Resting in God While Moving Forward amid Challenge: Matthew 11:25-30 in Historical Context and Ministry

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Meanings: what ministry and tradition expect and what scholars uncover

"Come to me, all you who are weary, and I will give you rest" are among the most iconic and well-known words of Jesus, providing a mainstay of Christian devotional literature.[1] *Evangelical Lutheran Worship Pastoral Care* includes Matthew 11:28-30 as a reading for the Commendation of the Dying, and for prayers at the bedside in medical treatment.[2] While recently preparing to visit a parishioner in a long-term care facility, I remembered what others from my congregation had shared about this person: how he and his wife had been much-liked youth group leaders, how he had once been involved in practically every part of lay ministry. Now, after suffering multiple strokes which had taken away his speech and mobility, he was confined and without much hope for physical recovery. Earlier that week, I had read this interpretation of Jesus' summons to rest from Matthew's gospel: "What a strange invitation. For ordinarily when people are gathered for pleasure or for working together, they no doubt say to the strong and cheerful: 'Come here, take part with us.' But about the troubled person they say: 'No, we do not want to have him with us; he only spoils the enjoyment and delays the work." [3] In contrast to this typical human desire to want the company of upbeat people, Jesus summons into his presence "all those who labor and are heavy laden." As Kierkegaard's devotion continues, for Jesus, no one is excluded not even the one "for whom, alas, there seems to be no future." I realized I could approach the text of Matthew along with Kierkegaard to attempt to reach my parishioner. This one had lost so many familiar roles in work, home, and church, and speech and movement, and all at a relatively young age. I could go with Kierkegaard's insight to say how Jesus' invitation to come to his presence does not exclude those burdened down with heavy losses, or whose company for others might remind them of suffering and sadness. To that suffering one whose confinement separates from all that once was home, Jesus speaks his invitation to come and rest. When I tried to say this in my own words and read some of the text from Kierkegaard, my parishioner blinked at me, and something in his body shifted. He nodded several times, folded his hands, and looked away from me and up at the ceiling from where he lay in his bed.

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For my own practice of faith within the Lutheran tradition I am accustomed to Kierkegaard's general approach to Jesus' invitation. Unlike ordinary human inclination to invite the happy and adjusted into our circles, Christ invites the lowly and the burdened. This turning away from success, victory, comfort and power, and toward the lowly is consistent with the Lutheran distinction between a theology of glory and a theology of the cross. A theologian of the cross learns through experience and by God's word that in defeat, shame, and loss God's saving presence will be found.[4] In this way, I have learned to hear the words of Jesus' invitation as something identifiable with Jesus' call to "take up the cross and follow me" in Matt 11:7. Further study of Matthew's text in its historical situation and literary setting has not dissuaded me from this general direction for interpreting the summons to

1. All Scripture references are to the NRSV translation unless otherwise noted.

2. Evangelical Lutheran Church in America. *Evangelical Lutheran Worship Pastoral Care: Occasional Services, Readings, and Prayers* (Minneapolis: Augsburg, 2008), 211.

3. Soren Kierkegaard. *Discourses at the Communion on Fridays*. Sylvia Walsh, trans. (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2011), 48-49.

4. Martin Luther, "Heidelberg Disputation" in *Martin Luther's Basic Theological Writings*. Timothy Lull, ed. (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1989), 30-31.

rest. However, as in Kierkegaard's example above, the emphasis for Lutheranism and Protestants generally has been upon the individual experience of the power of God's word: how do I, the individual disciple, put into practice Jesus' summons? How do I the sufferer, and I the sinner, experience Jesus' radical presence? How may I be a conduit of that invitation to rest in Jesus' presence for the consolation of other suffering individuals? From historical study, and from taking into account the Scriptures' literary setting, I am learning to hold in a productive tension the difference of Matthew's world from my familiar traditions: for Matthew's Jewish Christ-following listeners, the horizon of the text's application was not centered around individuals, but a community struggling to find a way forward amid conflict and while carrying the weight of shared traumatic history.

