Change of Heart

Sermon preached by Jennifer Hudson, St. Andrew's Episcopal Church, Milford, CT, July 5, 2026

Matthew 11:16-19, 25-30

Waiting for your change of heart

It just takes a beat to turn it around

Yes, I'm waiting for your change of heart

At the edge of my seat, please, turn it around

"Change of Heart" is my favorite song on singer Cyndi Lauper's 1986 *True Colors* album (which I still have on vinyl, and I'll still play on my vintage turntable when I'm feeling nostalgic about my 80s childhood). The song is a high energy, dance pop track that leans into synthesizers and a fast, pulsing rhythm, giving it an almost breathless feel. That's not surprising, given that Lauper sings from the perspective of someone stuck between friendship and unrequited love, hoping for a "change of heart" on the part of the love interest that may never come. Underneath the high energy synth pop that invites one to lose oneself in the lightness of dance is a longing that is almost burdensome for the narrator. There's an implied plea from the narrator to the person of interest: "Come to me." And it's this plea, "come to me," which Jesus makes explicit in this morning's Gospel reading from Matthew as he attempts to change the hearts of his listeners.

Jesus is obviously frustrated in this passage. And there's an underlying sense of longing as well. Granted, Jesus isn't someone stuck in unrequited love, not in the conventional sense. But he does lament hearts that refuse to be changed by the invitation to move into deeper relationship with God and one another. Jesus points out how those around him thought John the Baptist was possessed by a demon and how Jesus himself was criticized for keeping company with those whom society considered the "wrong" crowd. John and Jesus have both extended God's invitation to turn around, to have a change of heart, to become someone new, someone changed

for the better. While John's invitation was austere, Jesus's is gentler. Maybe then it's little surprise that the wise and intelligent among the people aren't the ones who accept Jesus's invitation; it's the humble, the ones with an open heart, the ones who listen with childlike trust. But even in his welcome of those willing to receive him and have their lives changed forever, Jesus calls "come to me" because he knows how God longs for our hearts to change. Think of God as the one possessing unrequited love from us, sitting on the edge of God's seat, begging people please, turn your lives around, turn your heart to me.

But change of any kind—including of heart—is difficult. Who among us here can say we've been quick to forgive someone who hurt us? Have we encountered someone with our own biases and prejudices without first empathizing and placing ourselves in their experience? How many times have we tried to stop a behavior we knew wasn't good for us—perhaps binge eating, or binge drinking, or doomscrolling, or persistent negative thinking about something or someone (including of ourselves)? We humans can get stubborn. And, frankly, while we can learn better ways to cope and even move forward, real change is often nearly impossible. Nearly. That word "nearly" is a cushion, because real change is possible. Remember Ebenezer Scrooge in *A Christmas Carol*? By the novel's end, he's done a complete 180. He's a changed man with a changed heart who vows to maintain a generous spirit. Scrooge is a perfect example of how change starts with the heart. Whether it's working on inner healing and the process of forgiving someone who has hurt us or learning empathy or conditioning ourselves toward better life habits or getting ourselves out of spiritual poverty, we must start with an open heart. It's that open heart that allows us to commit to real change.

Yes, that commitment can feel like a burden at first. We're creatures of habit, after all. But Jesus invites us to take his yoke upon ourselves, and he assures us "my yoke is easy and my burden is light."

Of course, to us 21st-century listeners, a yoke is an image we might not fully apprehend. In Jesus's time, a yoke was a collar that harnesses a donkey or other animal for pulling a cart or plowing a field. It's a symbol for labor. So how can a yoke be easy and with light burden? And how can the yoke of our attempting to make real change, which is so hard for us, be easy and of light burden?

It might help to know that Jesus isn't asking us as followers to take on more. He's asking us to lighten up our loads. The burden of unforgiveness. The burden we cause with our prejudices. The burden of repeated behaviors that don't allow us to live up to our full potential and be the best person we can be. Learning from Jesus allows us to unlearn these burdens. Learning from Jesus allows us to live the way of love—love, which is the most liberating force in God's created universe. And we are so beloved by God. With all our imperfections and burdens, we are so deeply and unconditionally loved by God. God so longs for us to love God back and to love others as deeply and unconditionally as God does each of us.

So, what would it be like to love that person who hurt us? What would it be like to love that person we see as different? What would it be like to love ourselves enough to stop engaging in behaviors that end up harming us and others? Jesus knows it's not easy work to get there. That's why he's saying, "come to me." If we come to God, God will help us get there. God will help us change. God will help us make the commitment to the liberating power of love. God is waiting for our change of heart. It just takes a beat to turn it around.