

***Invitation to Faithfulness based upon
Matthew 11:25-30
Rev. Mark Seifried @ Townsend
Congregational Church, UCC
October 30, 2005 – 24th Sunday after
Pentecost***

In our gospel lesson Marcia read some of Jesus' most enduring words: "Come to me, all you 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. For my yoke is easy, and my burden is light." "Come unto me" is an invitation Christ offers everyday. It is an invitation unlike most, but also akin to others some of you have received. For those of you who have taken the sacred vows of marriage, you have insight into Jesus' invitation.

Married people decide each day if they are going to remain faithful to the marriage covenant: to honor and trust, to love and care for the other partner no matter what happens: in good times and bad, during times of illness and wellness, whether there is wealth or poverty. It is a choice to accept or reject. When one partner in the relationship rejects the invitation to faithfulness, the dynamics of the relationship change. Those who have experienced the heartache from rejected marital vows, know the difficulty of rebuilding trust. When one partner loses faith in the relationship, all is not lost, but it certainly is difficult to rebuild.

Through experience with my own relationships and working with others in couples' counseling, I realize that there are a few things that determine the success of a faithful relationship. The most critical factors are how the partners think about each other, their own role in the relationship and what they do with those thoughts. In a very real sense, our thoughts become self-fulfilling prophecy. If we continually think that our partners are unfaithful, unloving people, soon enough that is all we can see. We think, "She only called my office once today. Something is going on that she's not telling me. He came home late last night and I don't believe that business about the meeting running over." We begin

to look for other signs and soon enough we find them. Some unexplainable episode from last year now connects with this unrelated event. He thinks her difficulty with intimacy is suddenly a sign of something bigger. She thinks, "I'm not loved and I'm being taken advantage of."

After a while, even though we only feel a certain thing without any substantiation, we start to obsess on our hunch and we treat our partner differently. We start to tell others, not just about our doubts, but our certainty that the relationship is in the dumps. We question everything the other does or says, we look for discrepancies and we find them. Certain that we are unloved, we incessantly express our doubts. We tell our friends and family that our partner is a rogue and we attempt to assemble evidence to convict. This goes on for a while – maybe a few months, maybe a few years – and we discover that there is nothing left to the relationship. We never confirm our feelings, but they must be right. We've said so over and over. We've spent all this energy on it. We don't even know any more who it is that we married. The heart of the issue may not be anything the partner has done, only bogus feelings. I've spent all this time trying to convict the other that I no longer have any positive memories or thoughts of the person I fell in love with, just feelings of emptiness. And Jesus says, "Come unto me."

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In one commentary on these words of Jesus, George Hunsinger, professor from Andover Newton Theological School, says that we should take Jesus' invitation to heart. "Our text this morning is not addressed to those who glory in their spiritual life. It is not addressed to those who are inflated about their own accomplishments, whether spiritual or material, intellectual or social, vocational or private. It is not addressed to those who are impressed with the adequacy of their own success.

No, the message of our text this morning is really addressed to others. It is addressed to those, not only outside the church but also within, who labor and are heavy laden. It is addressed to those who are defeated—and in a much deeper sense this *too* includes all of us—and who have reached the end of their rope. It is addressed to you who no longer harbor any illusions about yourself and your accomplishments—to you who know that when all your pretenses are stripped away, you have nothing left but your own brokenness. It is addressed to you who can no longer lie to yourself and who can no longer hide behind false forms of

security, even "religious" form of security. It is addressed to you who know that you stand in solidarity with all other persons, *a solidarity of need and of pain*.

When we come unto Jesus, he doesn't say that he'll make you feel okay with yourself and the world. Just the opposite. Jesus says that when you are fed up; when you are at wits end go to him. When you go to Jesus, he'll tell you that you are spiritually challenged. You've been thinking about yourself too much. He says, "You've been dismissing my invitation. Accept it, please. God help us. Accept me and give up your burdens. Your problems are trifling compared to all I carry. You've been running from the real problems of the world. Come here and take some of my burden. Yes, take my burden. I need help with the little ones! I'm concerned with the poor. I'm concerned with the homeless and those dying of AIDS by the thousands every day in S. Africa. I'm concerned with the widow who lost all security when her husband died. I'm concerned with children who have no parents. I'm concerned for some members of my beloved church in Townsend that are tired and despairing. Take some of this from me and you'll know how small some of your issues are."

