

Being a follower of Jesus

Acts 4:32 – 37



Come to Me, and I Will Give You Rest

25 At that time Jesus declared, "I thank you, Father, Lord of heaven and earth, that you have hidden these things from the wise and understanding and revealed them to little children; 26 yes, Father, for such was your gracious will. 27 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. 28 Come to me, all who labor and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest. 29 Take my yoke upon you, and learn from me, for I am gentle and lowly in heart, and you will find rest for your souls. 30 For my yoke is easy, and my burden is light."

Anyone who spends time online knows there are innumerable invitations out there. We are frequently invited to become "followers" of a person, a group, or even a movement. Such calls to become "followers" abound. Even when we don't want to, we are urged to join various groups, become such "followers" or "disciples." All these invitations can sometimes feel stifling or exhausting. Yet, in today's sermon text, Jesus also extends an invitation to become his "followers." And here, the aim is not to be exhausted or stifled, but to be refreshed. The question is: how do we respond to this invitation from our Lord? I have an invitation here in an envelope—an invitation from a friend to a celebration. How do you feel when you receive such an invitation? Perhaps you are surprised when an old acquaintance honors you with an invitation after so many years, asking you to a special celebration. Or perhaps you are skeptical, asking yourself: "Can I foresee what I'm getting into if I accept this invitation? Do I even want to join the community I'm being invited to?"

When Jesus called out to the crowd, "Come to me," it was a unique situation. By that time, Jesus had already been active in Galilee for some time. Through his actions and his preaching, he had demonstrated that God was present. Even John—whether out of agitation or doubt—had asked: "Are you the one who is to come, or should we wait for another?" Amidst this situation, Jesus set out for Jerusalem, and people everywhere wanted to know: "Who is this Jesus?" And then, people rejected him. It was precisely those with influence in society who rejected Jesus' invitation; they did not want it. A recurring pattern can be observed among those who refused: something stood between Jesus and them. Anyone who met Jesus had to decide which path to take. Jesus claimed that God was present in our world through his person; through Jesus, God is among us. Whoever grasped this had to make a choice to abandon the structures and paths they had devised to reach God and instead follow Jesus, who embodies God. For many, societal power structures were also a factor; anyone who was part of such a structure would have to relinquish power. Those who rejected Jesus felt no need for him because they believed they already possessed God. Yet what they possessed was not God, but their own self-constructed image of God.

However, there is another side: those who accepted Jesus' invitation. These are the simple, the spiritually poor, and those who hungered for righteousness—people unable to compete with the dazzling deities of others. Jesus' call of salvation reached these people too; they heard his voice and came. Outside our Lukaskirche, this very call—Jesus saying, "Come to me..."—is depicted. Yet the artist chose to portray the poor people he personally knew at Jesus' feet—working-class individuals who lived in poverty right here near the church around 1893. Jesus, however, seeks to do more than merely offer empty comfort to the poor in their distress. The message is also not addressed solely to the materially poor; it is directed at all who suffer under the yoke of the Law or the yoke of false gods. It concerns people who have searched along many different paths—or even lost their way entirely—and who find themselves trapped in various prisons of their own making. If we were to limit Jesus' message—"Come to me, all you who are weary and burdened"—solely to the materially poor, Jesus would have to speak and offer comfort in a very different way. Certainly, Jesus does all that, too. But Jesus' call is different—and it is more. When he says, "Come to me, all you who are weary and burdened," and immediately follows with, "Take my yoke upon you... for my burden is light...", he does not intend merely to offer the kind of advice many life coaches give—suggestions for living more easily or coping better with life's many adversities. Instead, he speaks of a blessed exchange: I hand over to Jesus whatever weighs me down and burdens me, and I take on what *he* is. My very self—with all my traits and limitations—passes over to Jesus. And the person of Jesus—with his attributes—passes over to me. That is a blessed exchange.

Paul took up Jesus' words and says exactly the same thing when he explains at length in the Letter to the Romans that we human beings are all sinners and cannot stand before God, yet we are considered righteous before God through Jesus and his person.

