

“LIGHT BURDENS, EASY YOKES”

Matthew 11:16-19, 25-30

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You've been to wedding receptions, and so have I, where the decorations were beautiful, the food was great, and the fellowship enjoyable. But when the food had all been served and the band started to play, no one, or practically no one got up to dance! The more outgoing among the wedding guests try to get their reluctant partners on the dance floor, but alas, the music is too loud, the beat too fast, the tunes unfamiliar — you name it, there's an excuse to cover it! People continue to sit at their tables and visit with one another, and the dance floor remains empty!

In this morning's Gospel lesson, the dance floor is empty, and people are complaining. Jesus says, "*We played the flute for you and you did not dance, we wailed and you did not mourn.*" (Matt.11:17) You're always complaining about something! John the Baptist came with a message of gloom and doom and a lifestyle of austerity, and the people said, "He's too far out. We can't relate to that!" Jesus came to town eating and drinking with sinners, attending wedding receptions, rubbing shoulders with people from all walks of life, and the word went out that he was a glutton and a drunkard. Both men were representatives of God, trying to communicate what God is like, trying to demonstrate the concern that God has for every human being that God has made. But the people weren't happy with either one! Jesus makes the rather unflattering comparison of his generation to the actions of children. They ask for something, but when they get what they ask for, they are not satisfied, so they ask for something else. When they get that, they are still not satisfied. Are we like children who don't know what we want? What does it take to satisfy us? What does it take to get us on the dance floor of life?

Then Jesus says, "*Come to me, all you that are weary and are carrying heavy burdens, and I will give you rest.*" Some of Jesus' sayings recorded in the New Testament are addressed to his disciples, those who have made a commitment to follow Jesus. But this passage is addressed to the crowd. One of the commentators says "there are 50 references to crowds in Matthew, and 49 times they represent a mass of people who are astounded by Jesus, inspired by Jesus, healed by Jesus, fed by Jesus, commanded by Jesus, but not fully committed to Jesus." (1) That description characterizes many of us today, doesn't it? (That's my commentary, not something I read in a book.) Many of us are astounded by Jesus, intrigued by Jesus, healed by Jesus, fed by Jesus, commanded by Jesus, but not fully committed to him.

Well, when Jesus says, "*Come to me all you that are weary and are carrying heavy burdens, and I will give you rest,*" he gets my attention. The burdens that I am carrying are almost overwhelming at times. In a church this size, the pastoral concerns never stop. There's a new diagnosis of cancer every time I turn around. Almost every week someone loses a parent, a

child, a sibling, a close friend. People have job problems, marital problems, problems with their children, problems with their neighbors. I am thankful to be living in an area with great medical facilities, but health concerns plague us all, especially those of us over fifty! It was a wise person who said youth is wasted on the young! Beyond the pastoral concerns are the issues that come with leading an institution of this size: budgetary concerns, personnel concerns, building concerns. The old building continues to need attention; the new building needs to be paid for. By the time the lawn is looking nice it will be time to negotiate a new snow plowing contract for next winter, and so on it goes. Yes, *“Come to me all you who are weary and carrying heavy burdens and I will give you rest,”* certainly sounds appealing to me! *“My yoke is easy,”* Jesus continues, *“My burden is light.”* Almost sounds like an advertisement! Every time I hear these words I am reminded of their musical setting in Handel’s *Messiah*. At holiday time, when I am particularly stressed, these words are like a soothing massage or a warm bath: *“His yoke is easy, and his burden is light.”*

But wait a minute. Those of you who were here two weeks ago heard me say that following Jesus is difficult, not easy. You heard me tell a story about two young women who were martyred for their faith. You heard me say that following Jesus involves difficult decisions, that in Jesus’ day being part of God’s new family sometimes caused conflict in one’s family of origin, and that the same is often true today.

Two weeks ago Jesus said, *“I have come to set son against father, daughter against mother, bride against mother-in-law, and the members of your own family may become your worst enemies.”* He went on to say that if you love your son or daughter, your mother or father, your brother or sister more than you love him, then you are not worthy to be his disciple. Jesus reminded us that if we’re going to follow him, there is a cost. To follow him, you’ve got to pick up a cross and carry it. Because I have come, Jesus tell us, your lives will be harder. If you are going to follow me, you might have to turn your back on your family. It might get rough. Jesus wants his followers to know, up front, that his way is a narrow way. He focuses on the costs. He tries to prepare the would-be disciples for how difficult it might become. He gives us fair warning that following him will be demanding.

Then we hear the lesson from Matthew for today and it’s as if Jesus has been to a sales seminar and has learned some new techniques! People don’t flock to difficult, demanding tasks, he has realized. People have enough burdens already. They might be willing to wear a cross around their necks, but they don’t need another cross to carry. They’ve already got their hands full. So Jesus says, *“Come to me, all you that are weary and are carrying heavy burdens and I will give you rest. 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. For my yoke is easy, and my burden is light.”*

This doesn’t seem right. Is Jesus suffering from multiple personality disorder? One minute he’s telling us that if we are going to follow him we’re going to have to pick up a cross and carry it. This cross is heavy. Jesus’ way is demanding. The next minute Jesus is telling us to come to him if we are tired, and he will give us rest. He says his yoke is easy and his burden is light. Well, which is it? A heavy cross or an easy yoke?

