

Sixth Sunday after Pentecost, July 9, 2023
 “Unburdened and Set Free” (Matthew 11:25-30)

Come to me, all you who are weary and bearing heavy burdens, and I will give you rest.

These words of Jesus are some of the most treasured and comforting in the New Testament gospels. In their original setting, they were spoken to the Jewish people who found themselves caught up in the legalism espoused by the Pharisees. The Pharisees had taken God’s original Ten Commandments and turned them into hundreds of man-made rules to which all Jews were expected to comply. Trying to keep each letter of the law, on top of their efforts of making a living, raising a family, and fulfilling other obligations had become a burden to the people. The average Joe and Josephine simply didn’t have the time to devote themselves to the keeping every letter of the law like the Pharisees. It simply couldn’t be done.

And even more burdening was the guilt of not being able to measure up. The law called for perfection, and that was a state they could never attain. The apostle Paul wrestles with this burden of the law in our second reading: *I can will what is right, but I cannot do it. For I do not do the good I want, but the evil I do not want is what I do.* These Pharisaic laws – which the people were unable to keep – convicted them as sinners. As a result, they became weighed down by their sin. And we know that sin is a great burden to carry around.

The good news, Jesus says, is that God is not a God of rules and regulations, but a God of people. Therefore, a relationship with God is more important than trying to keep – and consequently become overburdened by – all those man-made laws. However, Jesus is not saying that the law of God is unimportant. God gave the original ten for a purpose. They were intended to help bring order to the community and to help the people stay in relationship with God and with one another. By obeying the Ten Commandments, you see, they would be able to demonstrate their love for God. However, the Pharisees had greatly confused God’s law – perhaps, even abused it. And the people suffered under its weight and the burden of guilt in not being able to keep it.

When Jesus says, *Come to me and I will give you rest*, he is saying that, through him, the people could have the kind of relationship with God that the law had initially been designed to produce. Therefore, they could lay down the burden of the law. In him and through him, they could know the Father and have a relationship with God. In him, they would find a rest that was otherwise unattainable through their efforts to keep every letter of the law.

Jesus often challenged the Pharisees on this very point. Remember when he was criticized for healing on the Sabbath, or when his disciples plucked grain on the Sabbath. The Pharisees contended that he and they were in violation of the law. But Jesus responded that the Sabbath was made for man, not man for the Sabbath. Their laws had become so twisted that they sought to serve man rather than God. So Jesus bade the people to bring their weary and burdened souls to him, and he would give them rest.

There was, no doubt, much jubilation when Jesus spoke these words. Through him, the people were freed from their legalistic oppression. Jesus was offering them a less burdensome way of knowing and serving God. What a relief that must have been!

But then, after telling them to lay down their burdens, he goes on to challenge them to take his yoke upon them. These statements don't really seem congruent, do they? Why would they lay down one burden only to pick up another one? Is he saying they need *another* burden to help them rest? Well, here we have to stop and understand the function of a yoke. A yoke is a wooden bar used to tie or link two animals so that, together, they could pull a plow or cart. For stronger and larger animals, the yoke is not heavy, nor is it uncomfortable. But what the yoke does is to allow the animals to combine their strength and accomplish much more than either one could do alone. So the yoke is not just a way to bear a burden, but, more importantly, to share a burden. Jesus knew the burdens the people were carrying, so he graciously offered his yoke – which he described as easy and light. He was not giving his yoke to add to the burden, but that he might share the burden.

Today, Jesus speaks across the span of 2000 years to offer us that same invitation and promise. We come here this morning just as weary, just as burdened as the people of Jesus' day. We, too, are burdened by sin. God's law still stands as the impossible standard always accusing us of being sinners. Like Paul, we know the right things to do, but we find it difficult to do them. Our poor choices lead to consequences – for ourselves and for those around us. And we are burdened even more with feelings of shame, guilt, helplessness, and confusion. But Jesus gives his yoke; and the yoke he places on us is that our sins have been washed away. It really is that simple. Jesus died on the cross to save us. The victory has been won, the contest decided, evil completely defeated. All we have to do is trust in his grace, which was shown in his death and resurrection, and we who are weary and burdened will find rest.

Now all that sounds good in theory. But even though we know that the burden of sin has been lifted from us, we still feel burdened, don't we? Some of us are burdened by an illness – our own or that of someone close to us. We want to believe that healing will come, but the doctors aren't offering much hope.

Some of us are burdened with a disintegrating marriage. We know that God loves and forgives us, but we can't seem to offer the same to our spouse. There has been a breakdown of communication and more distance separates us every day.

Some of us are weary with financial worry. We know that God promises to provide for our needs, but we've run out of money before we've run out of month and there's a bill that must be paid.

Some of us are weary from worrying about our children. We thought we'd been the kind of parent they needed, but they have broken our hearts and inflicted so much pain. We just don't know how to help them anymore.

And some of us are just plain weary – physically, I mean. We have more conveniences today than any time in history that were designed to make our lives easier and less complicated. But do

they? One example is the computer. It is a wonderful tool that was designed to make our work more efficient. But what has happened? Laptop computers we can take anywhere just give us additional opportunities to work. Instead of reducing our work, we tend to work more. Or cell phones. They are a luxury, but they, too that allow us to conduct business anytime, anyplace. Furthermore, not only do we have the capability to work more hours, but so many of us want to. We set expectations for ourselves – or have them imposed on us by others – to gain recognition for being the best. Or we want to keep up with the Joneses and have all the things our neighbor has that we work that much harder to achieve them.

Then there are the demands of our families. Our children are just as busy as we are. We want them to have all the opportunities that the other kids have so we haul them to sports activities, music lessons, dance lessons, scouting events. and activities that allow them to spend time with friends.

Life becomes so frantic and hectic for some that it's hard to know which end is up. We could use a little help coping with all the "stuff" happening in our lives. We could use a little rest. But we don't really want to ask for help. That might make us appear weak. So we work harder and longer and try to balance more things than are humanly possible. And we become even more weighed down, more weary.

For those of us who are carrying heavy loads of one kind or another, listen once again to the good news. Jesus says, *Come to me and I will give you rest. Take my yoke upon yourself.* The yoke that Jesus offers is not the kind that is burdensome, but a yoke of love. His yoke is an offer of a partnership, a relationship, a fellowship with Christ himself, who is offering to help carry our burdens. He has already carried our burden of sin to the cross. Therefore, he is more than capable of helping with others. So, bring your burdens to Christ my friends. Rest in his love and grace. You'll be glad you did. Amen.