

A Gift We Often Reject 2020
Matthew 11:28-30

Matthew 11:28-30 (New Revised Standard Version)

“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.”

A few years ago, some of our guys who grew up here in Las Cruces,
told me about needing to make a stop along the way near Organ,
to wait for their car’s radiator to cool off
before they could drive over St. Augustin pass.
because their cars couldn’t just keep going.

That reminded me of when I left the corporate world of business
to begin a new life as a seminary student preparing for ministry...
...and had no idea of all the changes and challenges I was in for.

It had been well over a decade since I’d finished college,
and my degree was in science, I was a biology major.
So I had almost no background in the seminary course work
and the material I was trying to learn was all new to me.
I felt a bit lost, stressed and overwhelmed by academic demands
and trying to fit in and adjust to a very unfamiliar environment.

As it happened,
an elective course I took after my first semester,
was about spiritual practices of the early Christian church,
such as ancient ways they prayed & meditated on Scripture...

... which turned out to be a gift and exactly what I most needed,
an opportunity to stop, wait and allow my radiator to cool off...
as in Psa 46:10, Be still, and know that I am God!

What I learned in that class completely changed my perspective,
which released me to grow in Christ and truly enjoy seminary
as some of the best and most meaningful years of my life.

One experience that made that course especially significant,
was spending several days at a Catholic Retreat Center,
with a wonderful Jesuit priest as our spiritual director.

He guided us through the spiritual exercises of Ignatius of Loyola
and focused on the promises of 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 specific context when Jesus spoke those words was just before the religious authorities objected when he healed on the Sabbath.

The Pharisees followed what they called, **the yoke of the Law**, while in contrast, Jesus offered, **the yoke of God’s grace**, “come to me”, and receive the healing and hope of God’s love.

That gracious invitation and promises are intended to encourage everyone who is weary from any of life’s struggles and burdens, offering rest for when it’s all too much or we’ve lost our way.

A yoke is very practical tool crafted for carrying heavy burdens, by making heavy loads seem lighter and easier to move, by redirecting energy and strength for maximum output.

The Greek word for easy also translates well-suited or a good fit, meaning that **our yoke in Christ** is custom made to fit each of us.

Our yoke fully equips us to handle life’s heaviest burdens, and fitted to match the best of our gifts, strengths & abilities.

Sometimes, a weak/inexperienced ox was matched with a stronger ox and yokes were engineered to match these uneven pairs of animals, **The yoke was made to accommodate, drawing the best from each.**

The point is, Christ is in **the yoke of God’s grace** with us, and present with us amid our life’s difficulties and burdens. And he has the heavy end, carrying the burden for us and with us... **... so it’s never our strength alone, but always Jesus is with us.**

Sometimes amid our troubles, distress, suffering and uncertainty, we can feel alone, lost, confused, frightened and overwhelmed, and even wonder **how can a good & loving God allow this to happen.**

In truth, the problem isn’t so much our situation or circumstance as it is that we’re trying to tackle & fix our problems on our own... **... and that’s not what it means to follow and walk with Christ.**

The rest that Jesus is promising to the weary and heavily burdened is not about us working harder to develop a better solution, and it’s not just hanging in there and waiting for trouble and suffering to pass eventually.

It's not ignoring the storm that is swirling all around us,
or denying that we are frightened or that things really hurt,
or that our troubles and struggles don't really matter.
It's way much more than just the power of positive thinking!

Real rest is God's promise, presence and power to be with us always
that gives us **a true and confident assurance** of relief and hope,
even when our world is breaking and falling apart...
... for the yoke Jesus offers is an intimate relationship with God
strengthening us through every situation, whatever we're facing.

It's not a promise of a comfortable, complacent, or effortless easy life,
but it's the soul's rest **by** living in confident hope and trust,
by walking and working in balance & in wholeness **with Christ**,
who calls us to a new life-perspective of trust and hope.

When I served a church in North Carolina,
the police chief of a nearby town along the coast
was a member of the church and also a very good friend.

It seems, the owner of several of the bars along the beach,
considered arresting his customers
for driving under the influence of alcohol,
-- to be bad for his business and bottom line.

So he ran for public office and got elected to the city council,
and there he began to do everything he could,
unjust, sneaky and otherwise, to replace the chief
with someone more compliant to his business interests.

For my friend and chief of police, it was an impossible situation.
He needed to provide for his family,
yet he was not about to compromise his integrity.
In the end, he kept his integrity, and was fired by the council.
It was a very embarrassing and destructive experience...
... we both wondered what God could possibly be up to.

Earlier he & his wife had started a small nursery & shrub business,
which took off when he gave it his full effort & attention,
and eventually even his sons came to work in the business.

As it turned out, it was a way better situation than he had before.
Several years later when we talked about him losing his job,
he said it was an amazing gift and blessing from God,
perhaps even one of the best days of his life.

We all know what it is to feel weary from life's burdens & struggles,
to face trials and disappointments, confusion and uncertainty,
unjust, hard and impossible situations **where we see no hope.**

When I talk with people these days about how they are doing,
it's clear that we are all weary and worn by the coronavirus.

No one wanted or predicted that we would still be dealing with this,
the threat of disease and its impact on our lives and finances...
... and that even after all these months, the end is nowhere in sight.

These are scary & perilous times in our world, nation and community
as we are pressed and challenged in countless and difficult ways,
... and so we wonder, what is going on with God?

I still don't know what the future holds for us, or for our church,
but I do know who holds that future, for God is still sovereign,
and it's far better to face such things with God than without him...

... and you can trust me on this, **it will end and be resolved
precisely where, when and how God intends.**

And maybe there are gifts and blessings that we haven't recognized.
Sometimes it's good to pause, to wait, slow down and cut back,
to spend more time with family at home, to clean out closets,
or to realize how much we miss being around other people.
Personally, I've appreciated more time to study, pray and reflect.

We must never doubt these three unchanging truths:

- 1st We're not alone, we've not been abandoned,
and Jesus has equipped us for whatever comes our way.
- 2nd Jesus invites us to share his yoke and remains with us.
So it's not about our strength, effort or wisdom alone,
but Jesus is carrying our burden with us and for us.
- 3rd To be the church, means that we are yoked together as family,
to provide mutual support, to comfort one another,
as we seek to share the Good News of Jesus Christ.

**The yoke of God's grace is our call to focus on Jesus for relief,
who is able to ease the burden of an overwhelming situation,
and will guide us as we wait upon the Lord, together,**
hopefully, making a difference by being and making disciples...

... which does not depend on our tenacity or our righteousness,

but living our lives in trust, blessed by God's gracious love,
which calls and equips and enables us to serve well
as instruments of hope, reconciliation and grace.

Today let us cultivate a deeper sense of gratitude and wonder,
by living in contentment with wherever God has brought us,
by looking for the blessing of what God is doing in our lives.

Consider this paraphrase of Matthew 11:28-30 from *The Message*.

"Are you tired? Worn out? Burning 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.

**Today we have come to share the Lord's Table of gracious love,
the gift of sacrament and mystery, of God's presence & blessing,
where we remember & celebrate our hope & life in Jesus Christ...**