Jesus doesn't trivialize our issues. He just asks us to take some of his and our burdens will lighten. Jesus' beckon call, "Come unto me," is an invitation to faithfulness.

Think about Jesus' invitation, "Come unto me." I believe that Jesus is calling everyone in this church to faithfulness: Jesus says, "Come unto me and be present." If you want the church to grow numerically and spiritually, you have to be here to welcome guests. If you want to know how Jesus is working through this community of faith, you're not going to know by reading the church newsletter. The spiritual stuff we do here can't be translated into words. Jesus calls you to faithfulness in your presence. He needs you here and the church is counting on you to be here, too. Christ extends an invitation to be present in this relationship: for better or worse, with a balanced budget or during times of financial insecurity, during times of trial or celebration. So I ask, "Will you accept Christ's invitation with your faithful presence?" I will and I hope you'll join me.

Jesus says, "Come unto me with your burden. Give me the thing that causes you the most diversion. For some this may be an addiction to food or alcohol. For others it may be habitual shopping. For others it may be obsessive thoughts. For others it may be issues around money." Jesus knows what it is and so do you. To truly accept his invitation, Jesus says, "Come unto me and give me the burden of your

distraction. I've got other things to give you in its place. Try praying to begin."

In addition to your personal needs, Jesus says, don't forget my burden. As your pastor, I invite every church member present this morning to commit to praying for your role in the spiritual growth of this church at least once a day for the next four weeks. If you serve with one of the church's small groups, pray for the work you are charged with. The Christian Education folks should pray everyday for their role in Sunday School. The deacons should pray daily for the spiritual welfare and their ministry to those in need. The choir should pray for their role in the music ministry everyday. You get the gist. If you are peripherally involved in the church, pray about how God might use you as a minister.

If I touched a nerve when I talked about obsessions and addictions, Jesus invites you to give those things to him in prayer, too. Rather than rationalizing what you can't do, Jesus wants to know what you can do. I believe that I can do almost anything with the help of Jesus and I believe you can, too. Pray for the needs of Christ's church and give your burden to Jesus. He promises to lighten your load. If you've been carrying the load for years, it may take him a while to liberate the whole thing, but be patient and he will. So, now I ask, "Will you accept Christ's invitation with your faithfulness in daily prayer?" I will and I hope you'll join me.

Similarly, Jesus says, "Come unto me with positive energy in the form of loving thoughts and encouraging words." Prayer can be defined as the spiritual energy we direct toward an object, whether tangible or supernatural. So, to a large degree, our thoughts and our words become our prayers. Jesus knows you are tired. Jesus knows you are worried. I've already described what negativity can do to an intimate relationship. The same is true of your relationship with the church. We need to be talking about the church and each other in a healthy manner. If you have a concern with someone, go directly to that person and say gracefully what's bothering you. Practice saying good things to others about what's happening here. We have a mission and a vision. The music is incredible. You do an awesome job with church suppers. The building is beautiful. The kids are full of joy and the Sunday School is exciting. Your time of sharing and prayer is beautiful. Your partnership with the church in S. Africa has become a model that churches around the country are emulating. I've felt the incredible spirit of resurrection every Sunday this fall and I'm bragging about you to my friends. I'm proud of the ministry you've done together and the vision

unfolding.

I've been invited to help build up the ministry and the spirit of this community. Jesus invites each of us to do the same in our thoughts and words and deeds. Believe in yourselves and believe in the God who makes it all possible. If you're out there making derogatory comments about the church, you're really making those comments about yourself and about the one we are called to serve. God is doing a new thing with Townsend UCC and Jesus says, "Come unto me. Sure there is hard work and plenty of struggle, but look at all the good that is going on here and start sharing the Good News." Jesus says, "Be like me. I am gentle and humble. I love these people. I love this church. Go out and tell your friends and family. Go out and tell strangers all that is good and beautiful here!" So, now I ask, "Will you accept Christ's invitation to faithfulness with the things you say about this church?" I will and I hope you'll join me.

Jesus invites you daily into a faithful family relationship and with his church. He says, "Come unto me with your faithful presence." Jesus says, "Come unto me with daily prayer, not just for yourself but for me and my church." Jesus says, "Come unto me with a faithful attitude in your thoughts and words." The choice is yours. Will you accept the daily invitation to a life of faithfulness with Christ?

The Shadow and the Promise. by George Hunsinger. Sojourners Magazine, October 1978