

How Can a Burden be Light?

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Matthew 11:25-30

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.”

REASON AND REST

Sam Wells notes that we preachers have always got it wrong when we talked about Jesus.

In the 19th Century, the age of reason, we attempted to bring people to Jesus by claiming that Jesus was reasonable. Our message was: “Come to Jesus, his gospel makes good sense.”

But, sometime in the 20th Century we began to proclaim a different message. We began to preach that Jesus was useful.

We said: “Come to Jesus and he will fix what is wrong with your life. Jesus will help you get whatever it is you want in life.”

That's still the message many preach today, and it would be tempting to hear today's gospel message in that way. In our lesson for today Jesus promises (among other things), "rest for your souls."

That's something we all want. In this age of anxiety we are sick and tired of being sick and tired. We want and need some rest.

And this is the time of the year when we can finally get some rest. Let's put hot dogs on the grill, stretch out on the lawn chair, and shoot off some fire works.

We deserve a break today. We deserve some peace and quiet. We deserve some rest.

And, from our perspective, we need to take that rest when we can get it. In less than a month we'll be asking, "Where has the summer gone? Is school starting already? We need more rest."

Jesus tells us that if we are weary and are carrying heavy burdens we can come to him, and he will give us rest. That message sounds promising.

A YOKE AND A BURDEN

But, upon closer examination, it's not exactly the message we want to hear. Yes Jesus will give us rest but his rest comes through a "yoke" that is easy and a "burden" that is light.

In other words, today's lesson is a bit of riddle. How can a burden be light? How can a yoke be easy? The teaching of Jesus seems like a contradiction. No wonder his message was (as our lesson for today puts it) "hidden from the wise and intelligent." (11:25)

Jesus promises rest for our souls, but Jesus also promises a burden as well.

Those two things don't seem to go together.

A burden may be light, but it is still a burden, one more thing to be placed on our weary backs. Wouldn't a better promise be to take away all our burdens?

I have the same problem with the idea of a yoke. A yoke holds livestock in a harness so that they can plow a straight and narrow furrow through the mud.

I'm not sure what kind of yoke Jesus has in mind for us, but I'm not so enthusiastic about the prospect. A yoke is still a terrible restraint. And even a yoke that is easy doesn't sound so great to me.

The message of Jesus still seems to swim against the tide of popular opinion. It's not what we're looking for.

It never has been.

It's not the voice of sweet reason nor is it the promise of rest, at least the kind of rest we want.

THE YOKE OF LEARNING

Actually, when we look more closely we learn that the yoke of Jesus is the yoke of learning. In verse 29 Jesus says, "Take my yoke upon you, and learn from me."

One of the titles given Jesus was that of Rabbi or teacher. Jesus was an impressive teacher, but the yoke of his teaching was also very demanding.

Well, Jesus not only imparted new information with his teaching. But, Jesus also invited us to live in a new way.

We need to remember that Jesus said the way to salvation is not a wide superhighway. It is the narrow, rocky path. (Matthew 7:13-14) Jesus said that foxes have holes and birds have nests but the Son of Man has nowhere to lay his head. (Matthew 8:20)

His way is the narrow way, and all of us struggle to follow him along that steep and winding path.

In Matthew's gospel Jesus tells us to turn the other cheek, to forgive our enemies, and to suffer for righteousness sake. And Jesus not only tells us that, in Matthew's gospel, in just a few chapters Jesus is going to do that. He will move (as one commentator put it) "from the mount of teaching to the mount of Calvary."

THE BURDEN OF FOLLOWING JESUS

Most of you have heard this argument before. Someone will say, "I think Jesus was a wonderful and inspiring moral teacher, but I don't really believe he was

the Son of God.” Usually the person who says this has read little of Jesus’ moral teachings.

Let’s be honest. Jesus’ teaching is more burden than inspiration. It is tough.

And yet Jesus claims that this burden is light. Jesus claims that this yoke is easy. How can Jesus say that ... unless this teacher is also the Son of God?

And that is the key to following Jesus. In order to follow Jesus we must believe that Jesus is more than just a great moral teacher. We must believe that Jesus is who he said he was. We must believe that Jesus is the way, the truth and the life.

If we believe that God was in Christ, then following the way of Christ, no matter how difficult is the most important thing that we can do. And if we believe that God was in Christ, we know that God will give help us follow a path that we could not follow on our own.

C.S. Lewis wrote that Christianity is “in the long run a thing of unspeakable comfort.”

But, Christianity does not begin as a word of comfort. The gospel is, in the beginning, a word of “dismay.”

The truth of the gospel confronts our sinfulness and demands that we take up a new way of life. This will be a struggle and certainly won’t feel like a word of comfort.

Indeed, Lewis suggest that if we seek comfort first, last and always, we will never find what we seek.

To find true comfort we must first find truth, God’s truth as revealed in Jesus Christ.

He wrote,

“If you look for truth, you may find comfort in the end; if you look for comfort you will not get comfort or truth—only soft soap and wishful thinking to begin with and, in the end, despair.”

THE DANCE OF FAITH

Let's look at it another way. God in Christ has invited us to join the dance of faith. We are invited to "get in step" with God's way of doing things.

But, this dance does not come naturally to us. We have to learn how to forgive. We have to learn how to lift up the alien, the foreigner who lives among us. We have to learn how to love enemies and do good to those who persecute us.

These are new dance steps for us. But, we can learn to do God's dance because the Spirit of God in Christ is our instructor.

Some of you know what it's like to learn how to dance. You have to count each step. You have to make sure your feet are in the right place in the right time. It's all very awkward.

