

Commentary on the Gospel for Thu, Jul 20th 2017

Kids engage in a lot of imitation — partly because it is simply fun to take on the roles of the adults around them, partly because it is their way of figuring out how to be. In the ancient world, the “art of living” was called wisdom — *sophia* in Greek and *hochma* in Hebrew. When you thought you had met someone who had this kind of wisdom, you were drawn to imitate them. Everyone wanted this kind of wisdom. However, it wasn’t always clear at first, when you were imitating the right people, people who really knew the art of living.

Jesus speaks to this quest in today’s Gospel reading. He speaks the persona of Wisdom personified, as portrayed in some of the Wisdom books of the Hebrew scripture. In that role, he says, “Come to me, all you who labor and are burdened, and I will give you rest. Take my yoke upon you and learn from me, for I am meek and humble of heart; and you will find rest for yourselves. For my yoke is easy, and my burden light.” The implication is that those addressed — laboring hard and heavily burdened — are not engaged in fulfilling work. For the remainder of Jesus’ speech shows that the rest Jesus offers is, surprisingly, not rest in the usual sense. Indeed it turns out to be a very different kind of labor.

Jesus’ kind of yoke is not the one-neck kind, where the carrier carries a burden alone; Jesus’ yoke is the two-neck kind, where Jesus carries one neck, and the person who comes to Jesus to learn from him is invited to carry the other. In effect, Jesus is saying, ‘Yoke yourself to me and you will learn meekness and lowliness that you will find light and easy. I’m asking you to share the yoke and burden with me, and with many others along for the haul. Being my disciple really is light and easy, compared to that other kind of yoke and burden that has been so exhausting for you.’

Sr. Simone Campbell, the nun on the bus, spoke on my campus recently. At one point, she recalled a conversation she had with a group of young CEOs who commanded outrageously enormous salaries. When she asked why they needed such high payment for their work, one replied candidly, “Sister, it’s not about the money. It’s about winning.” This would be the one-neck kind of yoke, not the two-neck kind, discipleship with Jesus, shared in a community of disciples. In the end, Christian wisdom is not a lifestyle. It is a person, Jesus.

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