

What Was Missing?
A Sermon on Matthew 11:16-19, 25-30 by the Rev. Philip Major
St. Paul's ~ Syracuse, NY ~ July 5, 2026

I am glad to be back with you after four restful weeks of vacation. My plan for vacation was to spend four weeks hiking across the northern edge of Italy, in the region called South Tyrol. On the third day out of 28, I realized I had planned the perfect trip for the 44 year old Philip Major. As you may know, I am the grandpa in my family. I am 64, not 44 years old.

So, I made some changes. I traveled shorter distances. I didn't stay overnight high in the mountains, on thin mattresses that are like sleeping on the floor. Each afternoon I descended back into the valley and stayed in an actual hotel, with hot and cold running water, and actual mattresses on the beds.

This region of Italy is one of my favorite places to visit. South Tyrol is about three times the size of Onondaga County. There are mountains, ranging from 8,000 to 13,000 feet in elevation, and over 10,000 miles of well-marked, well-maintained hiking trails. The scenery is breathtaking.

I studied German before I left, because in South Tyrol most of the people over the age of forty speak German and only German. Many young people are fluent in German, Italian, and English. They work in the restaurants, the hotels and the shops. I had many conversations with these young people, who were sometimes interested in talking with a visitor from New York.

The small cities, like Meran and Bozen, look a lot like cities in other parts of Europe. There are ancient castles and churches and many good restaurants. The streets are narrow, better for walking than for driving.

The small towns are different from our small towns. There are actual barns right in the towns, right next to the houses. Most of the houses and apartments have gardens, sometimes like miniature farms, around them or near them. The gardens are full of fruit trees, berry bushes, vegetables, cows, chickens and goats. Most of the people working in the gardens and on the farms are older, often the grandparents of the family. The food served in some of the restaurants and inns is very fresh because it comes from the town itself.

One morning I was eating breakfast at the inn where I was staying. I sat for two hours, eating yogurt and fruit, drinking tea and coffee, and writing in my journal. Through the window I watched a man about ten years older than me work in the large garden. He was harvesting fruits and vegetables and pulling weeds and carting them off in a wheelbarrow. And I thought to myself, "It's almost time for this particular grandpa to go home and take care of his garden." So, a few days later I took one train and then another and another to the airport in Milan, and flew home.

I met many good, helpful people on my trip to Italy. I saw many beautiful places. But there was one important piece of life I did not see on my trip. It could be that I was just not looking in the right places, but something seemed to be completely absent. I didn't really see what was missing until a few days ago.

This past Tuesday I started back at my work at St. Paul's. When I talked with the wardens I learned that Ruth Brown had a car accident, and she sustained some significant injuries. So on Wednesday I went to visit her at the Syracuse Home in Baldwinsville.

Ruth is recovering well. She was very talkative and energetic. I was relieved to see her looking so good. Ruth told me a little bit about her car accident, but mostly she told me about all of the people who had come to visit her in the past two weeks: Perry and Amy and Joe Russo and Willson came to visit. And Judy and Sue Beeching with Tory and Barbara, and a bunch of other people came to visit, I cannot remember all of their names. Some of the people came to visit her twice. And David and his daughter were coming to visit tomorrow. Then Ruth told me how Sylvia Lewis was helping her arrange

for a nurse to help her when she went home. And then Ruth pulled this beautiful shawl out of a drawer and told how Dan and Joe came to visit and brought her a shawl that she absolutely loved.

At about this time I'm pretty sure my mouth was hanging open. I just had to stop Ruth and ask, 'Hold on Ruth! Who are Dan and Joe?' Ruth said, "You know, the new guys who joined the church a few months ago." Right, Daniel Mayer and Joffre Cevalos, except Ruth is a bit more social than me so it's just plain Dan and Joe! Dan and Joe, though they barely know Ruth because they just joined the church a few months ago, heard she was in a car accident and spent a couple of hours making the trip to Baldwinsville to visit her.