I want to illustrate the way exegetes can take a passage from Matthew, which most Christians, out of tradition and familiarity, assume has an application for individuals, and set it instead within the specific contours of Matthew's literary and historical setting. For the example of Jesus' teaching about little children in Matt 18:1-5, Eunyung Lim draws out the distinctive Matthean details which indicate that the gospel responds to the historical situation of a community in suffering. Lim begins with a comparison to Mark's account. In Mark 8:33-37, Jesus takes a little child into his arms to confront the disciples with their dispute between themselves over who is the greatest. Jesus' action of welcoming the lowly child refutes the competition for glory between individual disciples. By contrast, Matthew places Jesus' teaching on the little child not in relation to the dispute between disciples but to the status of the children of "kings of the earth." The details of Matthew's literary sequence reveal this contrast: immediately prior to the passage where Jesus points to a child as an example, Jesus asks the question, "What do you think, Simon, from whom do kings of the earth take toll or tribute? From their children or from others?" (Matt 17:25). This sequence places the key theme of children in a recurring pattern with the subjects of social status and taxation. The "kings of the earth," as in the regional client governor class typified in Herod, could leverage the advantages of social status and political power to shield their own children from taxes. Matthew's earliest audience in the 80s CE likely were not at all so privileged. Matthew's audience had endured the brutality of the Jewish War, and in its aftermath, Rome's punitive imposition of the *Fiscus Judaicus* tax upon Jews throughout the empire. Unlike the children of the political class who enter into the advantages of social alignment with Rome, the children of the Matthean community in a post-70 CE setting would suffer from taxes which reinforced their status as the defeated party in a traumatic war.[5] With these historical and literary details, Lim is able to offer a response to the question of how Matthew's earliest audience may have received Jesus' teaching about welcoming the little child.[6] To paraphrase Lim's conclusion: when Jesus points to the example of a little child who enters the kingdom, that teaching does not address how I as an individual would follow Jesus by adopting an attitude of ethical humility, but rather how the kingdom of God embraces those in a lowly social and political state.[7] Following Lim's approach I ask: how can recent exegesis of Jesus' invitation to come and rest, through restoration of the passage to its rich interactions within the sequence of Matthew's gospel, shift our understandings of how to apply the text in ministry? How could tracing that context help expand the range of possibilities for experiencing in ministry the power of Jesus' summons to rest as it relates to communities and shared history?

When Jesus points to the example of a little child who enters the kingdom, that teaching does not address how I as an individual would follow Jesus by adopting an attitude of ethical humility, but rather how the kingdom of God embraces those in a lowly social and political state.

Movements: a sequence of thanking, revealing, and inviting

You who are *weary*, you who carry *burdens*, come to me and *rest*. The way that these words of Jesus readily attract and soak up personal feelings often first focuses an audience's attention. Yet, scholarly approaches to the text often begin not with the attractive quality of these words' connotations, but instead seek to understand what Jesus is doing through these words. This kind of work of identifying what kind of speech-actions occur in each of the phrases helps restore the sayings within a context of movement and conflict. Once a preacher or minister has caught the sense of what the words are doing, this helps build a sense of movement which lends itself to interpersonal dynamics. To capture this sense of movement, I follow the work of Daniel Harrington: first, Jesus thanks the Father for revealing "these things" to infants (vv. 25-26). Jesus then attests to how the Father has handed "all things" to him (v.27). Third Jesus moves outward to turn and invite "all who are weary" to come and learn from him; that is, to receive the revelation that he has received from God. Watch for the key words

5. Warren Carter, "Matthew," in *The Gospel and Acts: Fortress Commentary on the Bible Study Edition*, Margaret Aymer, Cynthia Briggs Kittredge, David A Sanchez, eds. (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2016), 128.

6. Eunyung Lim. "Entering the Kingdom of Heaven Not Like the Sons of Earthly Kings (Matthew 17:24-18:5)," In *Catholic Biblical Quarterly* 83.3 (2021): 425-445.

