

Rest for the Soul

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Matthew 11:25-30

The father of a son with severe cognitive and developmental impairment went to see his priest. "Father," he cried through his tears. "I don't know that I can bear this burden all my life!"

"My son," answered the priest. "Can you bear it today? It's as heavy today as it is going to get. Can you bear the burden . . . just for today?"

Most of us have struggled with a burden that feels overwhelming and unending and has the power to break us. Maybe the burden is the grip of a depression that occasionally relents but never really leaves. Maybe the burden is the pummeling power of a grief that keeps slamming us, like waves in the surf, again and again and again. Maybe the burden is the betrayal with which we broke another's heart, or they broke ours.

So when Jesus says, "Come unto me, all you who are weary and heavy laden, and I will give you rest," we're in. We want so badly for this promise to be true. We'd give anything if this were not just a quaint bit of Bible-speak but an actual experience of rest and relief and renewal. What would it be like to lay down our burden even if just for a spell that we might--in the words of the prophet--mount up with wings like eagles, run and not be weary, walk and not faint? (Isaiah 40:31).

And yet, Jesus doesn't offer the kind of rest we're yearning for or feel we're due. He doesn't offer magical solutions or even a short reprieve like an all-expense-paid vacation to an exclusive resort. Instead, he offers something unexpected, counter-intuitive, and even aggravating to those needing rest. He offers us a *yoke*. "Take *my yoke* upon you," says Jesus, "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."

Now a yoke as an instrument for equipping a mule or ox to pull a load was a familiar metaphor in rabbinic Judaism. It meant that an eager young student was taking a particular rabbi's teaching and training upon himself. So in this sense, Jesus' saying is quite conventional: Those who follow him must learn his word and way.

And yet Jesus proclaims that his yoke is easy and his burden is light and that in bearing his yoke, we find rest for our souls. How can this be?

Well, Jesus' yoke is easy and his burden is light, first of all, because he helps us bear the *right* burden. It is not the burden of someone else's expectations or a punishing regimen of our own making. No, the right burden is a realistic understanding of the work that is uniquely ours to do.

Jesus warned against those who "tie up heavy burdens, hard to bear, and lay them on other's shoulders" (Matthew 23:4). He was talking about those who turned God's law from a liberating call to life into a fuzzy set of rules and regulations.

But the same principle applies when we add to our actual burdens by filling a gunny sack full of fret and worry and melodrama. Or when we try to do more than is humanly possible or pretend that everything is ok when it isn't; that takes so much energy! Or when we imagine that our burdens are infinitely greater than those borne by lesser mortals. This is a syndrome I know well because sometimes, when my ministry gets hectic and demanding, I experience an adrenaline rush that says, "Wow, how indispensable and special you are!"

But then I enter our church's memorial garden to say goodbye to one of my friends, as I did this week, and there stands the statue of Christ the Good Shepherd, waiting to meet me. And that's when I'm reminded that he's the one doing the heavy lifting, not me. For the lamb the Good Shepherd carries in the crook of his arm . . . is me.

The gospel of Luke tells the amusing story of Jesus and the boys landing at Mary and Martha's place (Luke 10:38-42). Martha goes into a tizzy, working fast and furious to whip up a meal worthy of so distinguished a guest. Meanwhile, her baby sister, Mary, is sitting with the menfolk in the living room, reveling in Jesus' company and soaking up his truth.

Finally, Mary storms in and explodes, "Lord, do you not care that my sister has left me to do all the work? Send her back to the kitchen where she belongs!"

Jesus looks at her lovingly, longingly, and says, "Martha. *Martha!* You are coming apart at the seams. Take a load off and sit a spell. Take my yoke upon you and learn from me. Then in a little while, you and I will go into the kitchen and we'll whip up something wonderful together."

Jesus' yoke is easy and his burden light, first of all, because he helps us know what to hold on to and what to let go.

And Jesus' yoke is easy and his burden light because it fits so perfectly. In fact, an old legend says that during his years as a carpenter, Jesus made the best yokes in Palestine. People came from near and far to buy his custom-fitted yokes that never chaffed their oxen. Perhaps above Jesus' carpenter's shop hung a sign that said, "My yokes are easy." Because one meaning of the Greek word often translated "easy" is "well-fitting."

