



## **SPIRIT** IN THE DESERT

### **Matthew 11:16-19, 25-30**

Jesus said to the crowd, “To what will I compare this generation? It is 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!’ Yet wisdom is vindicated by her deeds.”

At that time Jesus said, “I thank you, Father, Lord of heaven and earth, because you have hidden these things from the wise and the intelligent and have revealed them to infants; yes, Father, for such was your gracious will. 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.

“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.”

*Grace and Peace to you from the mystery in whom we live and move and have our being.*

## **For you**

I know a church that has such a wonderful welcoming message of grace. Every Sunday you can sense the message of grace. People feel comfortable coming in to experience this throwback to the 1970’s Jesus movement.

It is perplexing why the church does not grow beyond its regular number. Over the years I have seen many people leave the church discouraged. They all express the same type of reason for leaving. They could not seem to work their way into community. Not because the churches’ intent was to exclude, but the regulars still lived longing for the warm embers of a movement past and wanted to maintain it.

The same leadership for over fifty years feared that new people might not understand their “vibe,” and, as a result, “others” were inadvertently excluded.

Oh, don’t get me wrong—if you wanted to join the Sunday morning fireside experience, you were welcome. But it was harder to be included on the retreat committees or the backyard whiskey-drinking, cigar-smoking hangouts for the men who filled the pulpit when the pastor was on the road.

Yes, I said it: only men were allowed to preach or serve as elders in this church. That is another issue worthy of its own critique.

The need today for community is greater than ever. The need for environment of engagement rather than an environment whose message is about God’s grace for one’s moral failure. That alone will draw others any of us but just does not seem to move people into a deeper healthy connection with each other and with God.

Unlike the church where Paul said to the Corinthians (1 Corinthians 12:26), “If one part suffers, every part suffers with it; if one part is honored, every part rejoices with it,” today needing help is often an agonizingly private matter, while helping others has become a profession.

For example, the helping industry only kicks in when there is a crisis. Little is invested in prevention. We have invested in an ethos of individualism, and the church has also fallen prey.

This teaching of communal spirituality and imaginative teaching would surely see Jesus again as radical and counter to today’s culture.

Real community is a preventive environment whose benefits include mental health, physical well-being, and spiritual connection. Those working in healing and teaching about healthy communities today call this creating trauma-informed environments, and it is understood as a form of collective care for the soul of the community.

It is not psychological counseling, but rather a more functional environment of grace for the entire community.

I am afraid today’s culture sees true spirituality in community as an inconvenience. Yet a healthy contemplative life will inspire social action and community engagement and vice versa.

It is not just in crisis that community matters, it is in laughing and celebrating together and nurturing sober joy. Man do I miss potlucks!

All of this became crystal clear when I was asked to lead a young marrieds class on spirituality at the church I mentioned. I began by asking this joyful room full of Jesus followers the question, “What is spirituality?” I wrote down the words they called out, and before we were done, there was no space left on the giant whiteboard.

I took a step back, looked at the whiteboard, and said, “What could this tell us about our understanding of spirituality?” A silence fell over the group until someone from the back row shouted, “Maybe we don’t know what the hell we’re talking about.”

We all laughed, and it sparked a conversation that helped us experience spirituality right in the midst of the very questions we were asking about spirituality. This was the beauty of the young marrieds group, hiding within the larger church fellowship of revolving members

In that moment of honesty and curiosity community began to take place. We explored our inadequate understanding of spirituality and experienced Spirit in our communal sharing and practice.

If we are not as willing to shout our perplexity and engage with honesty, we are like children playing a flute in the marketplace. Everyone hears but does not dance. Public dancing would be seen as foolish and unfortunate in the transactional marketplace. So would vulnerability. That is why we are “adults” in the world that must be taught how to respond to our own suffering and the suffering around us.

Trauma-informed environments are needed today because there is trauma as a result of the individualistic and self-determined environments of our childhood.

I like to think that community is not simply when we have had a successful gathering, but when broken meets broken. And this does not mean we have to be broken in order to experience community. It simply means that we are imperfect and often wounded in our journey toward belonging and authenticity.

Therefore, Jesus invites us to make the home of our hearts a welcoming place for spiritual engagement and community wherever you are in life right now. In the midst of the “marketplace.” It is a place where we experience wholeness in real time. This is what spirituality is.

Jesus compares us to children in the marketplace, not knowing what the hell spirituality is. Like the unaware, they mislabel and punish truth-tellers—John and Jesus alike.

We can explain the market amidst the noise of wall street, how to access black Friday sales, podcasting, and online gambling yet we cannot integrate our lives spiritually. Our human condition seems to ignore the place within us that breathes life into our daily existence. May our experience of grace become less one dimensional in our daily lives and include the love and discernment of Spirit. May we hear the tune played by the children who live simple lives of beauty and wonder. Children who desire more than anything an adult who dances to their playful tune. The child within us that longs for connection and belonging yet has settled for so much less.

The institutional church—or any institution, for that matter—cannot provide community, spirituality, or healing for you. Now, that might come as a blow to many churches that think they’ve cornered the market on the “grace vibe,” with their “on point” preaching, teaching, and music that produces an awesome experience—and maybe even a free breakfast for first-timers. But none of this can produce spirituality *for you*.

The experience of Spirit cannot be coerced or manipulated by programs or ethereal worship. The inner place of spirituality cannot be done “for you”; it is something we must each engage. We alone can give consent to the Spirit to live, move, and stir our souls.

Those with childlike imagination—dancing to the mystical flute of the Spirit and hearing the “suffering wail”—are friends of Jesus. The marketplace does not need to disappear for Spirit-filled living to occur; it can be experienced in the midst of our hectic lives and within our authentic questions.

When community happens, Spirit is there and brings life. When we truly see each other, it is as though we are bringing one into existence and we too have a witness to our existence. We see the sacred dignity of each other.

This is what is missing in many of our institutions and in our culture: the honoring of the dignity of another human being. It is essential to the Christ message, resonating in the Beatitudes. Jesus urges his disciples to move toward this kind of spirituality, and so do our ancestors who longed for it.

Spirituality is communal yet must be nurtured within us individually; Our inner engagement is rest for our weary souls then reaches outward in the marketplace.

To be willing to surrender to this process is to stop amusing ourselves to death with preoccupations. This is what the marketplace is. The marketplace is not just a place for people to carry out their occupations; it also becomes a place where life is lost in preoccupations.

May you hear the God of peace, compassion, hope, and love forever asking you to dance.

Amen

For more information on trauma-informed training for the workplace and churches  
*The Faithful City*, founder Dr Sanghoon Yoo [www.thefaithfulcity.org](http://www.thefaithfulcity.org)  
*'Weave and Cleave' Podcast*