

A Sermon by the Reverend John McDuffie
The Fourth Sunday After Pentecost
July 5, 2020

Zechariah 9:9-12
Psalm 145:8-15
Romans 7:15-25a
Matthew 11:16-19, 25-30

In these troubling and challenging times, I wonder if on particular days you are beset with anger, frustration, depression, or a simple sense of inertia. Maybe it's because of the larger, global and national issues that are affecting all of us, and compounding that are any of the normal, ordinary mishaps and messes that come up in daily life. We sometimes say, "It's one of those days!"

What do we do when we're having one of those days? I must confess that sometimes for a laugh I turn to the music of Weird Al Yankovic. If you don't know Weird Al, he is a talented multi-instrumentalist and singer who composes parodies of popular rock songs. Among them: "Got no sin, got no vice, I'm livin' in an Amish paradise"; "Stuck in the closet with Vanna White, night after night after night after night"; "Got to admit it, I'm addicted to spuds"; and "Like a surgeon, operatin' for the very first time". You can check out Weird Al on YouTube.

The Weird Al song that came to my mind recently is "One of Those Days", which is a parody of "Ducks on the Wall" by the Kinks. I'll share just a few verses with you:

*Got to work late 'cause my alarm was busted
The boss chewed me out and everybody's disgusted
'Cause it's one of those days, it's just one of those days*

*I lost one of my socks in the drier
I can't find my wallet and my hair's on fire
Just one of those days, it's just one of those days*

*Just wrapped my Cadillac around a tree
A big swarm of locusts is following me
There's not even anything good on TV
It's just one of those days, gonna be one those days*

*A 747 crashed into my den
And there's nothin' but tater-tots for dinner again
It's just one of those days
Never mind, it's just one of those days.*

Well, enough of weird Al. There is someone else you can turn to: and it is Jesus. Because, as it turns out, if you read the entire 11th chapter of the Gospel of Matthew (we hear a portion of the chapter in today's Gospel), it turns out that Jesus was having one of those days. You'll recall over the last three Sundays we've heard Jesus commissioning his disciples to go on a missionary journey to the lost sheep of Israel---to preach, teach, and heal the sick. But apparently people

have not always welcomed the good news—maybe because they were expecting the radical inbreaking of the reign of God, replete with fiery judgement, and this is not what they’ve been getting. At the beginning of Chapter 11, a depressed John the Baptist, in prison, sends emissaries to Jesus to ask, “Are you the one who is to come, or should we expect another?” Jesus answers by saying to them, “Go and tell John what you hear and see—the blind receive their sight, the lame walk, the lepers are cleansed, the deaf hear, the dead are raised, and the poor have good news preached to them. And blessed is anyone who takes no offense at me.”

Jesus goes on to be critical of those who have misinterpreted and misunderstood both himself and John the Baptist, which is where our Gospel passage begins today. In the next passage of the chapter Jesus pronounces woe upon the cities in which most of his deeds of power had been done, because they did not repent: “Woe to you, Bethsaida! Woe to you, Chorazin!” and he even pronounces woe on the home base for his ministry” “And you, Capernaum? Will you be exalted to heaven? No, you will be brought down to Hades...”

And then, Just when you expect that Jesus, having “one of those days”, is about to completely blow a gasket, he does something quite remarkable instead: he prays a prayer of thanksgiving! “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; yes, Father, for such is your gracious will...”

And Jesus goes on to issue his famous invitation (I believe his is speaking here to his disciples): “Come to me, all you who 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. For my yoke is easy, and my burden is light.”

Those words have been a comfort to many people, over many generations, and particularly to anyone who is having “one of those days”. But notice that Jesus is not inviting us to lie down, do nothing, and receive some soothing balm. He is inviting us to learn from his gentleness, and his humility. This is his yoke that we are taking upon ourselves.

What might that yoke look like for us today, in terms of how we are to think, and live amidst the challenges that beset us? Regarding the Covid-19 crisis, there are those who are presumably wise and intelligent who tell us that the pandemic is contained...and yet numbers of new cases are spiking every day in certain places, and some scientists are quietly saying the pandemic is out of control. To those who want to live simply, with gentleness and humility, there is an easy witness: wear a face mask in public places, and practice social distancing! This is not a political statement; it’s a statement of care for oneself, and care for other human beings who are around you! I realize that I’m preaching to the choir here in Washington, D.C.—but I was shocked to read a recent Facebook post from one of my former parishioners who is now living in Kentucky. He writes: I just got verbally assaulted in a bakery as the only person wearing a mask. “This is America. We are free to do as we want!” I was told, “Go back to your basement!” Taking on the yoke of Jesus means being socially responsible, in the simplest of ways.

