

A Call to the Weary

*"Come to me, all you that are weary and are carrying heavy burdens,
and I will give you rest." Matt. 11:28*

Matthew 11:16-19, 25-30
College Hill Presbyterian Church, Tulsa

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The 4th of July Weekend is upon us! It's a time when we rightly reflect upon where we have been, and where we hope to head as a country. When I think back to what I was taught in school about the greatness of this land of ours, I now think they had one element of it wrong. We were taught that America was the great "melting pot." I no longer like that image. Why? Because it implies that everything and everyone has been melted down and blended together to form one, new, undistinguishable whole, as if there were such a thing as "the" American citizen. The inevitable application is that everyone is expected to think and do what those in power in our society determine is right and acceptable.

I have come to like a different analogy a lot better. It looks at America not as a melting pot, but rather as a pot of stew. Stew has a wide variety of different elements put into it. Even after it is cooked together, however, each element still retains its individual characteristics, rather than becoming indistinguishable, as if it were all melted together, or pureed in a blender.

That 'stew pot' imagery also better reflects what our own Presbyterian denomination is struggling with as we move deeper into the second decade of this century. **We're learning that we can't survive (or live together) as a melting pot, in other words, with indistinguishable uniformity. Rather, as I have stated on countless occasions, our unity can only be experienced through our diversity.**

We remain a denomination and a country with an ever-increasing amount of diversity in culture, ideology, even theology. We're still struggling to learn how to live with that diversity. Strangely enough, that's one of the primary strengths on which this country was built upon. Just look at the saying on the **Statue of Liberty**. Remember what it says? It begins with, **"Give me your tired, your poor, your huddled masses yearning to breathe free..."**

This symbol of freedom and liberty has been seen by tens of millions of immigrants from almost every country on earth as they find their way to these shores. This has made us perhaps the most diverse nation in the history of humankind.

It's remarkable just how similar those words on the Statue of Liberty seem to be to those of Jesus in today's passage from Matthew 11. Jesus offers the crowd what has been called the 'Great Invitation' – **"Come to me, all you that are weary and are carrying heavy burdens, and I will give you rest."**

Notice how similar that message is? Most of the people who have immigrated to this country have suffered under the burden of one kind of oppression or another in their homeland. In Jesus' day, the Jews suffered under oppression as well, as did the Christians in Matthew's day. But in the context of this passage, **Jesus wasn't referring to**

the oppression of the Roman government, he was pointing directly to the burden put on the people by their own religious authorities, the scribes and Pharisees.

This Great Invitation for the weary and burdened to come to Jesus to find rest, like so many other great one-liners from the Bible, has often been somewhat misinterpreted throughout the ages. That includes myself when I use those words as part of the invitation to the Table at the beginning of Communion.

In its biblical context, its application is actually more specific than we realize. When examined within the entire understanding of the Gospel of Matthew, we see that the invitation is issued not to those burdened by work, by sin, or even by life in general. Rather, it was **an invitation extended to those burdened by trying to keep all the religious laws**.

The scribes and Pharisees had laid an intolerable load on their shoulders. Therefore, the type of rest that Jesus refers to isn't for those burdened by their jobs and careers or finances, or those made weary by their family and relationships, or even those burdened by their vices or addictions. It's not that God doesn't help in these types of burdensome situations, it's just that **the rest that Jesus refers to in this passage is for those who have been burdened by trying to earn God's favor and blessing by attempting to be perfect in fulfilling the letter of the law**.

How hard it continues to be for so many people, especially perfectionists, to realize that **there is nothing we can do to earn God's love - we already have it, we always did, we always will - and that's what Jesus came to teach us about: the grace of God**.

Rabbis in Jesus' day often referred to the law of God as a yoke and burden. They promoted meticulous attention to following the law of God and supplied detailed explanations of how the law of God could be kept. Keeping the law perfectly, however, as they and we know, was and is an impossible burden. Yet the Pharisees insisted on rigid adherence to the law for people to win the favor and blessing of God. The religious authorities taught people that if they did what was required of them, in a legalistic sort of way, they would be amply rewarded. Their goodness and righteous deeds would achieve great blessing, and they would be assured good health and wealth. If they didn't, they would be punished by God and risk losing God's blessing.

Have you noticed that such teachers have never been in short supply in the world? They fill the airwaves, TV screens and many pulpits with this erroneous, legalistic code of behavior and reward. They're fond of dictating strict guidelines of behavior - the long lists of do's and don'ts. Like the Pharisees, such a message lacks the very essence of the gospel message itself - the grace of God. And that's where Jesus' teaching comes in to play.

Jesus promises rest for those who are burdened by trying to earn God's favor by strictly following religious laws and set rules of behavior. But we must remember that Jesus did not come to abolish the law but to fulfill it. **What he offers, then, is not a vacation from the law but a less burdensome way of fulfilling it**. Jesus states, "Take my yoke upon you, and learn from me...for my yoke is easy, and my burden is light." Presbyterian preacher, seminary professor, and biblical commentator Tom Long expresses it this way:

What Jesus offers is not a hammock, but a yoke. In Judaism, the yoke was a symbol of obedience to the law and wisdom of God. Likewise, Jesus' yoke is obedience to the commandments of the kingdom of heaven, a willingness to serve others with humility and mercy.

Jesus' yoke is 'easy,' and his burden is 'light' (Matt. 11:30) not because there is little to do or the way is safely paved. To the contrary, there is a cross to be carried (Matt. 16:24), and the world is full of wolves. (Matt. 10:16). The yoke of Jesus is easy and his burden is light because it is the way of God, and it is profoundly satisfying to the human soul.

To come to Jesus is to be taught gentleness and humility (Matt. 12:29). It is to join with Jesus himself in serving the world in the name of God.

In other words, Jesus shifts the emphasis by stating the weightier matters of the law are justice and mercy and faithfulness. **God, therefore, is not as concerned with our perfect behavior – following the letter of the law – as we have been led to believe. Instead, the most important issue is how we answer the question: Does your life embody justice, mercy, faithfulness and love in your relationships?**

This is the burden that Jesus called light. Grace is always lighter than legalism!

Jesus teaches us that our salvation, our redemption, our favor with God – or whatever you want to call it – is not based on our works and deeds, whether good or bad, but rather only on God's love and grace. It is that knowledge that makes our burden light, not that our lives will become easy or trouble-free.

Jesus spoke to people desperately trying to find God and desperately trying to be good, but who were finding that task impossible and therefore were driven to weariness and to despair. If you find yourself in that same position, remember these words of Jesus, "Come to me, all you who are weary and carrying heavy burdens, and I will give you rest."

Remind yourselves of those words again during this Independence Day weekend as we also recall the words, "Give me your tired, your poor, your huddled masses yearning to breathe free..."

Amen.