7. Lim, "Entering the Kingdom," 428.

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for "these things" and "all": the sequence moves from thanking God for "these things," testifying that God has given "all things," and then inviting "all who are weary" into these revealed things.[8]

Taking a further step to compare Matthew with a parallel text in Luke adds another result: comparison helps the interpreter to locate how Matthew places this sequence of movements within a scene of conflict. Matt 11:25-27 appears in almost identical wording in Luke 10:21-22, indicating that the first thanksgiving and revelation sayings were likely available in oral traditions prior to Matthew and Luke. Furthermore, as Harrington points out, both Gospels place these identical sayings closely after Jesus' cries of woe: "woe to you Chorazin! Woe to you, Bethsaida!" (Matt 11:20-24; Luke 10:12-15). Jesus turns toward thanking the Father for revealing "these things" to infants, while in a position of conflict with the unrepentant cities. One more important finding emerges through contrasting the two gospels. In Luke, Jesus follows the revelation saying with an address to the circle of his disciples: "blessed are the eyes that see what you see" (10:23). Matthew, however, has Jesus speak the invitation to come and rest to an open crowd, to "all you who are weary." Taking into account these details of structure and sequencing allows us as readers to imagine Jesus speaking into a situation beyond individual burdens or personal suffering: Jesus turns to God amid communal conflict and summons the weary to rest amid an interpersonal situation of ongoing unrest.

Conflict: a movement opposed and an identity attacked

If the prior observations help the interpreter to locate what Jesus does through the words, then what about the specific context? What are "these things" that Jesus thanks God for even amid conflict with Bethsaida and Chorazin? "These things," Jesus says God has revealed to infants while hiding them from the wise. In the context of Matthew's plot, "these things" are the "deeds of power" that the cities of Chorazin and Bethsaida have rejected. My approach to exegesis now shifts from the literary study of the plot to address the conflict with historical and sociological research drawn from Warren Carter. Jesus declares upon Chorazin and Bethsaida that "if the *deeds of power* done in you had been done in Sodom, it would have remained until this day" (11:21, emphasis added). The "deeds of power" are Jesus' healings, exorcisms, and proclamations narrated in Matt 8:1-9:38. Carter describes these manifestations as "God's saving presence" and "God's empire."[9] Acts of healing and exorcism are interventions of power, revealing "compassion in a context in which many understood ailments to result from sin, the devil and demons, angry gods, and hostile people."[10] Thus, as Carter notes, when Jesus' healings and exorcisms displace the spiritual powers understood to be binding people, Jesus simultaneously challenges the political status quo bound up with the spiritual domination: "these displays of the transforming power and wholeness that God's empire effects interfere with and repair Rome's world."[11] At Matt 9:35-38, the narrator interrupts the sequence of deeds of power to present Jesus surveying the crowds: "he had compassion for them, because they were harassed and helpless, like sheep without a shepherd." In response to the magnitude of need, Jesus sends his disciples out to heal, exorcise, and proclaim, thus widening the circle of his mission. Yet, "these things," the deeds of power for the care of the "scattered sheep," have met with opposition from the cities. The "infants" have recognized the revealing power of the disciples' deeds, while the "wise," which Carter identifies as standing for the local leadership who have sided with the political status quo in collusion with Rome. When the Matthean Jesus surveys what has happened and castigates the cities in 11:20-24, the compassion he has for the scattered sheep in 9:35-38 is repeated. Now, however, Jesus expresses that feeling as angry resistance to the local leadership who neglect the common people and reject the disciples' deeds of power.

