

“I am so tired”

What is unfolding with ever greater intensity in our country has given me occasion lately to reflect on a deeply formative experience when I was a journalist for my college newspaper. I was covering the fallout in the community from the murder of Kenneth Walker, a Black man, at the hands of a white sheriff’s deputy in my hometown of Columbus, Georgia. The murder happened in December 2003, but as you can imagine the impact ricocheted well into the new year and beyond. In the spring of 2004 I found myself interviewing family and friends of Mr. Walker. Mr. Walker was well attested as a mentor to many youth in the community and had no shortage of peers who loved and respected him immensely. Moreover internal investigations that found numerous violations on the part of the deputy who shot Mr. Walker, who was not the suspect the deputy thought he was. Ultimately, this resulted in the deputy’s dismissal later that year, and that should have been the end of any debate as to what happened and who was unambiguously and grievously in the wrong. And it probably would have except for one small detail: Early in the investigation a curious and by now very familiar *non sequitur* somehow made its way into reports on the incident—the results of a toxicology report showing that Mr. Walker had (gasp!) “traces of marijuana” in his system. I cannot overstate the forceful hold this one tiny detail had over the debate that continued to play out in the community. I was genuinely dumbfounded by the weight this was given. But I should not have been.

It is striking to me to consider that Jesus, a person of color, was two millennia ahead of his time in calling out the insidious and death-dealing hypocrisy of what we might today (in the language of contemporary discourse) call “respectability politics.” If you’re not familiar, respectability politics refers to the set of assumptions which maintain that conformity to socially acceptable or mainstream norms of appearance and behavior will protect a member of a

marginalized or minority group against prejudices and systemic injustices. [Pause and repeat.]

Here's how this works. John the Baptist—in his ascetic disavowal of material comforts and vigorous emphasis on holiness—is the very model of piety, Jesus tells us. And yet, the establishment finds a way, as it always does, to dismiss his words by calling attention to the perhaps crude and unconventional ways he expresses himself. “Insanity!” So long as there is a perceived flaw, anywhere, to find (and—spoiler alert—there always will be), the cause, and the concerns, and the demands can all be rejected in one fell swoop. The established order can deflect, and the great challenge of accountability and reform can be deferred another day. I can easily imagine that Herod and his goons “found” and promptly reported whatever is the Ancient Near East equivalent of “traces of marijuana” in John’s system. Just so folks knew what kind of person he *really* was.

What Jesus knew and what we, his Church, are called to know, is that respectability politics is ultimately not interested in respectability or decency at all, but rather in maintaining the false peace of “the way things are.” Now I need to be clear. I’m not saying that concern for civility, courtesy, and/ or decency are illegitimate or unimportant. Of course, they are important. It’s just that respectability politics has a way of being more sensitive to these considerations than the far more pervasive and, frankly, destructive manifestations of injustice that so often animate the demands that are regularly dismissed or sidelined by expectations of a certain way of doing things. Thus an oppressive system finds it easier to respond to calls for racial and economic equality by suggesting that Black men pull their pants up (to take one example of many possible examples). What such deflections guard, to our own detriment and at our own great peril, is the *disorder* of a system that protects and preserves structural inequality—systems that edify some at the tremendous expense of so many others. In our passage, Jesus is modeling for us a way to see

through such attempts to circumnavigate the challenge of accountability. The powers and principalities of this world are highly adept at resisting genuine change by setting up impossible (and inscrutable) standards for those who demand said change. This sets up an elaborate obstacle course for those who seek merely to live their lives unafraid to walk down the street, or to sleep in their own beds, or to earn the same living for the same work. In order to be taken seriously or, indeed, to be believed at all, folks must conform to a certain pattern of behavior deemed credible, and even then, it probably will not be enough. It is enough to exhaust even the most disciplined, grounded, and long-suffering among us. Indeed it is enough to lead Jesus himself to reproach the cities that have borne witness to his great deeds while steadfastly refusing to hear his words. “I am tired. I am so tired.”

And here we arrive at what I take to be one of the most curious statements Jesus has ever made: The savior and redeemer of the world—a man who complains frequently about the pervasive presence of the crowds who follow him, about not having a place to lay his head, who will wind up, on the eve of his crucifixion asking God to remove the cup—makes the astonishing claim that his yoke is easy and his burden light. How is it that Jesus, of all people, can say this? I get tired just imagining Jesus’s life and the tremendous strain on his ministry and person. There isn’t time, of course, to survey the many implications and interpretations of Jesus’s words here, but I think there’s a great clue in verse 29: “for I am gentle and humble in heart, and you will find rest for your souls.” I am gentle and humble in heart. I’ve been thinking a lot about this—what it means in the context of offering rest for burdened souls. One possible way to interpret Jesus here is that he has nothing to prove to anyone. Jesus is not saying he doesn’t have a lot on his plate; of course he does! What I think he’s saying instead is that he is not carrying anything more than his mission. He is not, in other words, carrying the additional weight of an unbelieving

world's expectations. He is not trying to convince people who steadfastly refuse to be convinced. He is doing only that which he can for those who will see and understand and respond faithfully to the Gospel message he bears. And while this does not mean he has less to do, it does mean that he has a much easier time of it. Likewise, we, his Church, do not have less to do. But when we relinquish cares and concerns that are not ours, the tedious cares imposed on us by those who are primarily interested are in maintaining the false peace of an unjust system, we have an easier time of it. When we feel constantly that we have something to prove—to the world, to each other, to ourselves—that burden becomes great and gets passed on to those whom we are trying to serve.

As the body of Christ, when we think about what it means to provide rest for a weary community, so deeply beset by all manner of strife and contention, one of the ways we can do this is by creating space for people to be exactly who they are, a space where folks don't have to be stronger than they are, smarter than they are, more interesting than they are. They don't have to be other than they are. I admit, one of the great joys that carried me through my last year of seminary was reading regular updates of the work being done, ever faithfully, by this remarkably beautiful congregation. From a distance, I took great encouragement from the myriad ways you, Centre, show up in and for this community. In this, you created and continue to create space for rest—I mean, *real* Sabbath rest!—for ourselves, for one another, and for the community. That, I think, is what it means to share the gentle yoke and easy burden of Christ. May we commit to ourselves, to one another, and to the Beloved Community to which we ultimately belong never to internalize the institutional imperatives or priorities of a broken and unjust system. And may we commit to remaining faithful to the love that has long animated and continues to animate the work we do here, together.

Matthew Jason Deen
Centre Congregational Church, UCC
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Amen.