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Genesis 24: 34 – 38, 42 – 49, 58 – 67 Psalm 45: 11 – 18
 Romans 7: 15 – 25a Matthew 11: 16 – 19, 25 – 30

There is a Hindu story recounted by Huston Smith, renowned world authority on religions:

A disciple comes to the master and asks, "How can I find God?" The master, without answering the question, leads the disciple down to the river. As they kneel by the flowing water, the master stares out over the water for a few moments. Suddenly, the master grabs the disciple by the back of the neck and pushes his head under the water, holding it there while the disciple struggles to get free. Finally, after what seems like an eternity to the disciple, the master releases his grip and the disciple emerges from the water, sputtering and choking and gasping deeply for a breath of air. After a few minutes, the master smiles and says, "So, how did it feel under the water?" The disciple, casting daggers with his eyes at the master, replies, "It was awful. I thought I was going to die!" The master smiles again, and says, "When you want God as much as you wanted air, when you feel like you cannot live without God in your life, then you will find God. Or rather, then you will realize that God has already found you."

In today's Gospel reading, Jesus addresses the issue of finding God – and being serious about that search. "But to what will I compare this generation?" Perhaps in frustration, Jesus points out the fickleness of the people (of us). When John was here, you complained about his soberness, his asceticism, his strictness, his self-denial, Jesus says. It was over the top for most of you. Now, here I am, eating and drinking and celebrating the Kingdom of God in your midst, and you don't like that one bit either! You don't like the challenge, Jesus says, in effect, between an entirely different way of honoring God from what you're used to, or a way that is like a window opening so that all of the stale air can be blown away!

The point Jesus is making is that the people (perhaps us) aren't really serious about finding God in their lives and in the world. Instead of focusing on the message, they focus on the messengers, and yes, they want to kill, and will kill, both of them. The people complaining about John the Baptizer and Jesus are not really serious about seeking God. Or at least not the God that Jesus reveals.

Instead, they are really looking for a god of their own making, a god made in their own image instead of the other way around. They want convenience. They want a religious life style that fits into the way they already live and move and have their being. They don't want to have to change anything about the status quo. They don't want to have to change their values and priorities. And they certainly don't want a religious experience that is outside of their ability to control it. They really don't want *God* to be in control. So, they make excuses.

Jesus would probably agree with the Hindu master: "When you want God as much as a drowning person wants to breathe air, when you believe that you cannot live *without* God, then, you'll forget about all this irrelevant nonsense and you will suddenly realize that God, the Kingdom of God is all around you."

Throughout his Gospel, Matthew sharply contrasts the Way of Jesus with that of the 'establishment' – the professional religious: the scribes and Pharisees, and the leadership of the Temple. What began as a living and breathing, life-giving covenant between the people of God and God has become instead a weight on the hearts and lives of the people. Law by law, like straws on a camel's

back, the weight of living into the Torah has gotten more and more complex, more and more burdensome. Laws regarding proper ritual and sacrifices, laws regarding what is clean or unclean, laws regarding practically everything in their lives. Do you remember last week when I said that Jesus intends the Good News to be spread, not as some set of propositions or a creed or a catechism, but as relationship? It's the same thing here. The Law, God's word, has become treacherous by becoming a demanding and perpetual means of pronouncing judgment and obligation. It has become the proverbial mill stone around the neck of the common person who can't possibly live into all of the law. It is interfering with the people's understanding of who God is and how God operates in the world. As the Rev. Dr. Delmer Chilton writes, "The yoke of the Law, of working in the Kingdom of God, has become an albatross around their necks, weighing them down and holding them back."