In his marvelous book on vocation, *Let Your Life Speak*, Parker Palmer explores the nature of burnout. Palmer suggests burnout results not from giving too much--as is popularly believed--but from giving what is contrary to your nature. In other words, if you are a "people

person"--trying to make it in a profession requiring a lot of solitude--you are a candidate for burnout.

But if you are working in harmony with your essential nature, giving freely of yourself will no more diminish you than plucking apples diminishes an apple tree. In fact, plucking apples, which it is the tree's nature to give, helps keep the tree vital, productive, and strong.

So too in the life of discipleship. There is no one-size-fits-all approach to serving God and neighbor. Rather, your unique niche and calling is custom-fitted to the contours of your gifts and needs.

Maybe your special touch is a quiet ministry of encouragement, helping others claim and celebrate their accomplishments, while teaching Sunday School to a bunch of third-graders would scare you to death.

Or maybe you're great at teaching refugee moms to knit, but chairing a committee is just not in your tool kit.

That's OK. God never asked or expected you to be anybody but you. As Paul writes in 1 Corinthians, "There are varieties of gifts, but the same Spirit . . . and to each is given (some) manifestation of the Spirit for the common good" (1 Cor. 12:4, 7). Granted, it usually takes some time and struggle to find just the right place of service, whether as a volunteer or as a professional. But it's worth the effort. Because once you settle into that yoke of meaningful work Jesus shaped just for you, you'll experience the kind of real renewal that comes only after you have given your best to some cause that matters to God and matters to you.

And finally, Jesus' yoke is easy and his burden is light, because he doesn't ask you to bear it alone. He always settles into the yoke right beside you, straining and pulling in tandem as the two of you share the load.

Indeed, Jesus' first and most momentous invitation, before any mention of yokes or rest, is "Come unto me." It is an intimate, personal invitation. Not "come to my teaching, not ponder

my truth or follow my principles, but come unto *me*.” Because Jesus is not just another sage with some helpful tips on leading a healthy, productive life. Jesus is the holy son of God, getting up close and personal in our own flesh and blood, to bring the living God near. As he proclaims in a scandalous pronouncement, “All things have been handed over to me by my Father . . . and no one knows the Father except the Son and anyone to whom the Son chooses to reveal him” (v. 27).

If that be true, then the only way to find rest for your soul is to risk acting as if Jesus really is there, sight unseen, just dying to link hands and hearts . . . with you.

In his book, *Believe and Belong*, Bruce Larson writes of those who show up at his office with the weight of the world on their shoulders. Sometimes, when the words run out, he invites such a wounded, worried soul to walk with him to 30 Rockefeller Plaza on 5th Avenue. The entrance to that looming skyscraper is dominated by a statue of Atlas.

Atlas is a beautifully proportioned figure with all his muscles straining because he is bearing the weight of the world upon his back. There he stands, the most powerful man in the world, barely able to support his burden. "Now that's one way to live," Larson observes, "trying to bear the burden all by yourself. But let me show you another way.”

Then he leads the troubled soul across 5th Avenue to St. Patrick's Cathedral. Behind the altar is a figure of Jesus, effortlessly holding the world in his hand. The graphic contrast between the statue of Atlas and the figure of Christ impresses a critical choice: Continuing to bear the burden that threatens to break you, all by yourself; or asking Jesus to help you do what you need to do and want to do, but could never do alone. “Come unto me, all you who are weary and heavy laden and I will give you rest.”

This morning, when you come to receive communion and kneel at the altar, maybe you could ask Jesus to take from your shoulder the burden you're bearing that doesn't belong there. Then take his bread and cup, his love and life into yourself so that when you rise, you rise with

the strength to bear whatever burden it *is* your calling to bear. Because now, you don't bear it alone. Indeed, in time you may discover that what you took to be a yoke was but Jesus' arm slung over your shoulder, holding you close and holding you precious.

Meet us, O holy Christ, at the point of our deepest need. Give us the wisdom to let go of the burdens we don't need to carry and the strength to bear the ones we do. In your name we ask this of our loving heavenly Abba. Amen.

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