

**“Unburdening” -- The Rev. Debra Slade
St. Francis Episcopal Church, Stamford, CT, July 5, 2020**

Right across Lake Mamanasco in front of our house, is a beautiful stone cliff. When the view is perfect enough to see the cliff and the cliff's reflection in the water, if you look closely, you can see one or more interesting face-like features embedded in the stone. It is a serene view, the lake, the cliffs, and the trees on the other side that belong to Richardson Park, easily accessible from Route 116, and Ridgefield High School. As soon as the weather gets warm, and until the weather gets cold again, an annual Ridgefield High ritual takes place. Assembled teenagers gather on the top of the cliff and proceed to jump off it into the lake below. It's a pretty high cliff, maybe thirty feet, and the lake is pretty shallow, so it is not something that is a very safe activity, particularly as it includes the rigors of climbing out of the water and all the way up again. But as long as there have been teenagers in Ridgefield, it seems, there have been jumpers, along with their friends who gather to play music, bake in the sun, and do all those things that teenagers get up to when they party and play. I used to fret and worry about these kids jumping off the cliffs right in front of my eyes, and in earlier days, perhaps about 20 years ago, I always debated about calling the police. But I didn't have to, as eventually some neighbor would, or the police might patrol our road and see them, and then work on trying to get them to stop.

A few weeks ago, when I was writing my last sermon, the noise of the jumpers, and the laughter, and the voices was a bit louder than usual. I went outside and saw a policeman on the road in front of our house using a loud speaker to order the kids to stop jumping and to immediately disperse. The gathering was the biggest I had ever seen, maybe even 40 kids. But now the reason for the dispersal wasn't just the obvious dangers of jumping off a cliff into shallow water, it was our new recent prohibition, the restrictions on just being together, the risk of spreading germs, and of doing harm to themselves and the community. And, yes, you are right in thinking there weren't any masks being worn along with their bathing suits. But as much as I am normally disapproving because of my motherly fears of harm coming to our young summer cliff jumpers, my heart did go out to them when I thought of their “zoom only” graduations, the lack of ability to be together, their sports events that were cancelled, and the great uncertainty about their futures in the dismal current state of the coronavirus, systemic racism, and economic uncertainty. How exhilarating it must have felt to put caution to the wind, jump forward into the air and land in the cool refreshing lake water!

In our Gospel reading today from Matthew, we see Jesus showing a lot of very human emotions. He is frustrated. He is disappointed. He is angry. He is wise. And, most of all, he is compassionate and loving. And how many of you when hearing his words lambasting what he calls “this generation” thought of the lambasting that we, of our current generation need for the horrific mess we have gotten ourselves into in the national mishandling of the pandemic, the continuance of systemic racism, white supremacy, and its deadly consequences, and the sheer lack of basic civility, respect, and kindness that is pervasive throughout our country, exemplified by our top leader. Saying sorry, admitting mistakes, acknowledging human weakness, expressing vulnerability has disappeared from the vocabulary of governing, and with it is lost the opportunity to reflect with wisdom, repent for wrongs against the vulnerable, and most importantly, most importantly – learn from our mistakes in order to do better, go forward in a new direction, and allow our world to advance towards creating a better, not a worse place, for those happy, looking forward to the future, cliff jumpers.

Jesus describes how both John the Baptizer and he gave his generation, and their people a model of how to live a faithful life of modesty, humility, service, forgiveness and sacrifice but they continued to just not get it and to go on repeating the behavior and mistakes of the past. How ironic to think, that those places and people couldn't even get it when they actually had Jesus in the flesh to listen to and love them. So, I guess, not surprisingly we, who also profess Christian faith can't seem to get it either. The scene in our Gospel from Matthew today is not so dissimilar from the other time that Jesus got really mad, the time in the temple, when that holy place was transformed into a market place, with the purpose of making deals and exchanging money. There Jesus angrily rebuked the people in the temple calling them robbers, overturned the tables of money changers, and drove out those who were selling and buying things. And then once those transactional business people are out of the holy temple, Jesus shows what one should do in that place – he welcomes the blind and the lame and he heals them. By doing so, Jesus models not allowing our institutions to be focused on transactional values, and driven by the “what’s in it for me” mentality. Instead he demands that our institutions be places that serve people with compassion, and particularly those who are the most vulnerable, those who are sick, and those who have been subject to persecution, injustice and all forms of hardship. On this 4th of July weekend, we must reflect on the state of our union and ways we must strive to make it possible for all people to celebrate its independence.

And like with the cleansing of the temple, in our Matthew Gospel reading today, after Jesus' anger subsides he provides compassion, love and a solution for our troubles. He says: “Come to me, all you that are weary and are carrying heavy burdens, and I will give you rest.” In these times, of great stress, sorrow and fear, we are all carrying heavy burdens that we need to put down and release. Not only do we have the personal emotional burdens of our many losses that swirl around us with the pandemic, and so much uncertainty for the future, we also bear the weight of our societal burdens that was so exemplified by the shocking murder of George Floyd and so many others, again exposing our country's systemic racism, inequality, and white supremacy. Lacking in consistent, based on science national policy for containing the coronavirus, the pandemic is again surging through our country, killing and sickening hundreds of thousands of our people particularly the most vulnerable, and people of color.

Thankfully, Jesus provides us with a solution -- and that is to stop carrying the burdens that are crippling us and instead put on the yoke of Jesus. For God's yoke is not heavy. God's yoke is light and easy, and more importantly God's yoke is the way to find rest for our weary souls. To put on Jesus' yoke is to do the work of God that has been modeled by the love God has for us and by the ministry Jesus did during his time on earth. To do the work of God is to serve the world, not harm the world. To do the work of God is to both personally and as citizens be committed to restoring and healing, not destroying and hating. To do the work of God is to put love of others before love of self. To do the work of God is to allow those who must leap into the unknown waters of the future to do so knowing they are not alone, and that there is a community of people who want things to be better for them, and for their children and for their children's children. And by wearing God's yoke, you will truly be unburdened.

You might even feel as light as a teenager on a breezy summer day, jumping off a cliff into a lake, your worries behind you, having the time of your life. **Amen.**