

# “Learning Humility”

*Sixth Sunday after Pentecost*

*July 10, 2023*

## Scripture

### Matthew 11:25-30

At that time Jesus said, “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 was your gracious will. All things have been handed over to me by my Father, and no one knows the Son except the Father, and no one knows the Father except the Son and anyone to whom the Son chooses to reveal him.

“Come to me, all you who 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. For my yoke is easy, and my burden is light.”

## Sermon

These familiar words of Jesus have a way of calming our spirits; they have a comforting rhythm and flow to them. Just hearing them seems to offer rest. “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 is light” (Matthew 11:30).

Familiar, comforting words. I wonder, though, if the invitation to cast off our heavy burdens and exchange them for rest distracts us from what Jesus asks of us. I wonder if these words, lulling us toward “rest,” pulled by a desire for “easy” and “light,” distract us from what Jesus is calling us to take on. “Take my yoke upon you, and learn from me.” Jesus isn’t removing all yokes from us. He’s inviting us to take on his. And the yoke that he’s asking us to take on is all we need to know and to learn in the school of Jesus.

Now, anyone listening to Jesus or reading Matthew’s gospel later would have understood Jesus’ use of the word “yoke.” Rabbis, teachers in the First Century, especially in Galilee, invited people to keep Torah, the Law of Moses. And this was called taking on “the yoke of Torah” or “the yoke of the kingdom of heaven.” Having achieved the highest level of education, rabbis were given the authority to teach and the authority (*s’mikhah*) to offer new interpretations or yokes. Each rabbi had a school of disciples around him. Jesus is a rabbi with his own yoke, his own interpretation. The most advanced students desired to study with a rabbi, which often meant leaving home and traveling for a season and going from synagogue to synagogue following that rabbi. These students were called *talmidim*, which we translate as disciples. A disciple (*talmid*) was more than a student, who went to school for a period of time, going through training, passing a test, “graduating,” and moving on. Instead, a disciple wants to

become like the teacher and become who and what the teacher is. Disciples were passionately devoted to their rabbi. In time, they would become rabbis and then pass on all they had learned. And Jesus is using this same model of learning. He is the rabbi, the teacher. He invited people to follow his way, to take on his yoke, to become part of his school. And he chose the people for his school because they had the ability and the commitment to learn. He chose them because they were teachable, because he believed in them, and trusted them to embody his teaching and way. [1]

You see, Jesus invites us to learn from him, to be yoked to him so that we can do what he does—that is, teach the good news and embody the way of God, this kingdom, in the world today. He invites us to learn. And he calls you and me and trusts us because Jesus believes we’re indeed teachable. We are teachable, and this is important for us to know because Jesus knows we still have so much to learn.

Years ago, I was at Heathrow Airport en route to Washington from Edinburgh. Walking around the Duty-Free, a book cover and title caught my eye. It was *The Old Ways: A Journey on Foot* by Robert Macfarlane, a new author to me. I pulled the book off the shelf, which is always dangerous, I skimmed through it, and immediately knew that I needed to buy the book. Macfarlane, Fellow in Emmanuel College, Cambridge, has written extensively—and beautifully (he’s become one of my favorite writers)—about the connection between the landscape covered by our feet when we walk and the landscape of heart and mind, all of which he knows something about since he’s an avid walker. And that’s what this book is about, journeys on foot. Macfarlane shows us that there’s a deep connection between walking and learning. I’m struck by the fact that Jesus invited people to walk with him, to follow, which is essentially walking with him. As Macfarlane shows, the connection between walking and learning is really important. The connection is rooted in language. The etymology of a word has much to teach us. So he tracked down the history of the English word learn. “The trail begins,” he writes, “with our verb to learn, meaning ‘to acquire knowledge.’ Moving backwards in language time, we reach the Old English *leornian*, meaning ‘to get knowledge, to be cultivated.’ From *leornian* the path leads further back...[to] Proto-Germanic, to the word *liznojan*, which has the base sense meaning ‘to follow or to find a track.’” Do you hear the connection between walking and learning? To learn is to walk; to learn is to follow a track. “To learn” therefore “means at root—at route—‘to follow a track.’” [2]

As disciples, isn’t this exactly what Jesus is calling us to do? Follow and learn. Walk with me and learn. Take on my way. Go on the way with him, who is “the way” (John 14:6), who is “way.” And as you go, learn, discover! The way is open-ended. There are things we can only discover when we’re walking, moving forward, step after step, into the unknown. Jesus calls us always forward, not to the past, but forward. And as we go, we learn and discover new things.

To discover new things, to learn anything on this journey means we need to acknowledge that there are things we don’t already know. To learn means we must confess ignorance. We have to say, “I don’t know.” Poverty of knowledge is required. We don’t know everything; we don’t have everything figured out. But there are plenty of people in the world these days who think that they do, who think they have it all figured out, and want to teach us. There are plenty

of Christians, our siblings in Christ these days who think they have Jesus all figured out; they assume quite a lot about God and what they think God desires. Some of our Christian siblings have their theologies and beliefs, viewpoints, and worldviews so tightly ordered, so fearfully restricted in cramped, confining boxes that there’s little room for the Holy Spirit to breathe or breathe new life into them. They’re so afraid of discovering anything new or anything that might burst open their well-guarded theologies, question their worldview, or their sense of morality, or their understanding of the Bible, or what it means to be human, or their understanding of science. So much of it is rooted in fear.

