070520 Matthew 11:25-30 “Challenged? Come To Me”

Christ’s Ministry, Hope’s Ministry Series

For weeks, most of you have been watching our worship services here at Hope online. Many of our church members are still looking in on the service today remotely. What you haven’t seen, on these pre-recorded services, are the bloopers, the many times Pastor Lew and I had to do a “take two,” or “take three.” Every single time we recorded a service, there were glitches and slip-ups.

Not that when we lead worship live and in person we don’t make mistakes. We do. But there’s something especially weird and stressful about standing in an empty church, looking at a camera, preaching to people somewhere out there. It’s so good to have you here today.

The past three-and-a-half months, in many ways, have been the strangest ministry period, the most challenging ministry season, we’ve ever known. And the months ahead promise to be challenging, too.

Here we are, back in church finally; but it’s different than it was. It’s weird, to be standing here preaching in a mask. To be serving communion wearing lavender exam gloves. But Hope’s ministry has to go on, doesn’t it? The Lord’s work has to happen. Our church’s mission to reach people in our community for Christ is more important than ever. But this ministry work is going to be challenging, for some time.

Well, whoever said ministry is supposed to be easy? Jesus certainly didn’t. We’ve been reading the past four weeks, from Matthew chapter 10, the cautionary instructions Jesus gave his disciples as he sent them out. “Ministry isn’t always comfortable,” Jesus told his disciples back in 30 AD. Tackling the mission Jesus gives his Church in 2020 AD is still challenging. Because not everybody gets it. Not everybody appreciates what we do here. Some reject our ministry. Some scoff. Some oppose. Others just ignore.

And some of us will get weary. Some of us feel uncomfortable, if the ministry is too challenging. Sometimes Christians like us get tired of doing what’s right, tired of keeping the faith, tired of serving and witnessing and loving. Even if it is all in Jesus’ name. Even if it is all exactly what Jesus tells us to do. Even if Jesus tells us that the most important thing we can ever do in our lives is to share the soul-saving Gospel, because it’s the only way for our friends and neighbors to be forgiven and saved.

So what do we do, when ministry is challenging? Where do we turn, in these peculiar days of pandemic ministry? “Come to me,” Jesus says, “all who labor and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest.”

Sounds good, doesn’t it? I could use some rest. My colleague here could use some rest. Parents keeping their quarantined kids occupied for weeks on end could use some rest. People waiting for test results, folks worried about their sick loved ones, friends with underlying health conditions could all use some rest. Political leaders, health workers, protesting minorities, besieged law enforcement officers, business owners, unemployed workers … we could all use some rest.

Jesus says, “Come to me, and I’ll give you rest.” But he’s not offering two weeks in some COVID-free resort. He’s not providing child-care, or promising good health. He’s not taking away all our stressors, or solving every heartache.

Jesus is talking about a different kind of rest. He’s talking here, in Matthew 11, about ministry. He’s talking about how challenging ministry work can be, and how we need help and relief and rest. And Jesus knows all this firsthand.

See, after sending his disciples out, the Lord goes on with his own ministry work. And even Jesus is challenged. He meets resistance, and his work is uncomfortable. And in our Gospel lesson, Jesus talks to the crowds, and he prays to his Father in heaven, about how challenging ministry can be.

Challenging for us, too. When we do our ministry work, as a church, out there in the community, not everyone’s going to value what we do. When we have to wear masks in here, and we don’t get to sit in our favorite pew, and there’s no coffee after service, we may feel like complaining. We’re challenged. We’re burdened. We’re tired.

But then comes this beautiful invitation, from Jesus himself. This is why you’re here today, and this is what you need to hear out there. “Come to me,” says the Lord, “and I’ll give you rest. Take my yoke upon you, and learn from me, for I am gentle and lowly in heart, and you will find rest for your souls. For my yoke is easy, and my burden is light.”

Again, Jesus isn’t promising to make our lives easy, or pledging to make our ministry work at Hope problem-free. But he is offering rest for our souls. Challenged, in your soul? “Come to me.” Challenged, in your heart of hearts? “Come to me,” Jesus says. Challenged with sin-guilt? Challenged with shallow faith? Challenged with ministry obstacles and inconveniences? “Come to me,” our Lord calls today, to you and me.

To all in his Church today, those here in this room, and those separated from us, Jesus’ words are not just an invitation. “Come to me,” he says, and those divine words convey the power to come to him. It’s the work of God, not our own work, that has overcome our natural inclinations to sin and disbelief. God has been working in your life, through his Word, through your church, through Christian parents or Christian friends, and God is enabling you today to come to him in faith. He’s forgiven you, he’s saved you, and, now, as his Son calls you to do challenging ministry work in his name, he nudges you to come to Jesus.

Ministry, during a pandemic, is going to be tough. But Jesus calls, “Come to me. Take my yoke upon you, and learn from me.” In other words, “Do this ministry work my way. Let my words guide you. Let my Spirit direct you. Live your Christian life by my instructions, using my approach. Whatever you’re doing at Hope Lutheran Church,” says our Savior, “Follow my lead, and you’ll be alright.”

And, in these weird, challenging times for our congregation, that’s exactly what we all need to do. Take Christ’s yoke on ourselves, and learn from him. Do everything in love, as he did. Speak the truth in love, as he did. Put others’ interest above our own, as he did. Sacrifice and serve, share and love, as Jesus did. And whenever any of that is a challenge – and it will be a challenge -- come to him.

Will you please pray with me?