Now, we too receive this invitation from Jesus: "Come to me, all you who are weary..." How will we respond to Jesus' invitation? Can we accept it? Returning to the invitation card I received from my friend, normally, when I accept an invitation, I do so because I know the person. It is preceded by a shared life story or journey taken together. Perhaps we are even related. Yes, and that is precisely the point Jesus is making. Jesus is related to the Father. Father and Son belong closely together. They are a family. They know each other. They share a relationship. They have not merely walked a certain stretch of the road together; they are completely attuned to one another. And now, Jesus reveals himself to us. He shows us his whole person. And he says, in essence, nothing other than this: "You, too, may belong to this family. You, too, may be children." Thus, a kinship arises between God and us—one that transforms our entire existence and who we are. This relationship with the Father presupposes "knowing." In the Bible, this implies more than just an intellectual or cerebral form of recognition; this knowing encompasses one's entire life.

Now the question arises: If God is so clearly recognizable in Jesus, and if we are drawn into this relationship, why do those who ought to know—namely, the wise—reject it? Shouldn't they—of all people—recognize that life with Jesus is better? Jesus himself says it: the relationship that forms between him and God, and between us and God, is like an electric current. We can see the effect, but not the current itself. One must be connected to the circuit to experience it all. And Jesus further emphasizes: only those to whom God reveals himself can grasp this. No matter how hard we try to approach God on our own or using our own means, it is not possible. Knowing God is not within our natural capabilities. We cannot simply step into the power current of God on our own. And precisely for this reason, Jesus turns His face toward us. He wants no one to be left out. Hence the Savior's call: "Come to me!" And that is why Jesus traveled such a long way—to reveal Himself to us. For Jesus alone is the way into this stream of God's power.

Jesus calls us to follow Him and to take up His yoke. The yoke He reveals to us grants our souls a Sabbath rest. This is expressed not only by the words "You will find rest for your souls," but also by the yoke itself, which is easy and light. These words signify more than merely taking a break. We are reminded directly of the creation story, where God establishes a Sabbath after completing creation. This Sabbath is not idleness, but the crown of creation. When God solemnly proclaims, "See, it is good!" creation is drawn into the perfect presence of God. And it is precisely this Word that God speaks once more through Jesus. Throughout the Old Testament, there is a belief that the ultimate Sabbath rest will be ushered in only by the Messiah. And this is exactly what Jesus means when He says, "Our souls find rest through Him." This does not mean simply taking a break; it means being rescued from the many compulsions that bind us and finding a Sabbath rest for our souls.

God knows of our many sins and burdens. In Jesus, everything is transformed for the good. Where there was sin, there is to be righteousness. Where there was hatred, there is to be love. Where there was hopelessness and doubt, there is to be faith and confidence. Amidst the many demands of our society and the pressure we place upon ourselves, we need these words from our God: "Now it is good! In Jesus, it is good!" For us, this word means truly pausing. It means laying down everything that makes life difficult and burdensome. It is about basking in the sunshine of God's grace and drawing strength from Him. I know that each of us has our own burdens to bear. For some, the burdens placed on them by others weigh heavily on their shoulders. Perhaps someone has caused you pain, and that person's sin weighs so heavily upon you that you have become bitter and unable to forgive. Sometimes the feeling is so intense that agitation and anger make it hard to breathe. "Enough now!" says Jesus. "Let it go! Lay your burden on Me." Then again, you might have done something terrible yourself. That burden, too, can be so heavy that life becomes almost unbearable. Simply lay it all before Jesus, who is able to carry it all on His shoulders.

No one is without a burden to carry—we all come before God just as we are. If our lives were like a school class, we couldn't always get the top grade. But in Jesus, we can. With Him we always draw from His abundance. For Him, words like "inadequate, imperfect, unsuitable" do not exist. So come! And finally breathe easy! God Himself says: "See, it is good!" Amen.