



I am meek and lowly in heart

Matthew 11.<sup>28-30</sup>

## Introduction

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Some twenty years ago, I sat in a high school auditorium during the Christmas season to witness a performance of selections from Handel's Messiah. I had listened many, many times to a half-a-dozen different recorded performances, some spectacular, of this singular piece of 18<sup>th</sup> century sacred music. Obviously, I did not expect this small group of high school students, with varying levels of musical talent, to perform at a level to which I was accustomed.

And yet, what I witnessed that night exceeded my wildest dreams. Indeed, that night's revelation, a revelation from and of God, was one of the pivotable religious experiences of my entire life. While the other 200 or so audience members saw, I assume, 50 or so high school students dressed in matching robes, lit by white spot lights, and singing from their perch on metal risers, I saw a God of surprising stature and unanticipated character. For many, many minutes, no one existed in that auditorium but He and I. The tears that streamed from my eyes were not those of appreciation for beautiful music, but appreciation for the most beautiful Being I could never have imagined.

I have never managed to find words to describe what I saw that night. I don't anticipate being able to do so in this homily. Nevertheless, we can have a look at what set off this revelatory moment, and consider its meaning, as best we can. The revelation came during the final

piece of Messiah, Part One. The text for this finale is a familiar one. I was moved, as we all are, by the Savior's generous twenty-six-word invitation.

“Come unto me, all ye that labour and are heavy laden,  
and I will give you rest.

Take my yoke upon you, and learn of [from] me...”<sup>1</sup>

But it was the seven words that followed this invitation that set off the revelatory fireworks that was to set fire to so many of my false and violent notions about God.

“I am meek and lowly in heart.”

Just as I saw on that Christmas Season evening the incomparable beauty of the Being who had uttered this saying two thousand years earlier, later I began to see and appreciate the subversive nature of this remarkable, near-impossible-to-believe utterance. To appreciate both the beauty of the Being and the subversion of the utterance, we must go back to the beginning.

In Matthew 10, we learn that during his Galilean ministry Jesus instructed “his twelve disciples” concerning the responsibilities and trials of those called to preach “The Kingdom of Heaven.” At the end of this instruction, Jesus “departed thence to teach and to preach in their cities.” The end of his instruction and the beginning of this circuit marks a new episode in Jesus' ministry. Chapter 11 represents a single episode, and can be read as a self-contained literary pericope.

The eleventh chapter of Matthew, like all scripture texts, is packed with meaning and subject to differing readings. In this homily, I will offer but one reading. It is not the “one and only true reading.” It is not even the only reading I can imagine. But it is one that has been meaningful to me. It has shaped my view of God, how I relate to him, and who I am today.

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<sup>1</sup> Matthew 11.<sup>28-29a</sup>

The entire narrative found in Matthew 11 revolves around a single episode in the Savior's earthly ministry. In it, disciples of John, the Baptist, approach Jesus. The disciples have been sent to Jesus with a single, simple question.

“Art thou he that should come, or do we look for another?”<sup>2</sup>

The narrative, then, begins with a question into Jesus' identity and character: “Who and what are you? Are you, perhaps, the awaited Messiah?” We should keep this initial question in mind throughout the narrative. The entire narrative found in this eleventh chapter is working on this question, and is, I suggest, still working on this question when, at the end of the chapter, Jesus offers his paradigm-shifting self-revelation: “I am meek and lowly in heart.”

In his initial encounter with John's disciples, and in answer to their question, Jesus is indirect concerning who and what he is. There is no categorical, “I am,” statement here. We could, undoubtedly, think of several reasons for Jesus' indirectness.<sup>3</sup> Given the specific content and literary movement of Matthew's eleventh chapter, I suggest that he is reluctant to directly acknowledge the title, ‘Messiah,’ because he does not wish to be associated with the majestic, domineering Messiah that those of his culture had invented. He certainly does not want his disciples, John's disciples, or any other disciples to think of him in such terms. The majestic, dominant Messiah is out of step with Jesus' self-understanding: “I am meek and lowly in heart.” Most importantly, it gets in the way of others' trust in him, and their willingness to approach him, as he invites them to do: “Come unto me.” Who, after all, looks forward to approaching another if they must constantly walk on egg shells?

Rather than directly answer the disciples' question, then, Jesus suggests that they decide for themselves who and what he is by carefully observing the things that he says and does. No doubt, they heard and observed many things during their reconnaissance. But Jesus points

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<sup>2</sup> Verse 3

<sup>3</sup> For example, we might credit Jesus' indirectness to his respect for the agency of those who inquire of him: “Let them decide for themselves.” Or, we might think of his indirectness as a result of his ever-present reluctance to engage in self-promotion. We could go on.

their attention to one specific aspect of his ministry.

