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July 10, 2011

Matthew 11:16-19, 25-30 <http://bible.oremus.org/?ql=177051788>
“Voices in the Marketplace”

We are a story-telling people. We like to share stories, personal stories and family stories – shaping them in such a way so that the tales are pleasant and fall easy on the ears. Estelle’s story, for example, is a familiar one, but I must admit that the ending is somewhat unsettling and leaves a bit of sadness in the air after it is told. Estelle became a widow in her mid-80s, and in time she became too frail to live alone in her Florida apartment. So she was moved up north (note the passive voice) to be near her daughter, Jane. The move meant many things – all expected – an adjustment to a new place, a loss of personal independence and a gradual decline in physical capacities. It meant, as her daughter put it, “Seeing how hard it is to be old, how long everything takes, how much some of it hurts.” When Estelle’s speech became increasingly slurred, a “talking board” was purchased in which buttons were programmed to say simple messages: *I’m cold. I’m hot. I’d like a cup of coffee. Close the curtains, please.* For the last two buttons, Estelle was told she could have them say whatever thing she chose. She was thrilled by this opportunity and thought up two messages. One was this: *You’ll be old someday, too, you know.* The other message, and the button Estelle eventually wore out from overuse, was the cry of a woman who had so treasured her privacy: *Get out of my room,* complete with a final obscenity added for good measure.¹

We tell lots of stories – stories about family caring for family, like Jane caring for Estelle. When we’re honest, we admit that growing old ain’t for sissies, but that’s how life is. So it goes, as Kurt Vonnegut would say with a shrug. Nations tell stories too. This past week we celebrated Independence Day, waved flags and set off fireworks. But national life is not always pretty – just look at Congress at the moment – and democracy, real democracy, ain’t for sissies. But that’s how life is in America. So it goes.

Jesse’s story is pretty familiar, but there are parts of his narrative that are unsettling and that leave a bit of sadness as well. In the early 1920s, a nine year old boy named James Cleveland Owens migrated with his sharecropper parents from Oakville, Alabama to Cleveland, Ohio. On his first day of school, the teacher asked him his name and he said he was called J.C. The teacher misheard him and, from that day forward, he was called Jesse instead. Jesse Owens would go on to win four gold medals at the 1936 Olympics in Berlin, the first American track and field athlete to do so; personally disproving the Aryan notions of supremacy of his Nazi hosts. It made newspaper headlines when Hitler shook the hands of the white medalists but refused to shake Owens’ hand. But it should also be noted that while in Germany, Owens could stay in the same quarters and eat with his white teammates, a privilege denied him back in segregated America. It should be noted that Owens received a ticker-tape parade in New York City; but afterward he had to ride the freight elevator to his own reception at the Waldorf-Astoria. He had stood atop the medalist podium in the Olympics, but still had to enter a bus by the rear door in his home country.² So it goes.

Like voices calling out in a crowded marketplace, we are surrounded by lots of stories. And on the surface, they seem fine, this re-telling of family stories, regional and national stories. But sometimes the stories don't work. Like a wrong note played in a familiar melody, sometimes we end up feeling unsettled and ill at ease, especially when someone names what we're feeling. To a crowd of listeners, Jesus spoke up one day and said, *To what shall I compare this generation? It is like children telling stories in the marketplace, their voices calling out to one another, saying "There was a wedding. We played the flute for you, but you didn't do the traditional wedding dance. There was a funeral. We wailed, but you didn't mourn as is the custom."* Something's wrong here. What is it?

On one level, what Jesus is referring to is the fact that the crowds around him seemed unmoved by the messages of both John the Baptist and Jesus himself. As it is written in Matthew's gospel, *John came living an ascetic life, neither eating nor drinking, yet people said, "He is demon-possessed. Jesus, the Son of Man came proclaiming the reign of God, eating and drinking around a banquet table and people complained that he was a glutton and a drunkard.* You just couldn't please people, whether your approach was austere like John or gracious like Jesus. Something just wasn't fundamentally right.