Why then do these local leaders in Chorazin and Bethasaida reject the disciples' healing deeds of power? As attention to details of Matthew's plot show, at issue is the identity of Jesus and the movement of disciples around him. Matthew's plot raises the question of Jesus' identity at 11:2, when the imprisoned prophet and ally, John, sends a question by way of his disciples, "Are you the one to come, or are we to wait for another?" The setback of John's incarceration poses the question of Jesus' Messianic identity, whether Jesus truly is what the voice from heaven announced, "my Son, the Beloved" (Matt 3:17). Does the incarceration of John who baptized Jesus show the weakness and failure of Jesus' mission? Aggravating this doubt, hostile voices accuse John of demonic possession (11:18), and discredit Jesus as "friend of tax collectors and sinners" (11:19). Matthew's sequencing allows us as readers to infer that the same leadership class which rejects Jesus

8. Daniel Harrington. *The Gospel According to Matthew*. *Sacra Pagina* (Collegeville: Liturgical Press, 1991), 169.

9. Carter. "Matthew" in *The Gospels and Acts: Fortress Commentary on the Bible*, 142.

10. Carter, "Matthew," 142.

11. Carter, "Matthew," 142.

in Chorazin and Bethsaida is behind these hostile accusations. Whether or not Jesus is an agent of God, whether or not the alternate politics of compassion and mercy demonstrated in Jesus' deeds of power are truly legitimate, viable, and *of God*: this identity is what the conflict with Bethsaida puts at stake. Amid opposition and embattled identity, Jesus makes his pronouncements on revelation and the summons to rest in 11:25-30. Jesus moves beyond imprecatory woes and into a prayer of thanksgiving for revelation (11:25), thanking the Father for revealing "these things" to children, appealing to the intimacy of his relationship with God, and continuing on with the invitation to the weary to rest (11:27). It is as though the prayer of thanksgiving and the revelation of a profound relationship with God put into relative perspective all the preceding discouragement. Rest orients a whole community toward God in spite of ongoing unrest as Jesus moves a community forward in compassion and deeds of power despite facing opposition.

Context: how does a community move forward? Have the merciful ways of God failed?

Turning from a literary approach, which has sketched Jesus' invitation to rest as an action, and the sociologically informed exegesis of Carter, which sets that action within a scene of conflict, I want to now ask a historical question: how might Jesus' summons to rest have spoken to the situation of Matthew's first hearers and readers? The sketch I offer here depends on the plausible but contested theory that the Matthean community were Jewish Christ-followers in Syria, likely displaced survivors of the Jewish War.[12] In a Syrian city with a large and diverse Jewish population such as Antioch, survivors arriving from Palestine in desperate conditions may have shared spaces in synagogues with Jews from prominent and relatively Hellenized families who had long lived in that city. Collective trauma at the destruction of the Temple raised urgent questions for interpreting "the identity, way of life, and future of Jewish communities in the empire. What was God doing? Had God withdrawn God's presence and blessing?"[13] Amid the pressures coming down upon the community from Roman power above, and among the possible pathways forward, Carter notes that some in Antioch might have sought to distance themselves from Judaism and become completely Hellenized. Even before the Temple's destruction, Josephus describes the efforts of a member of the elite named Antiochus who "accused other Jews of plotting to burn Antioch" and sought to enforce a ban on Jewish "identifying-practices (Sabbath observance)."[14] On the Torah-observant side, however, for Jews who also associated themselves with the name of the crucified Jesus, the social status for this sub-group within the survivors from Palestine could have been even more vulnerable.[15] Could the first listeners of Matthew's gospel have recognized in Jesus' woes upon the leaders in Chorazin and Bethsaida their own conflicts with Hellenizing elites in Syria?

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Previously, I mentioned Lim's work which draws together Vespasian's imposition of the *Fiscus Judaicus* in the aftermath of the destruction of the temple and the references to taxes and children in Matthew 18. Unlike the children of elites with their favored position under Rome, Matthean children, together with adults among all the Torah-observant Jews in Syria, would have owed the humiliating tax to the temple Jupiter Capitolinus in Rome. It is in this plausible historical context, then, that Lim notes the significance that Matthew places on children and kinship: while through their kinship to prominent families allied with Rome, the "sons of kings" gain social advantages, the lowly Jewish children without such ties Matthew declares as eligible to "enter the kingdom of heaven."[16] In the passage which makes the focus of my study, the significance of Jesus' prayer of thanks to God for revealing "these things" to infants, and concealing them from the "wise" could have spoken into the situation of Matthew's original hearers. Despite the hardships and rejection, the Torah-faithful Christ-followers may have faced, the deeds of power in their midst revealed that God had not forsaken them. Jesus' words "come to me all you who are weary" read out in their company from the earliest versions of Matthew could have summoned them toward a future even while they faced hardship and opposition in the present.