“Go and shew John again those things which ye do hear and see: The blind receive their sight, and the lame walk, the lepers are cleansed, and the deaf hear, the dead are raised up, and the poor have the gospel preached to them.”

“Now,” we ask, “what do such observations teach the disciples— and us, Matthew’s readers— about who and what Jesus is? What kind of ‘Messiah’ is he?” Several possibilities present themselves for our consideration. Jesus’ possession of “power and authority” might impress. Other audiences, in other settings were certainly impressed by Jesus’ “power and authority.”<sup>4</sup> Maybe that is just it: “Watch me, and see what power and authority I have— proof of my Messiahship.”

But, frankly, even this degree of indirectness seems too self-promoting. In addition, as the chapter unfolds, Jesus seems more interested in other aspects of his self-revelation. I may be unduly influenced by the self-revelation at the end of the chapter—“I am meek and lowly in heart”—but I seem to feel its influence working its way back and throughout the narrative.

And so, rather than being purely focused on the fact that Jesus ministers with “power and authority,” it seems that the text would have us focus on the character of those to whom Jesus ministers with “power and authority.” The narrative would have us consider what such a ministry says about the character of the minister and how one gains access to him. The fact that Jesus ministers to the blind, the lame, the leprous, the deaf, the deceased, and the poor, may, in itself, be sufficient evidence of his Messiahship. After all, Yahweh’s servant/s are, as Isaiah declares, “anointed to preach good tidings unto the meek.” He/they are sent “to bind up the brokenhearted, to proclaim liberty to the captives, and the opening of the prison to them that are bound.”<sup>5</sup>

“If I am to be thought of as ‘Messiah’ at all,” Jesus seems to say, “it is a Messiah who

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<sup>4</sup> See, for example, Mark’s account of Jesus cleansing a man with “a spirit of an unclean devil.” Those who witnessed the man’s cleansing, said, “with authority commandeth he even the unclean spirits, and they do obey him” (See Mark 1.<sup>23-27</sup>).

<sup>5</sup> See Isaiah 61.<sup>1</sup>

engages and associates with the vulnerable; those who are missing something that would mark them as whole and fully human.” Why? Why would he associate with such people? Many in his day critically asked this very question.

In this narrative, I suggest that Jesus answers this question: “Because I am meek and lowly in heart. I am one of them.”

Such “lowly” individuals, the Gospels suggest repeatedly, were looked down upon. They were often poorly served by a religion that viewed their afflictions as symptoms of personal and willful spiritual deficiencies and sin (Indeed, how could a religion that denied the leper access to God through temple worship possibly serve the leper?). Such false notions even infiltrated Jesus’ closest disciples. Upon seeing a blind man, Jesus’ disciples once asked, “Who did sin, this man, or his parents, that he is born blind?”<sup>6</sup> We can, perhaps, imagine the insecure and bitter self-loathing, and the terrifying sense of God’s displeasure that such false doctrine induced in those who “labored” and were “heavy laden.”

Jesus well understands that in ministering to and engaging with such riff raff, he is bucking the religious principles and practices of his day. He understands the subversive nature of his ministry. It subverts the false ideas concerning a majestic and holy (separate, aloof) Messiah and God. His ministry subverts, indeed was meant all along to subvert, false ideas of “worthiness.” By ministering to and associating with those thought of as irredeemable, Jesus subverts false ideas about who can associate with God and how that association is achieved. It seems that he comes by his subversion honestly, through his mother, Mary. She it was, who announced before Jesus was even born that he would “put down the mighty from their seats, and exalt them of low degree;” that he would “fill the hungry with good things; and the rich he hath sent empty away.”<sup>7</sup>

If it is not subversive to cast the mighty from their prestigious seats of power, and to deny the rich the material comforts to which they feel entitled and have come to expect as the natural and inevitable order of things, then I do not know the meaning of the word, “subversion.”

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<sup>6</sup> John 9.<sup>2</sup>

<sup>7</sup> See Luke 1.<sup>52, 53</sup>

Jesus understands that the subversive nature of his ministry will offend. Hence, Jesus warns John's disciples. "O.K. you have watched as I ministered to the blind, the lame, the lepers, the deaf, the dead, and the poor. Now,

'Blessed is he, whosoever shall not be offended in me.'

What could possibly be offensive about Jesus' ministry to the vulnerable?