Dan and Joe and all of the other visitors from St. Paul's brought Ruth what she needed most, which was the love of God. This is the beautiful thing I did not see during my travels through Italy. In the church we call it, "self-giving love". It's what Jesus did and it is what Jesus taught us. Ruth Brown is surrounded by a community of people who are following the example of Christ Jesus.

I know that Ruth is not the only person who has been the recipient of this community of self-giving love. On my way out of town, people were texting me and sending me emails with reports of people they were visiting. Derina was going to visit this person, and Joe visited Bob in the hospital, and Betsy was driving to Manlius to visit Mary. There were many people visiting other people. There were many people following the example of Jesus and giving a piece of themselves to someone who needed it.

This is different. It's different from anything I saw on my travels. It's different from what I have seen most places in the United States. St. Paul's is a community of people formed by the example and teachings of Christ Jesus.

Here is another thing that is different about the community formed by the example and teachings of Christ. At St. Paul's the people are more or less all jumbled up together. The young people and the old people, and the poor and the rich, and the people with lighter skin or darker skin, and the gay people and the so-called straight people, and the immigrants and the natives are all mixed up together. At St. Paul's we are not divided up into different groups.

This is such a relief. In the places I visited it often seemed like people were dividing themselves about ten different ways. The Italian speakers seemed to stay away from the German speakers. The people who drove enormous cars stayed away from the people who rode the buses. It seemed like a type of self-segregation was happening among the people. Segregation is the result of people emphasizing their differences and making judgements about others.

I was riding the bus a lot. One hot day, after hiking on some trails for most of the day, I rode the bus about 45 minutes to the next town. The bus let me off about a block away from my hotel. This was a fancy place, with palm trees and lounge chairs next to the pool. The people at the front desk were very surprised to see a hot, sweaty traveler and asked where I had parked my car. They were surprised, because I had jumbled up their idea of who should be staying at their fancy hotel.

Especially at St. Paul's, the people are all jumbled up together. This is like what happened at Pentecost, when Jews from all over the world were gathered together in one place, speaking different languages. This is what God intends for us. The people are all jumbled up together, not by accident, but because each one of you has made the decision that love is more important than anything else. This is the community formed by the instructions of our patron saint, St. Paul, who said that there is no longer slave or free, there is no longer Jew or Gentile, there is no longer male or female, for all of you are one body in Christ Jesus. St. Paul's is the community formed by the love of God.

Jesus points us toward this kind of community in today's Gospel passage. Jesus observes that people have a way of separating themselves by complaining about others. *"To what will I compare this generation? You are like children sitting in the marketplaces and calling to one another, 'We played the flute for you, and you did not dance; we wailed, and you did not mourn.' For John came neither*

eating nor drinking, and they say, 'He has a demon'; the Son of Man came eating and drinking, and they say, 'Look, a glutton and a drunkard, a friend of tax collectors and sinners!'

Jesus is describing something that is pretty normal in the world. The standard sort of human community is full of people making complaints and accusations about other people. The community formed by the love of God is different. In the community formed by the love of God we don't spend our lives dividing ourselves from others. We don't waste our energies complaining and making accusations.

Jesus gives us a different way. He does not say, "Come to me, just a few of you, the special ones." He says, *Come to me, all you that are weary and are carrying heavy burdens, and I will give you rest. Take my yoke upon you, and learn from me; for I am gentle and humble in heart, and you will find rest for your souls. For my yoke is easy, and my burden is light.*" The qualification for being part of the community is that we know what it is like to carry a heavy burden. Some of us are weary. Some of us are just very familiar what it is like to be weary, or to carry a heavy burden. We have compassion for one another.

In the community formed by the love of God, we take care of one another. And this yoke we have taken on is easy, and our burdens are light. Our burdens are light because of what Ruth told me. Many people came to visit her. Our burdens are light because we do not rely on one person to make everything right.

As a community formed by the love of God, we share in the responsibility of caring for one another, so our burdens are not heavy. As a community formed by the love of God, we are gentle and humble in our hearts. As a community formed by the love of God, we are all jumbled up together, because love helps us see each person is a child of God, created in the image of God.