

**“AN EASY BURDEN?”**  
**Matthew 11:16-19, 25-30; Romans 7:15-25**  
**July 3, 2005**  
**By the Rev. Elizabeth Oettinger**  
Copyright © 2005

Two weeks ago, Ryan showed me an ad that he had cut out of a newspaper. I don't remember if it was the *Gazette-Times* or *The Oregonian*. It portrayed a family—very white, very attractive, mom, dad, an elementary school aged boy, a slightly younger girl. Mom has a third baby in her arms. They're all dressed in casual clothes, smiling broadly at the camera, with duffle bags around them like they're off for a weekend away. The caption reads, “Our children tell their friends, ‘We go to the fun church!’ ” Did any of the rest of you see it?

Anyway, it caught my attention. I've thought a lot about it in the last two weeks, and I think it's probably pretty effective advertising. Any of us parents who have ever wrestled a reluctant child into the car on Sunday morning can't help but be drawn to a caption that implies not only that the kids love to go to church, but that they tell their friends about it! Especially in the Willamette Valley, where churchgoers are often more closeted than gays and lesbians, there's an appeal there.

And the people in the photograph look so happy. They positively glow with good health, affluence, and optimism. When was the last time you thought about whether your faith made you happy? What do you get from being a Christian? I think it's a serious question that too often goes missing in our tradition. In our gospel reading this morning, Jesus says, “Come unto me all you who are weary and carry heavy burdens and I will give you rest. For my yoke is easy and my burden is light.” They are wonderful words, compelling words. And again, they move me to ask, “What do you get, when you come to this place? In your private prayers and your public religious observance, are your burdens lightened? Do you find rest in Jesus? Do you even look for rest, or solace, companionship or peace in the love of the one God of heaven and earth?” We tell our children that God loves them, and that's supposed to make a difference for them. But how many of us feel truly loved by God, embraced by God, nurtured and restored by God? For how many of us does that make a difference in our lives?

I think of the words of the old hymn, “In the Garden”: “And he walks with me and he talks with me and he tells me I am his own. And the joy we share when we tarry there no other has ever known.” Many of the liberal Christians I have known are more embarrassed than uplifted by such words and sentiments. We liberal Protestants, we take our religion seriously. It's not about us, not about our inward life; it's about doing good, fighting injustice, negotiating peace, working for change. “Muscular Christianity” it was called in earlier days. We reduce our religion to little different from the League of Women Voters or the Ethical Culture Society. Not that there's anything wrong with the League of Women Voters or the Ethical Culture Society. Not that there's anything wrong either with fighting injustice and doing good. But in the church, it is supposed to be different. We are invited to be about the good works of the Gospel because we have been filled up by the Gospel. We are moved to love our neighbors because we know ourselves, feel ourselves loved by God in a way that transforms our entire interaction with the

world. I don't think we talk about that enough in the church. I don't think I have talked enough with you about that. "Come to me all you who are weary and carry heavy burdens and I will refresh you." That is our God; and our relationship with our God can bring us comfort and joy.

I want to go back to the picture in the advertisement: Mom, Dad, three perfect kids, and the "church of fun." We have something to learn from that picture and from our conservative Christian brothers and sisters who do a much better job than we do at cultivating the practice of the presence of God. They do a better job of allowing themselves to be filled up, made joyful by their faith. Having said that, though, ultimately the advertisement fails for me because it's not enough. It's not enough for our faith to make us happy, healthy, and optimistic. The reason we are to be nurtured by our faith, made joyful by the presence of God, is so that we can do the work of God, a concept conspicuously absent from the ad. So what would I put in its place? I think of the "bouncer" ad of the United Church of Christ that came out last Advent. How many of you saw that? The guy turning people away, letting only the "right" people into the church. It was effective, but I think it was as partial in its way as the happy family and the fun church. Underneath the bouncer ad, there was a kind of mean-spiritedness, an "us" versus "they-ness." We have it right; they have it wrong. We know how to do good in the world. And there we are, back smack in the limitations of the liberal church in the world.

So if I were going to post a picture of the church at its most whole, what would I choose? I would choose a picture from the Spring Assembly of our Conference. The picture is posted on the bulletin board out in the foyer. It's a photograph of Gene Ross with flowers around his neck, a green sarong skirt covering the lower half of his body. Gene is up on stage dancing in celebration of our inclusion of the Samoan church into our Conference. There's our Gene, unselfconscious, unfettered, singing and dancing in joy as the welcome circle of the people of God is expanded one more time. For me, that's the image of the church: the love of God filling us up, spilling over in a holy joy that leads us to pray, to dance, to act, to do all these at once because we know both ourselves and any one of our neighbors to be equally the beloved children of God. "Come to me all you who are weary and who carry heavy burdens, and I will give you rest." This is our God, who can fill us up, who can sustain us through all things—a God whose extravagant care for us makes even the loving and transforming of the world a yoke that is easy and a burden that is light. Thanks be to God. Amen.