Various members of our congregation have made several trips to New Orleans to help the people there who are trying to recover from Hurricanes Rita and Katrina. I was part of the group that went in January of 2007, and I was not prepared for the devastation and destruction that I saw. The flood waters had transformed neighborhoods into ghost towns. Sturdy brick houses

constructed to provide safe sanctuary from the elements were reduced to rubble. A once beautiful, green landscape of marshes and bayous was littered with mountains of debris and spotted with FEMA trailers. One of the jobs those early on the scene performed was to help “gut” houses — clean out the debris that used to be furniture, appliances, cabinets, etc., and shovel and wheelbarrow out the six inches of mud inside each house, and deconstruct each house down to the studs, so that they could be decontaminated and rebuilt. I remember as if it was yesterday the pictures that our crews brought back showing this challenging and backbreaking work.

When the crew I was with went to New Orleans, we were invited to the home of a woman where our first team had worked. It was now rebuilt, brightly painted and completely restored. Grateful for what Church of the Saviour and others had done, the woman held an open house, complete with food and beverages and cake.

That Sunday morning we gathered in the sanctuary of the church where we were staying. The pastor asked me to bring the message. I was told that the congregation has dwindled. Many folks have left the area, and are not expected to return. During the few days we were in New Orleans we had heard story after story about the devastation, the loss, the pain. As I looked out over the congregation, I can tell you that everybody there was visibly weary, all carrying — or maybe the best they were doing was dragging — heavy loads, heavy burdens.

Yet, I wonder, is it any different there than it is here on Sunday when we gather to worship? I pray that we will never have the burdens that they are carrying in New Orleans or in Iowa — homes destroyed, lives completely disrupted. But like that congregation in New Orleans, all of us limp in here every Sunday. We stagger in here, flooded by emotional hurts and spiritual pain. We hobble in here displaced, sin-sick, tired and worn, carrying tremendous burdens — some that nobody else on earth knows about, burdens we are carrying all by ourselves.

We get in here and Jesus says, “Come to me, my child, come to me. I know that you’ve been carrying a heavy load, the weight of your pain, the burden of your sins, the load of all your worries. Here. Come here. I will give you a rest.” My friends, if I have ever heard good news, that’s it! *“Come to me all you who are weary and carrying heavy burdens and I will give you rest.”*

But how can it be? How can Jesus go from talking about how difficult it is to follow him, of heavy crosses one minute to light loads and easy yokes the next? Which one is it? A heavy cross or an easy yoke?

Think about a yoke. Have you ever seen one? Yokes are big, bulky things that are used to bind two oxen together to pull a plow. You put the two animals’ heads in it and they are yoked together. Where one goes, the other goes. They pull together.

As helpful as yokes are, they aren’t mechanisms of rest and relaxation. They make hard work more comfortable, but that is only the case when two oxen are yoked together. The burden only becomes light when the yoke connects one ox to another. Jesus says that he is going to give us a yoke, but it is because of our yoke mate that the burden will become light. Because Jesus carries the burden with us the yoke becomes easy, the load less difficult to bear.

A fellow pastor tells the story of his youth group’s work at the home of an elderly woman, where they arrived to make some badly needed repairs. The first task was to carry some heavy furniture out of a room so that the teenagers would have room to work. The elderly

woman's grandson was there, eager to help. When one of the teenagers grabbed one end of a heavy dresser, this little guy, maybe six years old, grabbed the other end. He was grunting, straining, struggling but his end of the dresser didn't budge. The pastor said, "Why don't I help you with that? Let's lift it together." As the pastor reached down and picked up the end of the dresser, the little boy was right there beside him; his hands also underneath the dresser. Even with as much grunting and struggling and straining as the little boy was doing, if the little boy had let go, the pastor would not have felt the difference. However, if the pastor had let go, the little boy would have been crushed. (2)

Jesus says, "*Come to me all who are weary and carrying heavy burdens and I will give you rest.*" Then he bends down and takes the brunt of the load. We would be crushed if we had to carry that burden all by ourselves. But Jesus lifts our burdens and helps us carry the load. As a master carpenter, his yoke is carefully shaped so that it is kind to our shoulders and helps us carry the load more easily.

Jesus not only helps us with our burdens, he also asks us to follow his example, by reaching out and assisting others with their burdens. Someone once said, "Be kind, for everyone you meet is carrying a heavy burden." Amazingly, when we help others, our own burdens become easier to bear. When we share the burdens of others and take their load upon us, we find that this lifestyle of Jesus really does make sense after all.

The next time you go to a wedding reception, I hope you will get out on the dance floor. I hope you will not hold back or complain about the music. More than that, I hope you will not sit on the sidelines of life, but invest yourself totally in the lifestyle of Jesus. Yes, we are all carrying heavy burdens. But we have a partner who is carrying the brunt of the load. It is Jesus who is willing to lift our burdens so that we can dance and celebrate. With Jesus by our side, our yoke is easy, and our burden is light.

Prayer: Dear God, sometimes the burdens seem overwhelming, the load almost unbearable. Help us to hear your voice calling to us. Thank you for helping us carry the load. May we reach out to others that their burdens may be lightened as well. This is our prayer, through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.

Notes:

1. *The Clergy Journal.*, Vol. 83., No. 7., p. 126.
2. *Pulpit Resource.*, Vol. 36., No. 3., p. 8.