The "noble" do not act like this. They do not tempt fate, and risk the infection of defilement with individuals who may carry defilement in their very being. Certainly, the Messiah does not take such risks. But Jesus is constantly placing himself in circumstances that are "defiling." If he is Messiah, he is a defiled Messiah.

John's disciples are not only warned against being offended by Jesus' comfortably hanging out with those deemed by polite society as outcasts. They are also warned about the offense that comes with the realization that whom Jesus hangs out with says something about him—who he is and what kind of being he is. It says something about the Messiah. It evinces a Messiah who is "meek and lowly in heart."

It also says something about the Messiah's community, but that is a discussion for another day.

**h**e that is least in the kingdom of heaven is greater than he

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With this warning concerning offense ringing in their ears, John's disciples depart. Immediately, Jesus begins to question his remaining audience concerning John—who he is and what kind of prophet he is.

"What went ye out into the wilderness to see? A reed shaken with the wind?

But what went ye out for to see? A man clothed in soft raiment? Behold, they that wear

soft clothing are in kings' houses.

But what went ye out for to see? A prophet? Yea, I say unto you, and more than a prophet. For this is he, of whom it is written, 'Behold, I send my messenger before thy face, which shall prepare thy way before thee.'

Verily I say unto you, Among them that are born of women there hath not risen a greater than John the Baptist: notwithstanding he that is least in the kingdom of heaven is greater than he.

And from the days of John the Baptist until now the kingdom of heaven suffereth violence, and the violent take it by force. For all the prophets and the law prophesied until John. And if ye will receive it, this is Elias, which was for to come.

He that hath ears to hear, let him hear."

I don't know what your ears hear, but I'll tell you what mine hear.

Though comparable to the great Old Testament prophet, Elijah—perhaps the greatest of all Old Testament prophets except Moses—John, the Baptist, is even greater than Elijah. John's greatness flows from his proximity to Messiah, of whom and for whom he is a uniquely called emissary. Yet, he is unimpressive. He bears none of the expected signs of nobility. Indeed, even the "least in the kingdom of heaven is greater than he."

But, in describing the unimpressive appearance of John, Jesus is declaring much more concerning himself, Messiah. Messiah did not wish some impressive, highfalutin emissary of royal bearing as his most proximate emissary. No well-dressed, well-heeled, well-connected emissaries for him. To have called such an emissary would have been inconsistent with the Messiah's character. It would have been inconsistent with this Messiah's self-understanding and self-image.

In addition, it would have sent the wrong message to others. It might have lent credence to the culture's false notions of Messiah. It might have lent credence to the culture's false value systems. Where, then, would they have been left, those who "labor" and were "heavy laden"? To whom would they turn without fear or intimidation. No, as always, they would have been left without a fellow yoke man.

No sir. Messiah wants, indeed his character demands that his emissary, like him, be of humble bearing. Messiah requires the very least impressive emissary possible. In calling the least to be most proximate to himself, Messiah flips the scales, and witnesses that this world's value system is upside-down, topsy-turvy, and inside-out. He is here to turn the world side-ways. He is here to subvert. But this is not subversion for subversion's sake. This is subversion for the sake of the submerged. Indeed, what is subversion to one man is another man's saving invitation: "Come unto me, all ye that labor and are heavy laden." The Kingdom of heaven is for them, the very least. The very greatest should not expect a seat at the party—there's a parable about that, you might recall.

This is subversion for the sake of liberation. This is subversion to take back heaven.

Indeed, the least, those who labor and are heavy laden are in dire need of emancipation, for "the kingdom of heaven suffereth violence, and the violent take it by force." Oh, there is religious persecution to be sure. But it is a different sort of persecution than we might have imagined. The persecutors engage in a hostile takeover of heaven. They say the most hateful things about heaven. They limit access to heaven to a very small, powerful and vocal special interest group—themselves. The great, the powerful, the noble, the prestigious, claim it, by their doctrines, as their own private and exclusive playground, and make it a place that is impregnable to those who "labor and are heavy laden." This is violence of the very worst kind—violence perpetrated in the name of god.

Yes, what I witnessed that night in that high school auditorium was a revelation of the character of God and his Messiah. Only latter would I recognize its subversive nature; that what I had seen, in addition, was Jesus, come to storm the captured gates of heaven, and throw them wide open... for me.

"Things are not as they seem—'the rich and the learned, the wise and the noble'—would have them seem," promises Jesus.

"He that hath ears to hear, let him hear."



