

## **Freedom Isn't Free**

First Presbyterian Church of Kissimmee, Florida

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Matthew 11:16-19 (NRSV)

"But to what will I compare this generation? It is like children sitting in the marketplaces and calling to one another,

[17] 'We played the flute for you, and you did not dance;

we wailed, and you did not mourn.'

[18] For John came neither eating nor drinking, and they say, 'He has a demon'; [19] 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."

Matthew 11:25-30 (NRSV)

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; [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 you that are weary and are carrying heavy burdens, and I will give you rest. [29] 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. [30] For my yoke is easy, and my burden is light."

## **HEAVY LADEN**

Michael Turner, a minister told of taking a group of college students to New Orleans after hurricane Katrina to help some members of a particular church clean up. He was not prepared for what he saw. Neighborhood after neighborhood was transformed into a ghost town. Brick home were reduced to rubble. A once beautiful neighborhood was transformed into a mountain of debris and FEMA campers.

Their job was to "gut" a house, that is clean out the debris, shovel and wheelbarrow out the six inches of mud that was in the home, and tear down the home to the studs so that it could be decontaminated and rebuilt. Some of us know all too well what that is like after our encounter with a hurricane named Charlie.

But, it's hard to imagine that kind of misery on such a large scale. Michael said that one house that they gutted was a brand new home that was purchased just two months before Katrina hit. They are paying a mortgage on a home that they can't live in and are packed into a trailer that is not much bigger than one room of their flooded home.

One family from the church, an elderly mother and her mentally handicapped son were waiting for an ambulance to evacuate them before the hurricane. The ambulance never came. When the

National Guard unit went in they learned that when the waters started to rise, the mother got into bed with her son, and they died together.

The church that hosted Michael and his college students was in disarray. Most of the members had been dispersed to other parts of the country by the hurricane. But, the few that were left soldiered on, holding a fish fry for the volunteers who came to help them. The pastor said that you see the almost unbearable grief on their faces after trying to dig out for nine months and not seeing much progress.

They gathered in what was left of the sanctuary to eat. It was unbearably hot and filled with mosquitoes.

When Michael finished his meal he wandered around the sanctuary, no doubt wondering what it might have been like before this great calamity. He made his way behind the old oak pulpit that they had managed to salvage from the flood, and as he looked down he saw these words etched in the wood, "Come unto me, all ye who labor and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest."

He said that he looked out at that small congregation and all he saw were burdens ... heavy burdens. And he began to understand the power of this passage.

I know how he feels.

Sometimes when I look out on this congregation, I know that almost everyone here is carrying a burden, a heavy burden. Powerful storms have blown into our life.

Our lawns may be well manicured, and our homes may be intact, but I am hard pressed to find even one family in our church that is not carrying a heavy burden.

And so these words of Jesus are words that we want to hear.

They are words that we need to hear.

"Come unto me, all ye who labor and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest."

## SPIRITUAL REST

How can we really get some rest? How can we get some relief from the troubles of this world?

Have you ever noticed how many bed and mattress commercials are on TV and at the local home shows? Getting rest is big business.

Many of us don't greet the day well rested and refreshed. Our lives are filled with difficulties and question marks. We're not sure what tomorrow holds and so we often live our lives with a profound sense of unease.

It will take more than a Serta perfect mattress to give us rest.

Rest is not just about getting a good night's sleep. Rest is a spiritual state.

Rest is about learning to be secure in an insecure world. Rest is learning to be comfortable in an uncomfortable situation. Rest is learning to trust in something other than our own labor.

There's a saying in the business world that we should "work smarter instead of harder." I think that Jesus is saying something like this in a spiritual sense.

Work is not a bad thing. Work can be very fulfilling. Work can give life purpose and meaning. There are people who can work from dawn to dusk without tiring because they are excited about what they are doing.

But, we labor and are overburdened when we are working at something that is not what we are called to do. Instead of laying down the burdens that others would heap upon us we take them up. Our life becomes driven by a desire to prove ourselves to others, and even the good things in our life can become harsh taskmasters.

