

## PENTECOST VIII

### *Parenthood...*

So a Jewish man walks into the synagogue one day, plants himself directly in front of the Torah, and starts praying with all his might. Hands raised, voice shaking, he's just pleading with God, totally distraught.

His neighbor walks up to him and says "Noam, my neighbor, what's all the ruckus?"

"It's a disgrace," Noam says. "My son has become a Christian and moved to America!"

"Funny you should mention it," says the neighbor. "My son too has become a Christian and moved to America!"

So they both start praying together, bowing at the waist, shaking their hands at the heavens, shouting their grief.

The rabbi walks up to them. "Noam, Avram, what's all the ruckus?"

"Rabbi, it's terrible. Our sons have become Christians and moved to America!"

"Funny you should mention it," says the rabbi. "My son too has become a Christian and moved to America!"

So all three of them stand there, wailing and shouting, when suddenly the heavens open and a great voice booms down.

"Funny you should mention it . . . ."

In today's Gospel, Jesus calls God his father. We'll repeat that claim in a few minutes when we say the Apostles' Creed. For me at least, that language sort of sends me into a rut. It might be the comfort of language I've heard since childhood; or it might be the problems of calling God "Father", which I think most of us here at St John's understand pretty well. But I think that either using that language, or objecting to it, can become very safe and familiar.

So that's why I love the joke I started with. It takes this familiar language, that Jesus is God's son, seriously enough to find it mind-boggling. What could it possibly mean for God to be a father, to have a son?

Answering that means diving into the Trinity. And that means I'm not going to have all the answers. Jesus says these things he's talking about here elude the wise, but come to the infants, to those who cannot speak. Nevertheless, he speaks; and Lord willing, I'm just repeating what he's saying, so we can all hear it.

Listen to Jesus: "All things have been handed over to me by my Father; and no one knows the Son except the Father, and no one knows the Father except the Son and anyone to whom the Son chooses to reveal him."

There are a couple of tricks about this statement. First, Jesus is referring to himself in the third person, which always makes things sound very abstract and forbidding. Jesus could be very concrete and clear when he wanted to be, but right here, he isn't. Second, Jesus calls God Father, but nobody I've ever met talks about their parents like that. Whatever he's describing, it's clearly not the same as a parent-child relationship.

Nevertheless, I think there's some deeper resonance here. "All things have been handed over to me by my father," Jesus says: Parents tend to give their children everything they have, good and bad, all their lives long. "No one knows the Son except the Father," and vice versa: Parents and children, no matter what their relationships are like otherwise, tend to have a sort of iron-walled intimacy-- something that outsiders can't just walk into. Both of those, by the way, are reasons therapy is such hard work.

And that's what makes the next thing Jesus says so remarkable. "Come to me, and I will give you rest." His Father has given him all things, and he, in turn, wants to pass it on. Their parent-child privacy is something they want to open up, to share.

What does that sharing look like? It looks like being yoked with Jesus. Everyone he was talking to would have gotten this, so I'm going to spell it out. There are two common kinds of yokes in agricultural societies. You've got the kind a person wears, which will let you carry heavy loads by yourself. But that's not the kind Jesus has in mind. He's talking about the kind of yoke you put on cattle. A farmer would have put a single yoke across the shoulders of two oxen. To that yoke, you could attach your plow, or your cart, or anything else you needed them to pull behind them. And the way that the farmer would train a young ox is by putting it in the same yoke as an older one. As they would work together, pulling the same load, the younger one would become strong and tame, able to do the farmer's will.

I think those are the images Jesus is juxtaposing. He's saying, You're wearing your own yoke, carrying heavy loads by yourself. If you come under my yoke, you can learn from me, and we can pull together.

This, to me, is a little picture of ourselves and the Trinity. The Father is the good farmer, who loves the land and the animals and wants to see it all flourish. We are the young cattle, the farmer's prized possessions, the future of his family. Jesus is the old, gentle ox, who is just like us and can show us how to live and work for the good of the land. And upon us both, as at our baptisms, the farmer places the yoke of the Holy Spirit, joining us to Christ, turning our labor to good use.

On Trinity Sunday, way back in May, Anne reminded us that the Trinity is all about how God is relational. That's right on point, and it's what Jesus is saying again today. Because God is relational, and because God became human, we humans can become like Jesus, and join God's work. That's good news, because it means our labor-- all our sweat, and all our tears-- will never be in vain.

That may sound like a lot to read into a little comment about a yoke. But I really think that's what Jesus is getting at here. First, he talks about his relationship with the Father in these abstract, forbidding terms of exclusive intimacy; then, he pivots to this concrete image of welcome and rest. I think what fits those pieces together is nothing less than Jesus inviting us to be joined to him so we can share in the life and the work he shares with his Father.

Now, I've used Jesus' word "Father" a great deal, but I should spell out something else that bears repeating. Jesus' audience would have known as well as we do that God is not male. Indeed, in this passage, where he identifies himself so closely with God the Father, he muddles his own gender. Jesus was a man, biologically; but earlier in this week's Gospel, he calls himself Wisdom, the leading lady of much Hebrew literature, a mother of many children. Scripture often pictures the parental love of God as motherly, and Jesus doesn't invoke the fatherhood of God without reference to that motherhood as well.

So: Come to Jesus, all you that are weary and carrying heavy burdens, and she will give you rest. Take her yoke upon you, and learn from her; for she is gentle and humble in heart, and you will find rest for your souls. For her yoke is easy, and her burden is light.

Thanks be to God! Amen.