good self-esteem; to not get so down on ourselves; to keep a cheery attitude in life. And when we are dealing with issues of guilt and despair, we're taught by the popular media to blame society, not ourselves, for the troubles within us. "I'm okay, you're okay" is still a common way of looking at ourselves and at others. But if we really believe all this, then Jesus and His church is only for the weak; only for losers; only for those who cannot help themselves.

And we would be right. St. Paul was the biggest "loser" who ever lived. Your parents and grandparents who faithfully heeded Jesus' invitation and were regularly found in God's House and at His Table were some of the weakest people to walk the face of the earth. Children who are taught in Sunday School and church about a loving Savior are those who cannot help themselves whatsoever. It is true that when Jesus says, "Come to Me," He is not inviting the strong, the proud, and those who are able to help themselves. He invites only the "weak and heavy laden."

If you and I disagree with St. Paul; if we would change his words to read: “I have the desire to do what is right, and I usually carry it out. I usually do the good I want, and I avoid the evil I do not want. I’m not all that wretched of a man. That guy who allegedly killed eight people in Illinois—now he is a wretched man; I’m just living my life the best I can.”

If this is how we see ourselves, then we don’t have much use for Jesus’ invitation, “Come to Me.” If we don’t see ourselves as those who are weak, then why do we need a strong Savior? If you and I don’t agree with Paul that we’re wretched sinners, then why should we take Jesus up on His word and come to His House of Mercy regularly and come to His Table of Grace often?

Those who think that Jesus’ church is for losers are absolutely right. Why would a “winner” come here and say in sorrow: “I am a poor, sinful being...Lord, please have mercy on me and forgive my sins”? “Winners” do not plead for mercy. Secure people do not show signs of weakness.

And so perhaps we should pause and ask ourselves at this point, “Why am I in God’s House today? Why did I get up this morning, put on church clothes, and drive to the corner of Highway 94 and Church Road? Is it because I recognize my weaknesses? Is it because I realize that I have lost my way through life so many times that I am truly a loser, and that I would be lost forever unless God delivers me and keeps me with Him in life? Are you and I here because we know how helpless we really are? That we are, in fact, no different from St. Paul? That we, like him, fail to live rightly? And that we are wretched sinners who need a Savior?

If this is your humble attitude; if this is why you are here today, then thank God for revealing this to you. Just before Jesus says, “Come to Me,” He says this: “I thank you, Father, that you have hidden these things from the wise...and revealed them to babes.” If you see yourself as “weak and heavy laden;” if you are grateful, therefore, for Jesus’ invitation “Come to Me,” then it is because of your Father in heaven. In mercy He revealed your weakness to you. In love He showed you your wretched sinfulness. He is the One who pointed out what a loser you are, and that without Christ you would be lost forever. Your Heavenly Father out of pure grace toward you revealed to you that you are as helpless as a child; that as a babe, you depend upon Him for all things.

Those who are wise in their own estimation are not going to have your attitude, or your need for Jesus, because they reject the truth of God’s Word. But the fact is that only “losers” go to heaven—losers who are found by Christ and who see Him as the Way to eternal life. Only the weak are born of God. At the right time Christ died for the weak and helpless. He died for you and washed you clean of your sins in the waters of Baptism. If you recognize the weakness of your sinful flesh, rejoice! You have a Savior in Jesus. If you, like faithful parents and grandparents before you, count it a privilege to be called weak because you can do all things through Christ who strengthens you, then you are blessed indeed. And if you believe the words we sang: “Just as I am, poor, wretched, blind...Just as I am, Thou wilt receive; wilt welcome, pardon, cleanse, relieve,” then you are blessed of God.

“Come to Me” says Jesus, “All who labor and are heavy laden.” This means you, friend. Your sins are not too heavy for Christ. He already carried your burden to Calvary. He was laden with your punishment. He labored to bear the cross for you. He died for you and rose from death for you, and so now all He has for you is rest—rest from the guilt of your past; rest from a heavy conscience. Whether you’re young, old, or half-way in between, Jesus is rest for your soul. You don’t have to stop working to come to Jesus. You don’t have to slow down in life, but you can live, work, and play with sins forgiven in Christ; with a clear conscience; with a heart at peace with God for Jesus’ sake.

Jesus’ words of forgiveness are for you. God does forgive you no matter how wretched, weak, or lost you are. Jesus’ body and blood are for you. Here is rest that no mattress or couch can ever give. Here is life in abundance—life in Christ—a life lived free from worry, free from the fear of death, free from guilt and despair. Even St. Paul knew this. “Who will deliver me?” he cries. “Thanks be to God,” he answers, “Through Jesus Christ our Lord!”

“Come to Me,” says Jesus, but really it’s He who comes to you. You may walk into this holy house, but He comes to you in words of life. You may come up to this altar, but He comes to you in bread and wine. He comes to you, a wretched sinner, for one reason—that you, forgiven by Him, may have forever rest for your weary soul. Amen.