The first step in getting some real rest, some real relief is to lay down our burdens at the feet of Jesus. Remember that old hymn, "Have thine own way?" That's the first step in getting some real rest.

Instead of doing it our way we devote ourselves to doing it God's way. And that means that we re-evaluate a lot of things in our life that are driving us to distraction.

Looking at this from a psychological standpoint the word we use is compulsion. Most of us, at least some of the time, do things without much reflection.

We compulsively do certain things without reflecting upon why we are doing them in the first place. We are overburdened by demands that we place upon ourselves and the demands that are placed upon us by others.

Coming to Jesus frees us from these heavy burdens.

## CLEARING AWAY THE FOG

Some of Jesus' harshest words were reserved for those religious leaders who heaped burdens upon an already overburdened people. The people were suffering with real problems, but the religious leaders insisted upon emphasizing the minutiae of the law.

The kingdom of God was at hand, but they could not see it or embrace it. Instead, they spent their time with nitpicking details.

At General Assembly this year a task force looked at revising our Form of Government (or as they abbreviated it ... F-O-G). The idea was to simplify our Form of Government, or to make the “fog” less thick if you will.

Some of us remember when that was true. Our church had fewer rules, and it was easier to do business.

But, at General Assembly this year there was no agreement about the New Form of Government (or NFOG) ... so we will spend some more time studying it. I suspect when we get through we will have more “fog” than before we began this process!

It’s the same in the church as it is in our national government. We seek to simplify and streamline, but we create more burdens. Do you remember the paperwork reduction act? The idea was to reduce the amount of paperwork, but every time I fill out one of those government forms I have to think that we’ve done just the opposite.

Everywhere we turn the world lays a burden upon us. We are burdened by the government. We are burdened by the church. We are burdened the expectations of our friends and family. We are burdened by our own goals and desires.

The only way to escape these burdens is to lay them down at the cross of Jesus. We used to sing a hymn that emphasized this point. We sang, “Burdens are lifted at Calvary.” And that’s true. The first step in getting spiritual rest is to crucify the old way of life. We lay down our burdens when we look to the cross of Christ.

Paul wrote in his letter to the Galatians, “I have been crucified with Christ.” He didn’t mean that literally. He meant it in a figurative sense. He meant that he had abandoned the old way of life in favor of following Christ alone. (Galatians 2:20)

The old way of life, the old rules and regulations, the old fears and sorrows prevent us from really following Jesus. We need to put an end to those old ways. We need to leave those burdens at the cross.

This is certainly not an easy thing to do. In fact, I suspect that none of us get it done completely in this lifetime. We are always going back to our old ways, our old fears and a compulsive lifestyle that is ultimately self-defeating.

But, just because we cannot do it perfectly does not mean that we cannot do it at all. We can learn to work smarter instead of harder. We can learn what is really important in our life and what doesn’t mean that much. We can with God’s help crucify, get rid of those things in our life that are holding us back.

THE YOKE

However, crucifying the old way of life is not enough. In addition to putting leaving many burdens behind, there is one burden that we must dare to shoulder. In order to find rest, the Bible tells us that we have to take up the yoke of Christ.

Now what does that mean? Literally a yoke was a heavy wooden collar that allowed two oxen to work together in the field. The oxen were bound together by the yoke.

One commentator said that nothing was more important to a farmer than a good yoke. An ill-fitted yoke would blister the shoulder of the ox and even lead to a crippling infection.

Our translation of verse 30, "My yoke is easy" gives the wrong impression. We should translate that verse my yoke is "well-fitted" or "easy on the shoulders."

Jesus gives us a task that is well fitted to us. Jesus does indeed have a plan and a purpose for our life. And it is our job to lay down all the other burdens of life so that we can take up this one task, this one yoke that is custom made for us.

There are some Christians who haven't understood this second point. They think that when Jesus talks about giving us rest from our burdens that he's promising an easy life. We can reduce our blood pressure and increase our life span by following Jesus.