“Yea, a supper of the house of the Lord, well prepared, unto which all nations shall be invited. First, the rich and the learned, the wise and the noble; and after that cometh the day of my power; then shall the poor, the lame, and the blind, and the deaf, come in unto the marriage of the Lamb, and partake of the supper of the Lord, prepared for the great day to come.”<sup>8</sup>

**M**ore tolerable for tyre, sidon, and sodom

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The final warning Jesus delivers to John’s disciples concerning the danger of offense at his ministry is no idle warning. He knows whereof he speaks. It comes from Jesus’ own experience. The danger of offense is very real and very present.

“But whereunto shall I liken this generation? It is like unto children sitting in the markets, and calling unto their fellows, and saying, ‘We have piped unto you, and ye have not danced; we have mourned unto you, and ye have not lamented.’ For John came neither eating nor drinking, and they say, ‘He hath a devil.’ The Son of man came eating and drinking, and they say, ‘Behold a man gluttonous, and a winebibber, a friend of publicans and sinners.’ But wisdom is justified of her children.”<sup>9</sup>

Though in very different ways, both John and Jesus preach the same societal message: “repent.” “Leave your violent, exclusionary, prestige laden god behind; the one that drives you to lock heaven’s gates to others and leads you to justify your violent and exclusionary and prestige laden attitudes and actions toward the blind, the lame, the leprous, the deaf, the deceased, and the poor—those who labor and are heavy laden. John delivered this message in the minor key, as if playing a funeral dirge. “Repent or die. Serve all or be left with none to serve.” This was, indeed, Elijah’s message as the last Hebrew prophet, Malachi, had summarized it.

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<sup>8</sup> DC 58.<sup>9-11</sup>

<sup>9</sup> Verses 16-19

“And he shall turn the heart of the fathers to the children, and the heart of the children to their fathers, lest I come and smite the earth with a curse” [“so that, when I come, I do not strike the whole land with utter destruction”].<sup>10</sup>

As I have pointed out on numerous other occasions, we should pay more attention than we do to the Lord’s handling of this text in the Doctrine and Covenants.

“Therefore, renounce war and proclaim peace, and seek diligently to turn the hearts of the children to their fathers, and the hearts of the fathers to the children; and again, the hearts of the Jews unto the prophets, and the prophets unto the Jews; lest I come and smite the whole earth with a curse, and all flesh be consumed before me.”<sup>11</sup>

Again, John’s message is that of Malachi’s Elijah, “You have two choices: either you understand and act upon the reality that you are all connected, or you face extinction. There is life only in respectful community that values and honors every member.”

Jesus, delivering the same message of repentance, delivers the message in the major key, as if playing a joyful dance tune. “Repent and live. Enter and enjoy the Kingdom of heaven; that place where God’s rule directs the heart of each citizen.”

“The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God is at hand: repent ye, and believe the gospel.”<sup>12</sup>

Jesus’ message of repentance is “good news.” God is prepared to take control of the life of anyone and everyone who yields their hearts to him. This had been Jesus’ message from the very beginning.

“And Jesus went about all Galilee, teaching in their synagogues, and preaching the gospel of [good news about] the kingdom, and healing all manner of sickness and all manner of

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<sup>10</sup> Malachi 4. <sup>6</sup>; see the JPS Tanakh.

<sup>11</sup> DC 98. <sup>16-17</sup>

<sup>12</sup> Mark 1. <sup>15</sup>

disease among the people.”<sup>13</sup>

“And Jesus went about all the cities and villages, teaching in their synagogues, and preaching the gospel of [good news about] the kingdom, and healing every sickness and every disease among the people.”<sup>14</sup>

This was his message to John’s disciples just moments earlier.

“The blind receive their sight, and the lame walk, the lepers are cleansed, and the deaf hear, the dead are raised up, and the poor have the gospel [good news] preached to them.”<sup>15</sup>

But, whether in the minor or major key, Jewish audiences took offense. Having described society’s blindness to all but offense, Jesus ups the ante, adopts a more John-like tune.

“Then began he to upbraid the cities wherein most of his mighty works were done, because they repented not: “Woe unto thee, Chorazin! Woe unto thee, Bethsaida! For if the mighty works, which were done in you, had been done in Tyre and Sidon, they would have repented long ago in sackcloth and ashes. But I say unto you, it shall be more tolerable for Tyre and Sidon at the day of judgment, than for you. And thou, Capernaum, which art exalted unto heaven, shalt be brought down to hell: for if the mighty works, which have been done in thee, had been done in Sodom, it would have remained until this day. But I say unto you, that it shall be more tolerable for the land of Sodom in the day of judgment, than for thee.”<sup>16</sup>