Think about this description on a deeper level. John, the wilderness prophet, stood and shouted and baptized all day long in the Jordan river, yet people were not moved by him. And Jesus, the prophet of Nazareth, calmed the stormy sea, healed the leper and the woman with the flow of blood, and still people rejected his gospel and were unmoved by his words. This is not just a story about the people back in Jesus' day; this is not just a story about **their** lack of faith and hardheartedness. The opening question from this passage is one directed squarely at us: *To what shall I compare this generation?* Standing around flatfooted when we should be dancing for joy at the wonder of God's presence in this world. At other times, silent when we should mourn or grieve the amount of pain and injustice present in God's world. In some perverse way, we are so busy today that we're not getting anything done at all. We are so frantically running around that we never get anywhere. Something's not right in this story of ours.

Now maybe this characterization doesn't apply to anyone here. Certainly Presbyterians would never be guilty of such things: of not doing what we're supposed to do, of not caring enough or trying hard enough to get things right. But when we look at our stories more closely, there's unsettling history all around us: Jesse Owens winning Olympic gold but kept out of the "whites only" elevator in the Waldorf-Astoria. Stories of people growing old and families doing the best they can, even though quite often the button that is worn out is the one labeled "Get out of my room." Here in the noisy marketplace of modern life, it is hard to know what to do, what to believe, how to act in ways that ultimately, fundamentally make sense.

That's why another voice is heard in the marketplace – one that does two things. First, the voice offers up a prayer. Imagine that: a prayer saying “Thank you, God.” Officially in scripture the voice said this: *I thank you, Father, Lord of heaven and earth, because you have hidden these things from the wise and the intelligent and have revealed them to infants, for such was your gracious will.* The wise and the intelligent – the ones who busy loudly telling their stories, shouting into microphones and raising their voices in the marketplace; the ones who claim to have all the answers; even the ones like us who try to get it right by our own devices and yet who end up paralyzed – neither dancing when we ought or shedding a sympathetic tear when it is most appropriate. To us and for us, Jesus offered his prayer, inviting us to become like infants again. Infants – those who know they don't know; those whose hands are not so absolutely full with what they've been grasping and holding onto, thereby able to receive what is generously, graciously, handed to them. Jesus offers a kind prayer, because it invites us to become infant children of God, for such is God's gracious will for us.

Second, the voice offers an invitation, one spoken so clearly that it needs no paraphrasing or elaboration: *Come to me, all that are weary and are 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.* Rest – not sleep, not losing consciousness and stepping away from life; but rest that is healing, like the Sabbath is meant to be. Rest that is nurturing, like food and good knowledge and laughter is meant to be. Rest that is peaceful like a stroll along a path toward a distant goal that compels us onward even as the journey itself refreshes us as we walk forward. That's why the verbs “take my yoke” and “learn from me” are put side by side and precede the promise of “rest for your souls.”

Jane Addams, the famous social reformer of the late 19th century, said these words: *Simple people do not want to hear about simple things; they want to hear about great things, simply told.*³ At times the voices in the marketplace paralyze us with their conflicting messages, with their stories that start out nice but take a turn that is unsettling and leaves us ill at ease. Yet unto us another voice has spoken – a voice that first offers a prayer and invites us to let go, to become as children for in truth that is what we are. And then the voice gets personal and calls us forward, saying “Come to me, take my yoke, learn, rest.” It's a great message and one that can be simply told. And it's the message we need to hear. Thanks be to God.

AMEN

¹ “Final Passage,” Annie Murphy Paul, review of the book *A Bittersweet Season* by Jane Gross; New York Times Book Review, May 29, 2011, p. 15.

² Isabel Wilkerson, *The Warmth of Other Suns*, 2010, p. 266.

³ Robert Bellah, *The Good Society*, p. 153.