

When You're Weary and Heavy Laden
Matthew 11:25-30
July 5, 2020

“Come to me, all you that are weary and are carrying heavy burdens, and I will give you rest.” How many times have I seen this scripture passage plunked down on a plaque, or bolted to the foot of a statue?

These words of Jesus that I read, along with the Beatitudes, are among the most beloved of all of Jesus' sayings. It is one of the famous verses children memorize in Sunday schools. Maybe you learned it yourself. It is right up there with John 3:16.

The other part to the verses, of course, is the invitation by Jesus – “Take my yoke upon you for I am gentle and humble. My yoke is easy, my burden light.” Perhaps though this verse has been lifted out of its context. It doesn't quite flow with what comes before it.

It comes at the end of words of judgment after the arrest of John. People criticized John for his asceticism. He was all gloom and doom and no fun. He wore those weird clothes and preached messages that some did not want to hear.

It appears that they are now criticizing Jesus for just the opposite: he eats and drinks with sinners. He appears to be having entirely too much fun. (Diane Roth, The Christian Century, June 29, 2020). And yet in just a short time, Jesus would know the burden and heaviness of carrying the cross. But for now, Jesus was saying that his yoke was easy and his burden was light, and he invites others to join him.

I suspect most of us don't know much about yokes today unless you grew up on a farm. A yoke was an important piece of equipment for the farmer. A yoke was a piece of wood that the farmer placed across the necks of oxen to enable them to pull a plow or a wagon. It fit over the necks of two oxen so they could combine their pulling power. A load that would be too much for one ox might be manageable for two.

A lot depended on the farmer. How did he treat the oxen? Did he ram the plow too deeply in the ground? Did he load the cart too heavily? Did he use a whip? And a lot depended on the person who made the yoke. A heavy yoke would add to the burden. A badly fitted yoke would rub the oxen's neck raw.

Some carpenters had a special talent for making yokes. If an ox could pray, it would pray for a talented yoke-maker — someone with an eye for the contours of an ox's shoulder — someone who could judge how much space to leave between

the neckpieces. The ox would benefit from a yoke-maker who would take the time to fit the yoke well — who would polish the wood and sand down the splinters.

A good yoke maker would be somewhat similar to a good tailor today – someone who had an eye for a good, custom fit, and a comfortable style. Or you might liken a yoke maker to someone today who makes a custom, handmade saddle.

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As you know, Joseph was a carpenter. He would have begun teaching Jesus the art of carpentry as soon as Jesus was old enough to hold a tool. As Jesus grew up, he would learn a little more each day. At some point Jesus likely became a master carpenter.

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There is a wonderful legend concerning the early years of Jesus prior to his public ministry. It claims Jesus the carpenter was one of the master yoke-makers in the Nazareth area. It is not too farfetched to imagine. People might have come from miles around for a yoke, hand carved and crafted by Jesus son of Joseph.

Jesus was familiar with yokes. When customers arrived with their team of oxen, Jesus would spend considerable time measuring the team, or so the story goes -- their height, the width, the space between them, and the size of their shoulders.

Within a week, the team would be brought back and he would carefully place the newly made yoke over the shoulders, watching for rough places, smoothing out the edges and fitting them perfectly to this particular team of oxen. One size of yoke does not fit all. There was no such thing as a generic yoke. It is only a lovely legend, but it serves a point.

It is a spiritual analogy Jesus offers to us today – “Come to me, you who are weary and heavy laden . . . take my yoke upon you – one I have designed with you in mind. I will be next to you. We will do this together. Remember: a yoke was meant for two.” That’s the yoke Jesus invites us to put on today – one where he is next to us in spirit, pulling the weight.

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It is interesting to me that this passage from Matthew often shows up in the lectionary cycle that many preachers follow at about the time we are getting ready for our July 4 celebrations of freedom. I cannot help but hear Jesus’ words alongside the words of Emma Lazarus, at the base of the Statue of Liberty: “Give me your poor, your tired, your huddled masses yearning to breathe free.”