And lest we think that this is something peculiar to the place and time in Scripture, we have only to look at any other culture and faith to find the same thing. Humanity, though always seeking God deep within, has also always wanted a god or gods that could be contained and controlled. A way of believing that might bring some comfort, some sense, some order into the chaotic events of this world. In short, despite humanity being created in God's image, we have tried to return that favor over and over again by creating gods of our own choosing. We create systems and institutions that reaffirm the beliefs we already have, that assure us that you're okay and I'm okay and we're both okay with God. But, as evidenced by how many times we have tried this over the millenia and failed, it never really works. Because systems and institutions are created by people and, as someone 'at my old church' used to say, 'when you got people, you got problems.' Every one of us is fallible and flawed, illogical and inconsistent, and so the things that we create are naturally fallible and flawed, illogical and inconsistent.

That's what Paul says in this well-known section of his letter to the church in Rome. "I do not understand my own actions. For I do *not* do what I want, but I do the very thing I *hate*...I can will what is right, but I cannot do it...when I want to do what is good, evil lies close at hand. For I delight in the Law of God in my inmost self, but I see in my members another law at war with the law of my mind, making me captive to the law of sin that dwells in my members." That's the human condition in a nutshell. Who cannot see themselves in this?

So if indeed, to paraphrase the cartoon character, Pogo, "We have met the enemy and they are us," what are we to do? Well, *we* can't do anything. But God can. And God *has*. Jesus. Calvary has become our cavalry, rescuing us from ourselves, stopping the endless cycle of trying and failing, and guilt.

Come to me, any of you, who are ready to lay down your tiredness and your burdens of shame and guilt and failure, Jesus says. I'll give you rest and air to breathe so that you will not drown. Join me in my yoke – the yoke that is not the heavy weight of the Law, but rather the shared yoke of living in the Kingdom of God. The yoke of the Gospel. The yoke of relationship. The yoke that helps us pull together under God's direction.

God isn't found, says Jesus, by getting all the checks in the block for meeting every jot and tittle of the law. God isn't found through *human* intelligence and wisdom. God is found in human longing and desire. God is found in gulping in that breath of God that gives us life, that opens our eyes and heart to find that God is already right here, revealing God's self to us in a billion ways. God is found in celebrating life, the life that God has given to each of us.

Jesus invites us to lay our burdens down, to unclench those hands that have been holding on to whatever those burdens are so tightly. What might that burden be for you? Or for me? What is it that each of us, and all of us, need to let go of so that we can take up the yoke Jesus offers us? What haunts us from our past? What doubts bring us unrest and a troubled spirit? What guilt, or shame, or feeling of inadequacy inhibits us from jumping into the clear, cool pool of grace that Jesus offers? What do we not want to change about the status quo? In short, what keeps us from being serious about our search for God?

About three quarters of the way along the Camino de Santiago, between the mountaintop village of Foncebadón and the castle city of Ponferrada, there is the Cruz de Fierro, the Cross of Iron. Visually, it's not as grand as it might sound, but it is a very important part of the pilgrimage. It is an iron cross, several feet high, on top of a tall telephone pole. But all around it is a very large mound of pebbles and trinkets, photos and large stones. The tradition is that one either brings a stone from home or picks up one along the route as a symbol of the burdens that we each carry. The stone, or whatever it is, is then placed on top of this mound and left behind, symbolic of leaving behind all that weighs upon us.

Up here, in the basket on this table, are a bunch of rocks of varying shapes and colors and sizes. I invite each of us to pick up a rock on our way to communion and to name to ourselves, if we can, whatever the burden is that we wish to leave behind. If you can't name it but know that it's there, that's okay too, because the Spirit will pray within us in sighs too deep for words. And then, give your burden to Jesus. Leave the rock on the altar rail. And then, like a person whose head is finally above water, take in a deep, deep breath. Breathe in the breath, the wind, the Spirit of God. Allow that forgiveness, that embrace, that holiness to infuse every cell of your being. "Come to me all you who are weary and are carrying heavy burdens and I will give you rest," promises Jesus. Today and each day, may each of us seek God as much as we seek the air that we breathe, and may each of us find God already in us and around us and between us. +

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