Could Jesus be any more subversive and offensive than this? It is hard to imagine. Old Testament prophets had been known to compare Israel and Judah to Sodom (and Gomorrah). Isaiah, for example, had complained,

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<sup>13</sup> Matthew 4.<sup>23</sup>

<sup>14</sup> Matthew 9.<sup>35</sup>

<sup>15</sup> Matthew 11.<sup>5</sup>

<sup>16</sup> Verses 20-24

“The shew of their countenance doth witness against them;  
and they declare their sin as Sodom, they hide it not....”<sup>17</sup>

Jeremiah, condemning Judah’s prophets and the crowds who followed their lead, declared,

“They are all of them unto me as Sodom,  
and the inhabitants thereof as Gomorrah.”<sup>18</sup>

Ezekiel would double down on this criticism, accusing Judah, not of being like Sodom, but of being worse than Sodom.

“And thine elder sister is Samaria, she and her daughters that dwell at thy left hand: and thy younger sister, that dwelleth at thy right hand, is Sodom and her daughters. Yet hast thou not walked after their ways, nor done after their abominations: but, as if that were a very little thing, thou wast corrupted more than they in all thy ways. As I live, saith the Lord GOD, Sodom thy sister hath not done, she nor her daughters, as thou hast done, thou and thy daughters.”<sup>19</sup>

Jesus is in full agreement with these prophetic sentiments. Had he, Jesus asserts, preached his happy message, and administered to Sodom’s blind, lame, lepers, deaf, dead, and poor—these latter groups, in particular, subject to Sodomite scorn and harassment—Sodom’s citizenry would have repented “long ago” and in the most abject of ways. As it is, Judah’s citizenry has not even taken the first little baby steps toward repentance at this late date. Rather, they know only offense.

Here, we hear Jesus assert again that the first shall be last and the last shall be first. It is the nature of his kingdom to undermine and subvert all worldly values; turn upside-down all the cherished and perverted principles by which those who labor and are heavy laden are oppressed and kept enslaved.

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<sup>17</sup> Isaiah 3.<sup>9</sup>

<sup>18</sup> Jeremiah 23.<sup>14</sup>

<sup>19</sup> Ezekiel 16.<sup>46-48</sup>

O father, lord of heaven and earth

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Jesus has now spoken to John's disciples. He has invited them to know him and his character through the revelation that his ministry to the vulnerable provides. He has warned them against taking culturally-conditioned and prejudice-induced offense at this ministry.

With the disciples' departure, Jesus has turned his attention to the "multitude" that stayed behind. He has pointed their minds to the fact that John, acting in the spirit of Elijah, is the least impressive of Messiah's emissaries. This is as Messiah wishes it to be; as he needs it to be. It is meant to send a message concerning the character, the assessible character, of Messiah. It is but one step in retaking a heaven that the "capable" have violently stolen from the "incapable," the vulnerable, those who "labour and are heavy laden."

Jesus has also addressed the wider society's offense at and resistance to him and John—two very different types of preachers. He has warned the recalcitrant society that its rejection of his happy message—a rejection that even Sodom would not have dared—would bring punishments of the worse kind; punishments even more severe than those experienced by ancient Sodom.

Jesus now trades his mortal audiences of many for a Divine audience of one.

"I thank thee, O Father, Lord of heaven and earth, because thou hast hid these things from the wise and prudent, and hast revealed them unto babes. Even so, Father: for so it seemed good in thy sight.

"All things are delivered unto me of my Father: and no man knoweth the Son, but the Father; neither knoweth any man the Father, save the Son, and he to whomsoever the Son will reveal him."<sup>20</sup>

There is so very much in this oh-so-short prayer.

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<sup>20</sup> Verses 25-27

Again, we see Jesus' subversion; his turning of the world upside-down. The "wise and learned" are ignorantly blind to the character of Messiah, while unschooled "babes" bask in the revelatory light concerning Messiah's character.

But now, Jesus makes a new claim. This turning of the world upside down is not his idea or his doing. It is Father, the very Lord of heaven and earth, who is the truly subversive one. It was all His idea. And, again, this subversion is not for subversion's sake. It is to be revelatory. All that Heavenly Father gives Jesus to do is for the purposes of revealing His own character, in addition to that of Messiah's. The revelation of Messiah and his character doubles as a revelation of Heavenly Father's character. Whoever sees Jesus' revelation for what it is, a revelation of Father, will know Father.