But, if you keep at it there will come a time when you won't have to think about what you're doing. You listen to the music and just let go. You don't have to worry about counting or the placement of your feet.

You don't have to think about dancing. You are dancing. It is a part of who you are and what you love to do.

I think that's the goal for those of us who would follow Christ. That's one of the reasons that we get together every week and go over what God in Christ has called us to do and be. It's dance rehearsal! We are learning to join the Lord of the Dance in that dance called salvation.

And if we practice enough, what once seemed like a burden or a yoke around our neck, becomes a source of joy and salvation. In this dance we find rest for our souls. His yoke of love keeps us moving in the right direction.

MADE FOR THIS BURDEN

A young man once said,

"When I got married, I thought that the biggest struggle would be fidelity, being faithful to just one person. I thought that it would be a heavy burden.

But, now a decade into marriage I have found that I was made for fidelity.

The thing I thought would be a burden has become a source of great blessing and security. I have found that fidelity makes you happy.”

I think it’s the same way when we decide to follow Jesus.

It seems like such a burden. His ways are so different from the ways of the world.

But, as we follow Jesus we learn that the burden is light and the yoke is easy. We were made for this life. Losing our life for the sake of the gospel is what really makes us happy.

I like the way Eugene Peterson amplifies our lesson for today in the Message. He translates in this way:

“Are you tired? Worn out? Burned out on religion?

Come to me. Get away with me and you’ll recover your life. I’ll show you how to take a real rest.

Walk with me and work with me—watch how I do it. Learn the unforced rhythms of grace. I won’t lay anything heavy or ill-fitting on you. Keep company with me and you’ll learn to live freely and lightly.” (28-30)

FREEDOM ISN’T FREE

A meaningful life is often filled with great challenges and difficulties. We especially remember that on this July 4th weekend.

The founders of our country risked everything in order to make our country a reality. And if we are to follow their lead we too must be willing to risk everything in order to be worthy citizens.

Peter Marshall, a Presbyterian minister who immigrated to this land from Scotland once said, “May we think of freedom not as the right to do what we please, but as the opportunity to do what is right.”

In other words, “Freedom isn’t free.” True freedom comes with responsibility. If we are not grateful for the privileges that are ours in this country we will not take the hard steps necessary to preserve that freedom.

I think the same can be said of the salvation that is ours in Christ Jesus. We are not freed to do as we please. Instead, our salvation in Christ Jesus opens up the opportunity and the spiritual power to do what is right.

Right action becomes a possibility because God was in Christ and Christ is in us.

The Christian faith is an unbearable burden if we think that it is something that we must accomplish on our own.

On my own I cannot love an enemy or do good to those who persecute me. On my own fear takes over and I reject the foreigner who lives among us. On my own I become very cynical about the prospects for peace and justice.

But, Jesus tells us we are not on our own. We are a part of something much bigger.

In verse 27 of our lesson for today Jesus said, "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."

In other words the power of creation and the Creator are on the side of Jesus and those who are chosen to follow him. This is meant to give disciples of Jesus confidence during the dark times.

The burden of discipleship will not drag us down. The yoke of discipleship is not too hard.

On the contrary, following Jesus gives us a sense of purpose, an abundant life that is filled with meaning.

DOUBT

Don't think that following Jesus will make life easier. Jesus never promised that, and if we preach that we set people up to experience disappointment.

The Christian philosopher, Kierkegaard warned of this.

He said that if we represent the Christian life as nothing but consolation and happiness, we have opened the door for doubt.

Invariably the time will come when we are not consoled and not happy, and at that moment we will reject the faith. We will not want to be part of what is so obviously an illusion.

But, if we truthfully present Christianity as taking up a cross and following Jesus, doubt is not given an opportunity to gain a foothold.

COMMUNION

When we take communion we remember some hard things about what it means to be a disciple of Jesus. We remember body broken and blood shed for us.

In the face of such a sacrifice we are truly humbled. In the light of such a sacrifice, we cannot turn the Christian faith into a feel good, positive thinking useful religion.

The sacrifice of the cross is a burden. The sacrifice of the cross is a yoke.

But, through the power of the Spirit we come to understand that this burden is light. This yoke is easy. We learn that spiritual rest does not come from taking it easy. Spiritual rest does not come from withdrawing from the world nor does it come from just becoming a part of the world.

Spiritual rest comes from following Jesus. When we give everything to him and follow him completely, the demands of the world no longer control us.

It appropriate that the words of Matthew 11:28 are often used as an invitation to communion.

“Come to me, all you that are weary and are carrying heavy burdens, and I will give you rest.

We come to the Lord’s Table not because we are worthy. We come to the Lord’s Table because we are sinners, broken by life and by our own bad behavior.

It is at the Lord’s Table that we learn once again that true faith is not a do it yourself project. It is a work of sheer grace. We remember that his body was broken for us. His blood was shed for us.

But, even body broken and blood shed could stop the love of God.

Instead, those wounds became the means of grace. That setback became the greatest triumph the world has ever known. In this sacrifice we see glory, salvation and life eternal.

And this gracious meal calls all of us, out of *thanksgiving*, to live in a different way.

Instead of being a slave to our desires and the demands of others, we lay down our burdens and take up the cross of Christ. We recognize that the love and grace of God calls us to a new way of life that is gracious.

This is the yoke of Christ.

It is life lived in harmony with the God who is revealed by the sacrificial love of Christ. It is the freedom to live by the grace we have known in Christ Jesus.

It is the freedom to put down our many burdens and serve others with great joy and hope in the power of the Spirit.

How can a burden be light?

A burden can be light when it is borne for us on the cross of Christ.

This morning in the Lord's Supper we once again remember and give thanks.

Amen.