This is where humility comes in—for all of us. A Franciscan priest once reminded me that the meaning of the word humility simply means “telling the truth.” Humility, from the Latin *humus*, meaning soil, earth, means, essentially, being of the earth. Humility is not a false modesty, of putting ourselves down. That is not, technically, what humility is. It means being grounded, real, honest, truthful—about who we are and aren’t, sincere about what we’re passionate about and not, and specifically related to this text, truthful about what we know and don’t know. That’s what humility is, simply telling the truth.

Several years ago, I heard theologian Willie James Jennings speak at an event hosted by The Presbyterian Outlook and National Capital Presbytery, titled “Theology, Racism, and Christian Practice: How Shall We Respond?” It was held at St. Mark Presbyterian Church in Bethesda. Jennings is professor of Systematic Theology and Africana Studies at Yale Divinity School and one of the leading theologians of our time. He’s the author of *The Christian Imagination: Theology and the Origins of Race*, which has been called “a theological masterpiece.” At one point in his talk, I wanted to jump out of my chair and shout, Amen! —but since I was around a lot of Presbyterians I didn’t do that. Jennings invited us to practice what he called the “humility of a learner” and to consider this as a way of life for the Christian. Not just sometimes but all the time. Jennings exposed and critiqued a pervasive and destructive ideology that has been at work in the church for centuries, what he called “pedagogical imperialism.” Pedagogical imperialism was often and still is practice by the church, practiced by white Christians toward—well, just about anyone who isn’t white. This ideology is in the groundwater of Christianity, especially in the West. It runs through the history of colonialism and helped to legitimize slavery and, thus, embedded in our racist attitudes and practices. It’s around us all the time that we have difficulty seeing it, this pedagogy of imperialism. Imperial theology assumes that God knows everything and therefore has no need to know anything more. It assumes that God is the only teacher and doesn’t need to learn anything from us. Imperial theology is at work this way. When people hold to such image of God, who think they are like this image of God, they are always, therefore, teaching—they are always telling people what they need to know, what they should believe and not believe, always telling people how they should live their lives and behave. Imperial theology is always teaching, never learning, never listening, never open to learning anything new. Early missionaries, for example, viewed themselves as teachers, refusing to learn anything about God, the world, or themselves from indigenous people—with as we all know catastrophic results. [3] Now, of course, there were many mission workers who were the exception to this, who did listen and learned; but not many.

What we find in the Bible, instead, Jennings reminds us, is a God who is always on a journey, who walks with God’s people through the wilderness of our lives, who delights in learning and discovering in and with and through God’s people. Through the relationship with us, God is learning and discovering, through the “yoking” God learns something about Godself. We could almost say that God becomes more conscious in and through loving God’s people. Now this might sound like a radical idea, but it’s right there in the Bible. It’s all over the place. And it all come to a culmination particularly in an and through the incarnation, by entering into creation and human experience, God gains even greater awareness of what it means to be creature. Learning. Discovering. God delights in learning about God’s own creation. God learns. Jesus learns. Yes, Jesus is a teacher, but he’s open to learning—that’s how one becomes a good teacher, as every good teacher knows. Good teachers are always learning.

To be a disciple means that we are perpetual students in the school of Jesus. We are always learning—we’re always on the lookout for discovering something new about the depths of God’s love, the radicality of God’s grace, the unfathomable meaning of the cross, the mission and work of the Holy Spirit in the world, walking with Christ and expanding our awareness of who we are and what God is hoping to do in and through us, discerning what God is dreaming in and through us, not only for us and for the Church, but for the sake of the world, for the sake of healing and wholeness of human life and the health of communities the world over! For God needs teachable, humble spirits who continually confess that we have so much to learn and discover about the height and breadth and depths of God’s grace!

Jesus invites us, his disciples, to take on his yoke and learn in the school of Jesus. That’s what we are, that’s what the church is. Just imagine what the church can be like when we open ourselves to learn something new with humility. What if it involved a greater spirit of curiosity, inquiry, and discovery, of searching after all the new things we can discover and learn about God, Christ, the work of the Spirit, the mission of the Church, the justice of God’s realm, all that we can learn and discover about one another that we don’t know? Now, of course, it would also entail considerable change as we let go of what we thought was true in order to learn something more authentic, deeper. What if we lived open to discovering something new, meaningful, and redemptive about ourselves as children of God? What if we committed to learning something new and then using what we learn all for the glory of God? What if Christians were known, not as people fearful of truth, but as people constantly learning something new about God’s grace? What if that’s what we were known for? Just consider how radical that would be.

I have a hunch, though, if we lived this way, when we live this way, that living this way will not only feed our souls but that our souls might actually experience a kind of rest—rest in knowing that this is precisely what we were created for. It’s why God breathed life into dust, and formed us in the first place, and walked with us in a garden, and then walked with us out of that garden, into the world, into our lives. Thanks be to God. Amen.

## Sources

- [1] Ray Vander Laan, "Rabbi and Talmidim,"  
<https://www.thatttheworldmayknow.com/rabbi-and-talmidim>.
- [2] Robert Macfarlane, *The Old Ways: A Journey on Foot* (New York: Viking, 2012), 31.
- [3] These ideas are further developed in Willie James Jennings, *The Christian Imagination: Theology and the Origins of Race* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2010), 112-116ff.