If Jesus serves the blind, the lame, the leprous, the deaf, the deceased, and the poor, it is only because these are those who the Father would serve if he were present. If Jesus has selected a humble and unimpressive emissary rather than an impressive and noble one, it is only because he does as Father did when he chose Jesus, a man without credentials from nowhere as his exemplar. If Jesus is "meek and lowly in heart," so too is Heavenly Father. Like Father, like Son.

In relating Jesus' prayer, Matthew is reminding us that this entire episode, as all episodes from Jesus' life, was meant to be a revelation of Father and Son. Only those who watch Jesus carefully, and allow its revelation—the clearest, most intimate, most authoritative, and most authentic of all revelations—to flow into them will "know" the Father and His character.

From Jesus' ministry to the vulnerable, his selection of an emissary of humble and common bearing, and his lifting of Sodom with its Sodomites above Jerusalem with its citizenry, we have learned much concerning the nature and character of Father and Son. They are champions of the least. Such championing of the vulnerable—those who "labor and are heavy laden"—is, however, more than a working out of divine social conscience and justice. It is the result of their own solidarity with the "meek and lowly in heart." Father and Son can relate to them, for they are of them.

So, it seems to me, Matthew finally arrives at his punchline; the punchline toward which the entire narrative of the eleventh chapter has been working; the punchline that is, in fact, not his, but Messiah's. It is, at once, a gut punch to the powerful and capable, and deliverance to the "meek and lowly in heart." It is an aggressive move to retake a heavenly and happy kingdom that has been violently captured by those who claim it through their own capable and self-proclaimed righteousness.

### Come, take, learn

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Though, in prayer, Jesus' audience was one, we were all allowed to listen in. Just in case we missed the import of that one-on-one divine conversation, and all the other conversations that Jesus has conducted throughout this episode, Jesus turns to face his largest audience yet—a global audience that includes "all who labour and are heavy laden." He transitions directly and immediately from prayer, directed at Father, in which he promises that Father and Son are to be revealed through the other, to an invitation, directed at those listening in to his prayer. The nature of the invitation is important. As I understand it, it encompasses three imperatives—"come," "take," and "learn"—and a single promise, repeated twice—rest.

The very fact of the invitation to "come" is, in itself, extraordinary. The great philosopher, Soren Kierkegaard, captures the extraordinary nature of the invitation as well as anyone.

"Come here, all, all, all of you; with him is rest. And he makes no difficulty; he does only one thing: he opens his arms. He will not first ask you, you suffering one... 'You are not yourself to blame for your trouble, are you? You have nothing to reproach yourself for, have you?'"

"He assumes that those who labor and are burdened feel the burden to be ever so heavy, feel the labor to be heavy, and are now standing there irresolute and sighing, one person looking in all directions for help, another with downcast eyes because he discerned no comfort, a third staring upward as if it might still come from heaven—but all of them

searching. . . . He, the inviter, knows that precisely this is part of true suffering, to go off by oneself and brood in quiet hopelessness, without the courage to confide in anyone, to say nothing of daring with bold confidence to hope for help.”<sup>21</sup>

With Jesus’ “Come unto me, all ye that labour and are heavy laden,” we have come full circle. We started with Jesus’ self-revelatory ministry to the blind, lame, lepers, deaf, dead, and poor—classes of laboring and heavy-laden individuals. We will end with his invitation to ALL those who “labour and are heavy laden”

What, after coming to Jesus, are the invitees to do?

“Take my yoke upon you.”

Why, one might ask, is someone already weighed down with and depressed by burdens invited to take up a “yoke”? Why would anyone so burdened accept such an invitation? Even though Jesus assures us that his “yoke is easy, and [his] burden is light,” it is, nonetheless, an addition burden. How does one find “rest” by taking up additional weight? It all might seem somewhat nonsensical.

But it isn’t as though we have a choice; as though we can go through life without yokes and weights. Yokes are part of life. Linkages, connections, associations are part of life, indeed of existence. Jesus reminded us elsewhere that we can be linked in service with God or with Mammon, but not both.

Perhaps we put too much emphasis on the objective metaphor—the yoke—rather than its meaning: companionship and partnership. We must remember why we are invited to take up his yoke. We are to “learn of” him, or “learn from” him.

I love this imagery. I think of two oxen, yoked or partnered together. I think of those big brown eyes—those big brown eyes ever watching and observing; always learning. So, here we are, partnered to Jesus, who walks along side us. In such intimate association, we are able the better to watch and observe him; watch how he reacts to this and that. In such watching,

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<sup>21</sup> *Practice in Christianity*, p. 19 and 20-21.



we begin to learn who he is. We began to understand his character.