Rest: moving forward with an openness toward revelation

If "come to me all you who are weary" evokes a way forward despite opposition and hardship, what more can we say about

12. Scholars who support a scenario of a Matthean historical audience among Jewish Christ-followers after the war of 70 and in Syria include: Warren Carter, *Matthew and the Margins: A Sociopolitical and Religious Reading* (Maryknoll: Orbis, 2000), 14-49; Anthony J Saldarini, *Matthew's Christian Jewish Community* (Chicago: University of Chicago, 1994) 26; Ulrich Luz, *Studies in Matthew*, Rosemary Selle, trans. (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2005) 7.

13. Carter, "Matthew," in *Fortress Commentary,* 129.

14. Carter, "Matthew," 129; Josephus, *Jewish War* 7.47-53.

15. Although Carter also notes that evidence in the text supports that Matthew's Jewish Christ-following audience could have included a broad cross-section of social status, not only the very marginalized or poor who it likely did include. *Matthew and the Margins*, 25-27.

16. Lim, "Entering the Kingdom," 442.

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the kind of rest that Jesus offers? With the preceding sketch of Matthew's community as resisting the Hellenizing influence of a privileged class, the Matthean Jesus' stress on faithfulness to the Torah emerges in importance (cf. 5:17-20): the law of Moses Jesus strongly upholds even as he contests how other teachers practice it (23:1-25, especially v. 4 with reference to heavy burdens). When Jesus summons the weary and heavily burdened to rest, it is possible to discern in that rest a memory from the bestowing of the law on Sinai. My sketches here on the Mosaic allusions are indebted to Patricia Sharbaugh, who in turn draws from Dale C. Allison.[17] Sharbaugh finds two Mosaic texts that shed light on Jesus' invitation to the weary, Exod 33:12-23. Exodus 33 is a significant parallel because of the context in a crisis of uncertainty and of the responses of Moses, in prayer and intercession. Just as Jesus in Matt 11:25-30 turns from opposition and discouragement toward prayer, Moses responds to the crisis of the golden calf episode to intercede with God in Exodus 33.

At stake is the "uncertainty in the relationship between God and Israel," unleashed by the people's rejection of Yahweh for an idol.[18] There has been no shortage of deeds of power before the eyes of the people of the Exodus, yet rejection of Moses' God still occurs. Can the covenantal relationship endure this trial? In Galilee, the challenge to Jesus' identity, the uncertainty stemming from John the Baptist's arrest, and from the failure of deeds of power to bring the cities of Galilee to repentance, presents a crisis that parallels Moses' crisis. Thus, there is a comparable severity of context. In response, Moses at the tent of meeting speaks to God "face to face, as one speaks to a friend" (Exod 33:11). The "reciprocal knowledge between Moses and God springing from the intimacy of their relationship" approximates the stance of Jesus before God, the one who declares that "no one knows the Son except the Father" (Matt 11:25). To Moses, God offers the promise that "My presence will go with you, and I will give you rest" (Exod 33:14). This promise of rest to Moses forms the lexical link with the passage in Matthew. God promises presence and rest to Moses, but to the disloyal people, God has "threatened both to exterminate … (32:9-10) and to no longer accompany them (33:3).[19] Yet Moses in his private intimacy with God continues to intercede for those same people whom God appears to reject, drawing the horizontal relationship to the people back to God's presence. In response to Moses' intercession, God relents (33:17). In spite of how severe the trial tests the relationship between Moses, the people, and God, the unbroken strength of the bond of faithful intercessions prevails. When Jesus declares "come all you who are weary, and I will give you rest," the mission of Jesus to the "harassed and helpless" crowds remains a merciful and compassionate response. In turning from the imprecatory woes aimed at the leadership class, Jesus enters prayer in a unique relationship of intimacy as God's son, and turns that intimacy outward in a miraculous and powerful sharing of the promised rest of God. For Matthew's first listeners, who interpreted their lives and guided their practice by the Torah, the memory of Moses' intercession for the people could have informed their understanding of Jesus' promise of rest. Rest could have met a future way for a suffering people together with God in spite of opposition and hardship.[20]

