**Unburdening Love** Rev. Phillip Romine

Sixth Sunday after Pentecost The House of Hope Presbyterian Church
Song of Solomon 2:8-13 St. Paul, Minnesota

Matthew 11:16-19, 25-30

July 9, 2023

*“We will be known as a culture that feared death*

*and adored power, that tried to vanquish insecurity*

*for the few and cared little for the penury of the*

*many. We will be known as a culture that taught*

*and rewarded the amassing of things, that spoke*

*little if at all about the quality of life for*

*people (other people), for dogs, for rivers. All*

*the world, in our eyes, they will say, was a*

*commodity. And they will say that this structure*

*was held together politically, which it was, and*

*they will say also that our politics was no more*

*than an apparatus to accommodate the feelings of*

*the heart, and that the heart, in those days,*

*was small, and hard, and full of meanness.”[[1]](#footnote-1)*

So writes Mary Oliver, the poet otherwise known for her holy ruminations on the the natural world. At times, it seems, even poets must shake loose their familiar rhythms, and even their content, to follow the muse, to say what’s true.

In Matthew’s Gospel we meet Jesus shortly after he’s commissioned his disciples to go to the lost sheep of Israel: those corners of his own people who are in search of healing, good news, and the nearness of God’s presence.[[2]](#footnote-2) Jesus seems to think that the ministry and message of God’s inbreaking realm would be of particular interest to his fellow religious practitioners: after all, many of them say that’s what they believe.

What today’s reading skips over is the first sign that Jesus’ ministry to his fellow Israelites failed: among the very people Jesus knows to be obedient religionists, they cannot hear their own renewed message of liberated love. In verses 20-24 Jesus proclaims woe after woe to the Israelite villages who reject his message and deeds, saying instead that the message would have been better received and lived out among the non-Israelite towns of Tyre and Sidon.[[3]](#footnote-3) John came first with mournful woes and calls to repentance, and was labeled demonic by his own people. Now the singing and dancing of Jesus get him labeled hedonistic by the very same people.

If we say we follow the resurrected Christ; if we have committed ourselves to the cause of Jesus, we are not invited into a selfish satisfaction with our Christianity. We too must heed the call to repentance, and join in the joy Jesus ushered in.

Scholars note that Jesus’ yoke “is not an invitation to a selfish life of ease, but of deliverance from the artificial burdens of human religion.”[[4]](#footnote-4) Whether through John’s wild word of judgment or Jesus’ invitation to the feast of abundant life in God’s inbreaking realm, religion—yes, even, especially, the religion that claims to follow Jesus—is upended.

There is a measure of comfort—in our small, hard, and mean times—in being certain that something in our lives might be stable, reliable, secure. And as we search for certainty, our religious traditions offer a tempting destination. But when we worship our religion instead of the One our religion proclaims, we deceive ourselves, and the truth is not in us. And those of us who are Christians in this time and place are doubly tempted to worship a version of our religion that cozies up to empire.

Our history illuminates our checkered path in this regard. At the margins of empire, pre-Constantinian Christianity offered hope, healing, inclusion, and an incredible mosaic of belief and practice to its adherents.[[5]](#footnote-5) While post-Constantinian Christendom cemented Christian Scriptures, promulgated the thinking of sages such as Augustine and Athanasius, and produced unifying creeds and sprawling institutions of higher learning, it also conflated violence, conquest, and domination with divine blessing.[[6]](#footnote-6)

In the 15th and 16th centuries, the Doctrine of Discovery undergirded the colonial enterprise of European nations, bringing racialization and genocide to what we now call the African and American continents,[[7]](#footnote-7) even while Martin Luther located grace and salvation as God’s gifts that the Roman Church could not control.[[8]](#footnote-8) Luther’s heirs, in their haste to shore up control and certainty in the ecclesial structure of early Protestantism, centered personal belief and religious practice as markers of assurance that heaven was theirs and to hell with non-Christians.[[9]](#footnote-9)

Antebellum enslavers and their business and religious partners in the North upheld the dehumanization of enslaving Africans and their descendents, even as those very same enslaved Africans wove Christianity into their cultural and religious practices for spiritual and material liberation.[[10]](#footnote-10) The liberating power of the Gospel was part of the constellation of love in the civil rights and Black Lives Matter movements,[[11]](#footnote-11) even as others, to this day, pull passages from our Scriptures to justify exclusion, hate, and who (again) is in or out of the desired afterlife.[[12]](#footnote-12)

Christianity is ours to use and abuse. But it can never be love. It cannot show love. It cannot and will not endure all things. As Jesus’ ministry to his contemporaries—and indeed, to so many of his followers who have confused divine love with the power of empire—it will fail, again and again.

But Christianity can point to love. It can, through its people, be honest about the fullness of its history. It can strip away previously-held notions of “one right way” that made for small, hard, and mean versions of itself. It can witness to all the other ways our human attempts to secure the right way, the best way, the only way to live, to think, to act, to love—will always mean the denial of life, thought, action, and love to others.