The other crisis is more difficult to garner a simple response that is effective—and I’m talking about the uncovering of the scourge of police brutality to people of color, and of the uncovering

of the difficult state of racial relationships, and systemic racism which I believe is real. Recently I've been returning over and over to a song that was written in the late 1960's by the late Donny Hathaway, a black singer and songwriter, which was sung by Washington D.C.'s Roberta Flack in her debut record album in 1970. It's called "Tryin' Times", and I find the second verse perpetually haunting:

*You've got the riots, and the ghettos
And it's all around
A whole lot of things that's wrong
Is goin' down
I don't understand it, my point of view
Is I remember someone said, do unto others,
As you would have them do unto you
Folks wouldn't have to suffer, if there was more love,
But these are tryin' times.*

I believe that we are at a remarkable moment in human history, and in this great nation of ours, on this Fourth of July weekend. Decades, nay, centuries of violence toward people of color are being brought to the light of day. This is not an easy thing to do, and to live with, for us as white Americans. If you want to deny it, I strongly recommend your reading [The Cross and the Lynching Tree](#) by theologian James Cone—it will break your heart, and bring you to an astounding awareness, and remind you of how the white Christian Church at times in its history has been astoundingly silent. What is being aired today, on our nation's streets, as well as in calmer venues, seems to steer between angry, destructive activity, and threats of retaliatory violence and denial. But the philosopher Hegel, who lived by the formula of thesis/ antithesis/ synthesis, once opined that "For a thing to be great, it has to be capable of enduring a great contradiction within itself"—and that is where I think we are as a nation.

I myself have started reading another book this week, entitled [Up From Eden: A Transpersonal View of Human Evolution](#), by Ken Wilber. It was first recommended to me by the brothers of Snowmass Monastery in Colorado, where I went on a centering prayer retreat in 2007 and had the privilege of meeting Fr. Thomas Keating. I'm finally getting around to reading the book! Wilber is a psychologist who believes that human evolution is not a finished product. We have evolved from our hominid ancestors in our cognitive, as well as spiritual capacities, and we are continuing to slowly evolve. He notes that the awareness of death and what is unknown, is what has troubled us, since our ancestors first developed a reflexive consciousness. And throughout human history societies have formed around the denial of death—in which more fortunate people live with the illusion of preservation and leave death to the less fortunate. We become tribal, attempting to preserve our particular part of the species, over other parts of the species—often through violence and subjugation.

But human evolution slowly continues; and Wilber believe that the endpoint of our transpersonal and spiritual evolution is to accept fully the reality of death, and to come to fully affirm that all humans are on equal footing, equal worth, and worthy of mutual respect and caring. I've just summarized in a very simplistic manner, the thesis of a book that is much denser--but I remember Fr. Keating saying that the best way for us to support this evolution, and the overcoming of our tribalism, is through the practice of our own centering prayer—this is prayer

that doesn't petition God with our needs and wants and desires, but a prayer simply invites Christ to be with us, so that we can listen to him. It is prayer in which we, like infants, can simply receive him for whom he truly is. And if we receive Christ in this way, it was Fr. Keating's belief that this is the antidote to our tribalism. We can embrace more fully the promises we make in our baptismal covenant—to seek and serve Christ in all persons, loving our neighbors as ourselves; and to strive for justice and peace, and respect the dignity of every human being.

I invite you to consider the small, random acts of kindness that you see all around you, and to dwell on them and live into them for they are the signs of Christ; and to not consider and dwell on the random acts of intolerance and insult which you may also see all around you. And if you are having "one of those days", you can listen to Weird Al for a laugh, but more importantly pray a prayer of thanksgiving for being who you truly are—a child of God—and to whom you truly belong—and turn to Christ. Fr. Tim told us in his sermon last week that the best we can do some times is to listen—particularly when we at a loss to contribute otherwise. With this faith we can grow, learn, do unto others as we would have them do unto us, and come slowly to anticipate as did the prophet Zechariah, the ultimate arrival of the king who comes to us, triumphant and victorious, humble and mounted on a donkey. *Amen.*