Without doubt, there are a million things we can learn from and about him as we travel in such close and intimate companionship. But, in considering these millions of things we might learn about him, Jesus seems to consider that one thing is of the utmost importance. As we partner with Jesus, and thus learn about him, we come to this essential realization. We have this one profound revelation: “Jesus is ‘meek and lowly in heart’”!

Again, our narrative brings us back to the question of character. Who is Jesus and what kind of being is he?

First, he is “meek.”

But this is more than an observation we make about his character. This is his own understanding of himself! This is not only what and who we see out of the corner of our eye as we travel along joined with him. This is what he sees when he looks into a mirror: a man of meekness.

To be “meek,” is to be “kindly,” and “gentle,” and “lenient.” One who is meek deals “with people in a kind manner, with humility and consideration.” In Greek culture, the word *praus* “is especially a virtue in women and characterizes female deities.” Greek *praus*, “etymologically related to *frijon*, *frijonds*, *freund*, *friend*, denotes that which is ‘gentle’ and pleasant.” It is used of things that are mild, soothing, allaying, calm, gentle, affable. “The adv. *proaws* is often used for the quiet and friendly composure which does not become embittered or angry at what is unpleasant.... This is an active attitude and deliberate acceptance, not just a passive submission.”<sup>22</sup>

Is it meaningful and pertinent to Jesus’ sense of self and his self-revelation that our English word, ‘meek,’ comes from German *meuk*, ‘soft,’ ‘pliant,’ with a secondary meaning of ‘excrement,’ ‘dung’? Or that our English ‘muck,’ (related to Danish *møg* and Old Norse *mjúkr*) comes from the same source and means dung.” You can decide for yourself. But,

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<sup>22</sup> See *Theological Dictionary of the New Testament*, Vol. 6, p. 645ff).

perhaps you can understand why so many who saw and heard Jesus concluded he was more worthy of contempt than praise.

“He has no appeal,  
does not impress.  
Though we look upon him,  
we simply find nothing praiseworthy about him.  
He is a worthless fellow,  
dismissed by everyone,  
a man mentally unstable through sin,  
familiar with defilement,  
and, as a man too ashamed to look others in the eye,  
he is thought contemptible.  
He is simply not worth our consideration.”<sup>23</sup>

He follows this startling revelation of his meekness with the revelation of his “lowliness.” This attribute is something much less domesticated, respectable, and attractive—and something far more intimidating—than the “humility” as we so often think of and portray it. It is something much closer to “humiliated.” The Greek word, *tapeinós*, has the sense of “mean,” “insignificant,” “weak,” and “poor.”

Luke might light us to understand that Jesus inherited such a sense of self from his mortal mother, Mary, who confessed herself to be *tapeinós* in her Magnificat. Here, *tapeinós* is something opposite “blessed.”

“My whole being magnifies the Lord;  
all my energy is devoted to exalting in the God who rescues me  
because he has taken careful note of the dishonor that this woman, who is subject to him, suffers.  
But look! From now on all peoples will consider me favored  
because the All Powerful One has performed magnificent things for me.”<sup>24</sup>

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<sup>23</sup> Isaiah 53.<sup>2-3</sup>; author’s translation

<sup>24</sup> Luke 1.<sup>46-49</sup>; author’s translation

But the Gospels in general and Jesus' just-uttered prayer in particular remind us that "he that hath seen [Jesus] hath seen the Father."<sup>25</sup> Jesus' inheritance of these traits of "meekness" and "lowliness" represent a double inheritance: traits inherited from both his mortal Mother and his Divine Father. His mortal mother and his Divine Father are "meek and lowly in heart."

Again, I do not know whether such meekness and lowliness is consistent with the God with whom you have communicated, but I do know that this is the God that I discovered in that auditorium on that Christmas Season eve. I saw a truly humble, unassuming Being. I saw a Being who thought as highly of me as he did of himself.

Oh, truly, this revelation of the Divine character is worthy of a multitude of exclamation points. Truly,

"Such knowledge is too wonderful for me;  
it is high, I cannot attain unto it."<sup>26</sup>

This is a storming of heaven, indeed, for the benefit of those who are engaged in wearying toil; a toil, we are reminded elsewhere, that was (and often still is) burdensomely imposed by religious leaders more interested in maintaining their position and control and power than in serving the needs of the broken.