If only that were true today. If only that were true. George Floyd struggled to breathe freely, but he could not. Too many immigrants who are fleeing danger and trying to come to this country for safety have been denied rest for their tired and

wearied souls. Too many African Americans who are dying needlessly did not find rest for their tired and wearied souls. Too many Native Americans who have been forgotten and neglected for so many years in this country have not found rest for their tired and wearied souls.

It is a constant struggle to survive. Native Americans suffer disproportionately from the corona virus. You don't even hear people talk about the Native Americans these days. They have fallen off the map.

I have always had a special place in my heart for the Native Americans. I admire their deep spirituality and sense of pride. Talk about feeling wearied and carrying heavy burdens. "Give me your poor, your tired, your huddled masses yearning to breathe free."

I don't know what Emma Lazarus had in mind when she wrote these words in her poem "The New Colossus," but today there are still too many who have not found rest. There are too many struggling to breathe under the weight of oppression.

It is not enough to talk about it. We have to do something about it. The hundreds of thousands of people who march in the streets across the country are making a difference. Some mayors and city councils are working to make a difference in the ways they care for and protect people under their jurisdiction. The governor of Mississippi this past week signed a law that will remove the confederate symbol from the state flag. When you notice something that is hurtful and offensive to people you listen and try to change it. That's the right thing to do.

We need to vote for congressional representatives who pledge to make a difference when it comes to equality and justice and bring to fruition the words Jesus was compelled to speak centuries ago.

He too was speaking out against an authoritarian and legalistic system controlled by the scribes and Pharisees who judged people and enacted laws that were oppressive and unfair.

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Speaking of heavy burdens and yokes, African Americans were forced to bear the burden and yoke of slavery throughout the 17th and 18th centuries in the American colonies. Even though the bloody Civil War brought an end to slavery for four million people, the legacy of slavery continued to influence American history, from the Reconstruction era to the civil rights movement that emerged a century after emancipation. They bore the burden and yoke of slavery.

That burden is still felt when the doors to jobs are closed to people of color. The burden is still felt through the practice of redlining that effectively insures

segregation continues in certain housing markets and neighborhoods. The burden is still felt and is heavy laden because black people are likely to die in greater numbers of the corona virus than white people.

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Today Jesus would say, “Come and be yoked with me, for my yoke is easy and my burden is light. Come and find rest for your weary souls.” Or, if you are of another persuasion, here the Divine One say to you, “Come and join with me. Find rest, and we will make this journey together.”

Jesus says, Come unto me - all you who are tired - all you who are feeling drained – all you who are feeling empty -- all you who are burdened and exhausted by the struggles of life, and I will give you rest. I will fill you with new joy and establish you in a relationship with God that will give you a new life -- here and in the world to come.

You can start to have that life by taking time to pray. You can discover what he promises through contemplation and meditation. You can ease your burden by reading an inspiring book that connects you in spirit with the Divine One. I lighten my burdens and feel a sense of joy by walking with my dog in the woods every day. It’s there I meet God more than anywhere else.

You can lay your burdens down today. And when you see someone who does not enjoy the benefits and lifestyle you have, do what you can to share their yoke and lighten their load.

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On this 4th of July weekend, let us give thanks for the freedoms and liberties we enjoy, and remember our ancestors who were themselves burdened and oppressed by the British government. We of all people should remember those bitter lessons of oppression, and extend the same right of freedom and equality and the pursuit of happiness to others so that we might be equally yoked with our brothers and sisters, and have some role in lessening the burden for others.

May you be able to lay your burdens down today, and be lifted up by the One whose yoke is easy and whose burdens are light. Amen.

Matthew 11:25-30

²⁵ At that time Jesus said, “I thank you God, 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, for such was your gracious will. ²⁷ All things have been handed over to me by God; and no one knows the Son except God, and no one knows God except the Son and anyone to whom the Son chooses to reveal God. 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.”