Christianity does this by pointing to Jesus, who proclaims that the yoke of divine wisdom is not adherence to belief, or following the fullness of the law, or giving ourselves over to the whims of a powerful nation or leader or economic or religious system. Jesus’ yoke is love: love that binds us together with all creation. It is a yoke that beckons us, like the beloved, to arise, and come away[[13]](#footnote-13) to experience life, bound forever to each other. As lovers. As siblings. As children and ancestors. As beings woven into a web of creation too terrible and wonderful to comprehend.

It is a yoke because, however unburdened by the whims of culture or history, it connects us together. Not by status or creed. Not by language or religion. Not by any of the ways we categorize or systematize ourselves. Under the yoke of love, we are burdened with all that burdens creation, knit together, as we are, in this inescapable network of mutuality.[[14]](#footnote-14) Under this yoke, as our hearts grow bigger and softer, they are, we are, more vulnerable. Under this yoke, our deeper connections with one another mean we too are acquainted with the suffering and the injustice that visits our neighbors. And under this yoke, all of creation is connected to, and supporting us, too. Here is the fullness of joy. Because as poet Ross Gay wonders, “What if joy, instead of refuge or relief, from heartbreak, is what effloresces from us as we help each other carry our heartbreaks?”[[15]](#footnote-15)

It never has been, nor will it ever be, the dictates of powerful people that move us to love, that wrap our minds and our bodies in love, that invite us to put down our pretensions about the best, most effective, most productive way to do or to be. We will always be moved to love:

* By children who invite us to play music and to cry, to sing and to dance;
* By strangers who shows us unexpected hospitality;
* By the endless giving of parents, guardians, chosen family;
* By the Buddhist practitioner who invites us into deeper understanding of the mystery, the pain, and the beauty of existence;
* By the agnostic whose life committed to the wellbeing of others preaches the Gospel to us, as if for the first time;
* By the lover who, despite all that might hold us back or down, beckons us to arise, summoning strength within us we did not know we had.

Yoked to love, we can grow bigger, softer, learning how to drain away meanness. Yoked to love, we can work together to de-commodify and re-divinize the world. Yoked to love, rivers and animals and neighbors can flourish when we commit to teach and reward the sharing of things.

Wisdom will indeed be vindicated by her deeds,[[16]](#footnote-16) deeds no creed can hold.

So come, all you, all of us, who are weary and carrying heavy burdens. Let us bring all we hold sacred, and learn from Jesus how to hold that sacredness a little less hard, so that it might be a little less mean. Let us shake loose, for a time, the familiar rhythms, and even the content, of our ways. Know that Jesus’ message of absolute divine love can always pass through, but cannot be contained by any of our designs, religious or otherwise.[[17]](#footnote-17) Put down pretensions. Let go of the best, the only, the perfect. Take your rest. And when we wake, let us arise, and come away, following Jesus in love, for love, and with love. Amen.

1. “Of The Empire,” Mary Oliver, *Devotions: The Selected Poems of Mary Oliver* (New York: Penguin Press, 2017), 112. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. Matthew 10 [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. Matthew 11:20-24. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. M. Eugene Boring and Fred B. Craddock, *The People’s New Testament Commentary* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2004), 54. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. Rudolf Bultmann, *Primitive Christianity in its Contemporary Setting*, translated by R.H. Fuller (Leipzig: Interdruck, 1983), 175-178. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. Justo L. Gonzalez, *The Story of Christianity, Vol. I: The Early Church to the Dawn of the Reformation* (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1984), 113-128; 173-180; 207-216; 292-323. [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. <https://facing-racism.pcusa.org/site_media/media/uploads/facing_racism/doctrine-of-discovery-report-to-the-223rd-ga-2018-finalized-copy_as-approved.pdf>; see also Willie James Jenkins, *The Christian Imagination* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2010), 43. [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. Paul E. Capetz, *God: A Brief History* (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 2003), 90-96. [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
9. John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, Vol. II, edited by John T. McNeill, translated by Ford Lewis Battles (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2006), 930-932; 1011-1041. [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
10. Eddie S. Glaude Jr., *African American Religion: A Very Short Introduction* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014), 32-46; see also William Yoo, *What Kind of Christianity: A History of Slavery and Anti-Black Racism in the Presbyterian Church* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2022). [↑](#footnote-ref-10)
11. <https://www.history.pcusa.org/history-online/topics-note/presbyterians-and-civil-rights> and <https://pcusa.org/bearingwitness/#2>, accessed 7/7/23. [↑](#footnote-ref-11)
12. <https://bfm.sbc.net/bfm2000/>, accessed 7/7/23. [↑](#footnote-ref-12)
13. Song of Solomon 2:10; 13. [↑](#footnote-ref-13)
14. Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., *A Letter From Birmingham Jail*. [↑](#footnote-ref-14)
15. “Can the heat of a world on fire ignite seeds of joy? Ross Gay’s new essay collection explores the revolutionary tactics of delight,” Beth Waltemath, in *The Christian Century*, May 2023, 83. [↑](#footnote-ref-15)
16. Matt. 11:19. [↑](#footnote-ref-16)
17. Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Letters and Papers from Prison*, edited by Eberhard Bethge (New York: the Macmillan Company, 1971), 381: “Our relation to God is not a ‘religious’ relationship to the highest, most powerful, and Best being imaginable…but our relation to God is a new life in ‘existence for others’, through participation in the being of Jesus.” [↑](#footnote-ref-17)