Sending: faithfully go forward, resting in God

In taking up historically informed exegesis on Jesus' summons to the weary, I have sought to find a productive tension between the Christian traditional emphasis on individual sufferers and the situation of Matthew's first Jewish audience. The problem with traditional emphasis has not been its lack of radical power, as I sought to illustrate through the example of Kierkegaard's interpretation and my suffering parishioner for whom there "seemed to be no future." Rather, the problem I identify is the way that expectations brought from tradition to Jesus' summons may constrain the range of meanings of the passage for preaching and ministry. Does the rest Jesus promises always mean peace and quiet within the heart, alone with God, an escape into a private space removed out of a situation of challenge and tension? Does taking up the yoke of the cross mean an individual practice of radical realignment unconnected from any specific context, or may the words of Jesus speak further into the interpersonal struggle of a community in conflict over its identity and future? I hope that my interpretation could address the contemporary situation of pastors and laypeople involved in the struggle of changing the direction of their churches toward using their power and resources on behalf of the marginalized in their own setting against the predominant individualistic and consumerist values of North American culture.

During a year assignment through the Young Adults in Global Mission program of the ELCA, I participated in the education and worship activities of a Lutheran church in a rural provincial area of a post-Communist country. Throughout that year I had

17. Patricia Sharbaugh. "The New Moses and the Wisdom of God: A Convergence of Themes in Matthew 11:25-30"in *Horizons*, 2013, 40(2), 199-217. Citing Allison. *The New Moses: A Matthean Typology*. (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1993).

18. Sharbaugh. "The New Moses," 207.

19. Sharbaugh. "The New Moses,"208.

20. Although this is not a major focus of this paper, it is important to note at this point how Sharbaugh's parallel with Exodus finds a miraculous and gracious event occurring in the passages, but the emphasis on covenantal faithfulness overcoming trial avoids the classic Lutheran way of pitting Torah and law against grace and faith.

opportunities to build trusting relationships with teachers, the children and their families I worked alongside. One teacher shared with me her perspectives with me, that frankly, she was an atheist and the traumatic history of the church in her country had formed her views, but that when she listened to me preaching for the students in chapel that even she was moved. She attributed that openness to the trust we had built. Later at the end of my year, I was tasked to help an American group of short-term volunteers from another Christian tradition lead a Bible camp for the children at the school. At the end of the first day, the same co-teacher was shaking with rage: how could you have done this? How could you have brought these people here with their ways of trying to convert our children? Was this your plan the whole time, to set us up for this "Jesus Camp"? Several other teachers felt similarly betrayed. I was surprised, blindsided. All the deeds I had done, all the identity of my place in the community and trust I had built, was it being ripped away? To pause amid this tension, to receive Jesus' summons to rest in all the tension I carried in my body, was to receive the transforming invitation revealing a way forward: go to the teachers in humility, and with resolve to apologize. Go with resolve to remain faithful. Go in complete uncertainty and lack of control of the outcome, but with an openness to believe in the possibility of renewal of relationship on the other side. Go forward into the conflict and find rest through remaining in and with the way of Christ. For Matthew's Jesus, the way of prayer finds rest and strength in God even in persistence through opposition, tension, and discouragement. In time my colleagues came to understand the depth of my sorrow and regret at the miscommunication, and we were able to work together to reflect on what had happened and prepare plans to avoid a catastrophic misunderstanding with short-term camps in the future. For myself, I came away with an experience of how conflict may become generative for a community and of the resilience of the abiding rest that Christ gives to those who bear burdens to renew and restore relationships where the future is uncertain but the calling to move forward is faithful and sure.

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