How do some of the popular evangelists of the day put it? "If you want your best life now, you just need to follow Jesus. Jesus wants you to succeed. Jesus wants you to prosper."

I'm afraid it's not that simple or easy. Yes, Jesus wants us to lay down our unnecessary burdens and come to him, but we do that by taking up a heavy yoke. It is a yoke that is well-fitted and uniquely suited to us, but it is a yoke nonetheless.

God doesn't give us an easy life; God does give us a life with purpose and direction.

Someone once said that if you want to really ruin a child, give them a life of ease. Focus everything on their needs. They will be very unhappy and most likely make everyone else unhappy as well.

That's why those self-help books are of little or no help. They are based upon a false premise. When we focus everything upon what we want and we need, what we end up with is not self help but selfishness and sometimes even mental illness. Burnout doesn't come from working too hard but from work without meaning or purpose.

## YOKED WITH JESUS

So exactly what is this easy yoke that Jesus asks us to take upon ourselves? Why is this yoke easier to bear?

You may have noticed that most yokes are made for a pair of oxen. Two oxen pulling together can do more than one working alone. Jesus said, "Take my yoke upon you, and learn from me."

The yoke is Jesus' yoke. We are in the harness with Jesus so to speak. We are not left to bear the weight of responsibility alone.

And, you may rightly ask, "Where is Jesus in our world today?" And I would answer, "We find Jesus in the work of our fellow disciple."

Paul wrote in his letter to the Galatians that we should "Bear one another's burdens and in this way you will fulfill the law of Christ."

When we bear the burden of a brother or sister in Christ we do it willingly. We take that burden upon ourselves in the name of Christ. We weep with those who weep as an act of faith.

Please note that burden bearing is not becoming a "worry wart" or a busy body in the name of Christ!

I must say this because quite often people seem to think that this is the case. They lament the fact that the prayer list is so long, and with a long face complain about all that is wrong in the church and the world.

This is not bearing a burden. This is creating a burden for everyone who must listen to our complaining.

There is a quiet confidence to burden bearing. There is a willingness to be with people in some very dark places while maintaining an attitude of hope.

I remember someone saying that a good pastor is a person who keeps a sense of calm during the most difficult of circumstances.

I think that is a good characteristic for all who would be a follower of Christ. We maintain a sense of calm in difficult circumstances.

We do this not because we are just laid back or uncaring but because we believe that Jesus is with us in this work. We believe that he carries the load that is too heavy for us to bear alone.

A minister illustrated this very well.

He said that his youth group was helping an elderly person move. They were moving a heavy dresser out of the room. A teen-ager picked up one end, and a little six year old boy grabbed the other end and tugged with all his might.

The minister waited a few moments before asking, "Why don't we try to lift it together?"

And so together they moved the furniture. The pastor said, "If I had let go, it would have been a burden too big for him to bear. But, when I walked beside him the heavy burden became bearable."

We often struggle and strain with a heavy load, a burden that is too great to bear.

But, Jesus comes alongside us and suggests that we carry the burden together. What was too heavy becomes an easy load, and instead of being crushed we are lifted up to serve in his name.

### FREEDOM ISN'T FREE

Many people have said that "freedom isn't free." They mean that we all have a responsibility to sacrifice for the good of our country. The freedoms we enjoy in this country come at a high price.

In the same way, though salvation is by grace and the price of salvation is paid by Jesus on the cross, we must remember (as Bonhoeffer put it) that there is a cost to discipleship.

We lay down heavy burdens in order to take upon ourselves the yoke of Christ. It is a yoke well fitted to who we are, but it is a yoke nonetheless.

I would suggest that you reflect upon these truths as we take communion today.

The body of Christ is broken for you. The blood of Christ is shed for you.

In Christ your sins are forgiven. You can leave your burdens at the cross.

And the forgiveness and freedom you experience at the cross will give you the courage to move in a different direction.

The power of the cross will enable you to take up your own yoke, your own cross.

Don't be afraid of the journey. A gentle and humble Savior will be with you every step of the way. (Matthew 11:29)

Amen.

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