

## Having a Lightness of Being

**Isaiah 30:15-18**

**Matthew 11:28-30**

This morning's message is a follow-up of sorts to last Sunday's conversation about sabbath and taking rest. We're reflecting this morning on having a lightness of being. We have terrific readings for a communion Sunday—from Isaiah, and now from Matthew.

### **Matthew 11:28-30**

"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."

### **The Message**

"Are you tired? Worn out? Burned out? 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."

This is the word of the Lord. Thanks be to God!

In 1930, British economist John Maynard Keynes wrote an essay called "Economic Possibilities for Our Grandchildren." In the essay, he made the assertion that because of progress, his grandchildren's generation (meaning people in the workforce today) would only work 15 hours a week.

Similarly, in the early 1960's, testimony was given to a Senate sub-committee on the advancement of technology (this was the beginning of the space age, and the advent of computer technology). Technology experts predicted that advances in science and technology would be so great, that they forecasted within 20 years the average American would be working just 20 hours a week. "The challenge for the average American," they said in their testimony, "would be figuring out what to do with all the excess time." 60 years or so later, after *significant* advances in technology, to say the least, and the progress that John Maynard Keynes talked about –I wonder how many people are trying to figure out what to do with all the excess time they have on our hands?

And by the way, that can include retired folks. I have heard it said many times, "I've never been so busy since I retired." That isn't everyone's story, but in a culture that values busyness and activity and productivity, that probably rings true for many retired people.

We are people who need to learn how to experience rest. Deep rest. Not just physical rest. If all we needed was some physical rest, we could take a mental health day and sleep in, or take a nap, or take a vacation. But where can we find deep spiritual and psychological and emotional rest—soul rest—which is really at the heart of so much of our weariness and fatigue? Especially after a year and a

half of covid, and political turmoil! We're actually still in the midst of it. We're emerging from covid, but we're probably another year or two away from anything that looks like a new normal.

Our world has become the world of the Red Queen of Alice in Wonderland, who said: *"Now here, you see, it takes all the running you can do to keep in the same place. If you want to get somewhere else, you must run at least twice as fast as that."* I wonder how many people feel that way. And we don't have to be busy and running all we can to become weary and tired. There is enough going on in the world to try to absorb that is wearisome to heart, mind and soul.

And to the weary of soul, Jesus offers rest.

And he offers it by offering a yoke—which at first doesn't sound very appealing to me. After all, a yoke is a work instrument, used by beasts of burden. So it seems to me that the last thing weary people need is a yoke. But as we reflect a little deeper on Jesus' words, he seems to imply that we're already carrying a yoke anyway.

Subtly, what I think Jesus is saying is two things:

1. To be human is to carry a yoke of some kind. We are yoke bearers.

That yoke could be our work—paid work or volunteer service. Our advocacy efforts—our time and energy spent on the things we care

deeply about. Our responsibility to our children is a yoke that we bear, gladly—whether our children are young or grown (we still worry about them!). Our responsibility to our parents is also a yoke that we bear, with gratitude—what does it mean to honor our father and mother, especially in the later season of their lives? Our yoke could be our worries (the things that keep us up at night); and bad religion can be a yoke and a burden. By bad religion I mean: do more, try harder, you gotta earn it, so God will approve of you. Or at least so God won't smite you. That kind of bad religion.

God doesn't approve of us when or because we've earned it. God loves us and approves of us, period. Our part is to receive, and respond gratefully and wholeheartedly to God's grace. Bad religion is a burden.

To be human is to carry a yoke of some kind; to have burdens. Good and necessary burdens, bad and unnecessary ones. We are yoke-bearers.

2. The second thing Jesus is saying, subtly, is that we don't know how to carry our burdens very well; we don't bear our yoke rightly. We're not very good at it. We carry them wrongly. Or we overdo it. We take on too much. We hold onto things that we don't need to hold onto, and in doing so add weight to an already heavy burden, or yoke.

That is what Jesus implies in the way he says, “All you who are weary and carrying heavy burdens.” It’s subtle.

Jesus uses the middle voice, grammatically, signifying that I choose to take and carry a burden. Active voice: I burden someone. Passive: someone burdens me. Middle voice: I accept it. Jesus uses the middle voice, which means we could translate Jesus’ words this way: “Come to me all you who are weary and *have overburdened themselves;*” or “*who have taken on too much;*” or, to use a common phrase, “*who are carrying the weight of the world on their shoulders.*”

Anyone feel that from time to time?

So, Jesus is saying, we don’t know how to carry our burdens very well. We overdo it; we take on too much; we try too hard; we *stress out* about our burdens, even our necessary ones, which then increases the weight of them. And when that happens, our joy and lightness of being are depleted, and life and faith feels more like duty than a blessing. We are meant to “live freely and lightly” in Jesus’ words. These words from Jesus, and especially how E.P. translates them, have a spaciousness to them. They feel like fresh air, and a removal of the weight from our shoulders.