What labor, what burden is not eased by such a traveling companion? A companion who does not by his sense of superiority look down upon us? Harshly judge us? A companion who through his own vulnerabilities, his own labors and his own heavy burdens, can relate to our vulnerabilities, our labors, and our heavy burdens? A traveling companion and partner who is "in all things... made like unto his brethren, that he might be... merciful and faithful... For in that he himself hath suffered being [exposed to challenges], he is able to succor them that are [exposed to challenges]."<sup>27</sup> A companion and partner who brings a

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<sup>25</sup> John 14.<sup>9</sup>

<sup>26</sup> Psalms 139.<sup>6</sup>

<sup>27</sup> Hebrews 2.<sup>17-18</sup>

cessation to the weariness and insecurities induced by all our vulnerabilities”

Truly, this is at-one-ment. A connectedness, an association, a partnership that gives rest, respite, and repose.

## Conclusion

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In Matthew 11 God, the Only Begotten Son, the great I AM, the maker of heaven and earth, has left his divine abode, entered a body of clay, and ministers among men. He does so in hopes of revealing the divine character—his own, to be sure, but also that of his Father in heaven. He reveals that character through the manner in which he ministers. In ministering to the blind, the lame, the leper, the deaf, and the poor—the vulnerable, the labored, the heavy laden—he hopes to offer a clear revelation concerning the character that he and his Father possess. He reveals something of himself and his beloved Father in selecting the humblest, least impressive of emissaries. In ministering in such a way that “babes” understand his revelation while those who are “wise and prudent” easily miss it, Jesus reveals something about himself and his Father.

While actions may speak louder than words, words are important. Jesus’ paradigm shifting revelation concerning the divine character is so unanticipated, so radical—indeed, Jesus knows and warns that this revelation will offend and perplex and enrage—that it requires both word and deed. And so, in what is surely one of the most extraordinary confessions that the cosmos is ever likely to hear, Jesus speaks in word what he has been trying to communicate in deed:

“I am meek and lowly in heart.”

Jesus surely recognizes and clearly teaches that the revelation concerning the divine character has an impact on those who hear it, understand it, accept it, and enter into partnership with the God who is thus revealed. The revelation brings renewal and rest to those who are vulnerable and lost; to those who “labor and are heavy laden.”

But the startling confession that ends Matthew's eleventh chapter is more than "testimony." It is more than ministerial outreach. It is more than PR. It is simple cosmic truth. It is a statement concerning God's own self-image. God is "meek and lowly in heart" even when there's no one else around and no others watching him. In relating with others in a "meek and lowly" manner, he is not putting on an act. He is not utilizing a "teaching moment." He is only acting out of who and what he is yesterday, today, and forever.

This revelation is "subversive." It subverts all the false and violent narratives mankind has thought and spoken about God. It is no less effective in its subversion than the well-known pronouncement that Jesus uttered from hills and dales all over Galilee.

"Blessed be ye poor: for yours is the kingdom of God.  
Blessed are ye that hunger now: for ye shall be filled.  
Blessed are ye that weep now: for ye shall laugh."<sup>28</sup>

This divine revelation is now, today, in this very present moment restive and restorative. We find rest; finally relax in the presence of this God who is meek and lowly in heart. Today, tomorrow, and every day after that right on into eternity; for by virtue of his meekness and lowliness God has stormed the gates of heaven and thrown wide the gates that the self-righteous and self-reliant so forcefully and violently slammed shut in the face of those laden with spiritual vulnerabilities and incapacities.

As so often, we glory. We marvel. We ask,

"Who could have supposed?"

Not me. My imagination was too pinched. I only came to know what I could never have supposed through the divine revelation that flowed in that darkened auditorium filled with glorious music and a text as astounding as any that ever flowed from the bosom of God and was written by the hand of man:

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<sup>28</sup> Luke 6.<sup>20-21</sup>

“Learn about me.

Learn that I am meek and lowly in heart.

Then, and only then, will you find inner rest.”

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<sup>a</sup> Questions often arise concerning this question and how we are to understand it. Was John unsure about Jesus’ identity as Messiah, notwithstanding his previous encounters and testimonies concerning Jesus found in other Gospels—particularly that of John? Was he sure of Jesus’ identity, but wished for his disciples to come to the same understanding on their own?

I suppose such questions are appropriate to any “historical” investigation of the relationship between Jesus and the Baptist, though we must always be cognizant and appreciative of the fact that the four writers of the Gospels did not all share the same level of knowledge and understanding. Matthew’s John, the Baptist, may not have had the early understanding of Jesus as John, the Beloved’s, John the Baptist.

Be that as it may, such questions concerning what John, the Baptist, did or did not understand are not, I suggest, pertinent to Matthew’s purposes in his eleventh chapter. As best we can, we must answer the questions and glean the inspiration that Matthew intended in writing the chapter involving this meeting between John’s disciples and Jesus.