Perhaps the real issue isn't so much that we don't know how to carry our burdens very well, but that we simply try to *carry them all by ourselves*, on our own strength. Because somehow we think we are supposed to carry them by ourselves. Ours, and sometimes other peoples' burdens too! On our own we try to carry them all. And Jesus is saying we're not to own them or carry them alone.

This is what God was saying to the people of Israel through the prophet Isaiah (30:15-f): "In *returning and rest* you shall be saved, in *quietness and trust* is your strength" (i.o.w., not your own strength). In that Isaiah passage we heard God say, "Ok, so it looks like you tried to do this all on your own strength and effort. How did that work for you?"

In response to our overburdening ourselves, or carrying the wrong yoke, Jesus offers us a new yoke. "Take *my* yoke upon you..." (instead of your self-imposed yoke) "and learn from *me*."

When Jesus says "come to me all who are weary" he isn't offering a spa vacation where we do nothing, go get some rest, then return to our crazy life to start the whole cycle all over again—where we get weary and burdened again, then find ourselves in need of another vacation, etc. That's the hamster wheel Jesus is trying to get us off of.

He's not offering escape, but new equipment for handling life, day by day—a simpler and lighter way of being. What Jesus is saying is that the most restful gift he can give is a new way to carry life, a new way of bearing our responsibilities. And that's *with him* and not on our own.

Because this isn't an individual yoke he's offering. That's the kind we carry on our own. Jesus' yoke is a dual yoke. It took me years before I discovered this. A "yoke of oxen" is actually two and not one. Jesus doesn't say, off with your old yoke, here's your new one, and off you go now—good luck! It's a dual yoke. And I learned that often a younger or less experienced animal would be yoked with a more mature & experienced one, so the less experienced one will learn.

So, what Jesus is saying is that he is sharing the load with us, or perhaps even sharing the *bulk* of the load; *Jesus* is doing the heavy lifting; and while we walk alongside him he is teaching, and we are learning.

So, what's required of us if we want the rest he offers: consent; surrender. A letting go of control. One of my favorite writers, Anne Lamott, in her book titled, *Help, Thanks, Wow* (about prayer; there are only three real prayers...) talks about a "deep exhale of consent," and "going limp"—but not completely limp; we have to work with Jesus to learn a new way of being that doesn't involve me bursting blood vessels in my head and arms when I try to exert control. She says,

“If I were going to begin practicing the presence of God for the first time today, it would help to begin by admitting the three most terrible truths of our existence: that we are so ruined, and so loved, and in charge of so little.”

We have to be willing to let go of our burdens completely. To try to let go of trying to manage or figure everything out, let go of trying to force things, and consent to God’s good intent for us. We take our burdens to Jesus, but then leave them there (picture on the bulletin cover). Hannah Whitall Smith, p.17-18

And this isn’t easy. Surrender and giving over our burdens to Jesus is a challenge, because most of us (I am going to assume) were raised to be self-sufficient people, who were taught that it’s best not to ask for help. Be strong; learn how to handle it. Don’t be a burden to anyone; even if it’s God we’re burdening! This is true for me. I was raised by parents who were both survivors of childhood tragedies and trauma, and therefore became extraordinarily self-sufficient, so I come by it honestly.

So this idea of consent and relinquishment of control is difficult for many people, as it has been for me. When I became a Christian, I thought the reason Jesus had come was to make me *even better at being self-sufficient!* He offers strength to the weary, right? But I didn’t realize that to be truly strong in the Lord meant letting go of *my way of trying to manage life*, and letting Jesus lead.

So, Jesus says, come. Take my yoke, leave yours behind. Be yoked with me. Learn from me. Come with me on a journey of discovery, and receive a lightness of being.

And as we walk with Jesus, we learn to know what to care about and what not to care about. What to retain, and what to let go of. What is ours to take on (bearing one another's burdens appropriately) and what is *not* ours to take on, or is none of our business to begin with. I've mentioned before that at the Greider house, our way of saying this, if we feel tempted to take on someone else's baggage is: not my circus, not my monkeys. I have enough of my own monkeys chattering away!

In learning these things, we learn to be free people who learn to travel light. We learn the "unforced rhythms of grace" as Eugene Peterson so beautifully puts it. The *unforced* rhythms of grace. Which suggests that, when we take matters into our own hands, we tend to try to force things, try to make life work on my terms, my way. That's what wears us out, when we try to force life. Learning "the unforced rhythms of grace" brings rest and peace, and a lightness of being.

12<sup>th</sup> century mystic Hildegard of Bingen one described herself as "a feather on the breath of God." Talk about a lightness of being! That sounds delightful.

Maybe that was easier to accomplish in the 12<sup>th</sup> century (probably not), but it sounds like something worthy of working toward, as we unburden ourselves and become yoked with Jesus.

Communion: what burdens do you need to release this morning? What do you need to bring to, and give, to Jesus (bulletin cover: what's in your bag?). I'd invite you to collect those, put them in your bag, and bring them to Jesus as we listen to and watch a song...

Video: come to me, o weary traveler. The words are in the bulletin, but they'll also be on the screen. Sing along if you like, or simply listen to this invitation from Jesus as we prepare our hearts for communion this morning. This will be our invitation to the table.