

Come Unto Him

By
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from the pulpit of
Bryn Mawr Presbyterian Church

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Matthew 11:16-19; 25-30

¹⁶“But to what will I compare this generation? It is like children sitting in the marketplaces and calling to one another, ¹⁷‘We played the flute for you, and you did not dance; we wailed, and you did not mourn.’ ¹⁸For John came neither eating nor drinking, and they say, ‘He has a demon’; ¹⁹the Son of Man came eating and drinking, and they say, ‘Look, a glutton and a drunkard, a friend of tax collectors and sinners!’ Yet wisdom is vindicated by her deeds.”

²⁵At that time Jesus said, “I thank you, Father, Lord of heaven and earth, because you have hidden these things from the wise and the intelligent and have revealed them to infants; ²⁶yes, Father, for such was your gracious will. ²⁷All things have been handed over to me by my Father; and no one knows the Son except the Father, and no one knows the Father except the Son and anyone to whom the Son chooses to reveal him. ²⁸“Come to me, all you that are weary and are carrying heavy burdens, and I will give you rest. ²⁹Take my yoke upon you, and learn from me; for I am gentle and humble in heart, and you will find rest for your souls. ³⁰For my yoke is easy, and my burden is light.”

Just a couple of years into my time as a pastor at a church in South Bend, Indiana, our congregation experienced a sudden and tragic death. The husband of a lifelong church member was killed in a car accident in the middle of the night. It was made even more tragic by the fact that he was not alone at the time of the accident. Another woman's presence in the car led to all the kinds of speculation in the community that you might imagine. It was rough.

I was a young pastor, seven months pregnant, and my head of staff was away on vacation. Having just returned from a youth conference, I was meeting with the widow and her family for the first time after the death at the funeral home visitation. Her husband's family were devout Pentecostals. Before I even arrived that afternoon, the decision had already been made that I would co-officiate the service at the funeral home the next day with a Pentecostal preacher.

I first spent time one on one with the widow offering my condolences and helping her process all of the unhelpful sentiments that friends had been offering to her. The one that will never leave me is her friend who in an attempt to offer comfort, suggested that sometimes "God just makes mistakes." She and I had a hard but moving conversation about how her husband's death was not the result of a negligent God and that God in fact was grieving alongside her in this moment.

Then I met one on one with that other pastor. In an attempt to merge our traditions together, we agreed that he would lead the prayers and that I would offer the meditation. I shared the basics of what is included in a Presbyterian funeral liturgy, and then he in all sincerity gave me suggestions for my sermon. I am sure that I seemed very young, but of course looking back now I am sure that he was only in his mid-30's himself. He reminded me that a moment like this offers a significant opportunity to invite folks to give their lives to Jesus Christ. You might imagine that this was the last thing I had planned on saying or doing.

But of course, what that colleague suggested would be typical and even expected in a Pentecostal funeral sermon. Life is fleeting. When we gather to grieve, we are reminded that any one of us might be next. So, you need to get

yourself right with God before your moment of judgement arrives. We affectionately call this a *Come to Jesus Sermon*. By the grace of God, I don't have a copy of what I preached that next day. I am sure that there was more Jesus coming to us than us coming to Jesus, more love and less brimstone, more grace and less fear, and very likely more questions than answers.

The originator of the *Come to Jesus Sermon* of course was John the Baptist - with his warnings of the final judgement that was just around the corner, boldly declaring the need for people to get themselves right with God, calling all to live lives of repentance and sacrifice. The Messiah is coming and few of us are ready.

Just prior to our text for this morning, John the Baptist has sent word to his followers from his jail cell that he thinks it might be this Jesus of Nazareth who could be the Messiah that he has been preaching about and who they have all been waiting for. Jesus sends a clear message back: 'Go and tell John what you hear and see: the blind receives their sight, the lame walk, the lepers are cleansed, the deaf hear, the dead are raised, and the poor have good news brought to them. And blessed is anyone who takes no offense at me.' (Matt 11:4)

John was renowned for causing offense and was heavily criticized by the religious leaders of the time for being too extreme, too rough around the edges, too committed to the life of fasting and setting himself apart from the distractions of the world. He was in prison because of his unfiltered criticism of King Herod and his lifestyle choices. For John the path to redemption is clear: the way along it is difficult and rigorous and the consequence for falling off of the path is the difference between life and death.

For Jesus the path was clear as well. But instead of forging it by stepping outside of the messiness and sinfulness of the world, Jesus placed himself right in the middle of it. He preached that the way was not going to be easy, but that there would be room for everyone to travel on it with him, that the wellbeing of the afflicted was the most cherished value along this path, and that redemption wasn't only available in some future kingdom or in our next life, but redemption was offered today and in his presence.

This is the argument that Jesus addresses in our scripture for today. Not an argument about which is a better way to follow, but the truth that the religious leaders of the time were able to find fault with both options. New Testament scholar Doug Hare summarizes it perfectly - “This generation is able to write off John because of his abstinence from normal societal intercourse, and Jesus for exactly the opposite reason - because of his banqueting with sinners.”¹ They didn’t like that John fasted or that Jesus feasted. They didn’t want to mourn with John or dance with Jesus. Not satisfied with a funeral or a wedding, they rejected both the teaching of repentance and judgement and redemption and wholeness.

Jesus goes on in this passage to offer another teaching to describe his particular version of the way - inviting those who would follow him to set aside the burdens that have been weighing them down so that they might take on his yoke and follow him. For his yoke is easy and his burden is light. It is a slightly odd metaphor. It is an invitation that seems to sit in contrast to Jesus’ weighty invitation to his disciples just a few chapters later to take up the burden of the cross to follow him even at the risk of losing their own lives.

Jesus’ invitation to take on his yoke is one of the most comforting and relatable passages in all of the New Testament. Every time I read it or speak it myself it seems like the weight of all that is pushing down on me just gets a little lighter. I think each of us can relate to the reality that any number of things in our lives weigh us down: worry about our children or our parents, anxiety about our work, our lack of work, our over work, concerns about the world that are overwhelming and insurmountable, the weight of illness, of grief, of shame or isolation. Each of us has a burden that we are carrying that we would gladly exchange for the gentle and compassionate yoke of Jesus Christ.

But if you think about it a yoke and a cross aren’t all that different when we imagine them resting on our shoulders.

¹ Doug Hare. Matthew: Interpretation. Westminster/John Knox Press, 1993.

Seminary professor Lance Pape describes the invitation to try on the yoke of Christ in this particular way: "What Jesus offers is not a freedom from work, but freedom from onerous labor. Soul-sick weariness is not the inevitable consequence of all work, but rather of work to which we are ill suited, of work extracted under compulsion and motivated by fear, or of work performed in the face of futility. There is also the weariness that comes from having nothing at all to do that truly matters. The easy yoke means having a purpose that demands your all and summons forth your best. It means work that is motivated by a passionate desire to see God's kingdom realized. It means work towards a certain future in which all of God's dreams will finally come true. To accept the yoke of the gentle and humble Lord, is to embrace the worthy task that puts the soul at ease."²

There is one difference between a yoke and a cross. A cross is really just meant for one: a singular tool for a singular purpose. Whereas a yoke is a tool that when used in a particular way can bind two together so that the weight and the burden are shared.

Of course, taking on the yoke of Christ is an invitation to share our burdens with him, but just as he demonstrated in his immersive community based ministry, to take on the yoke of Christ in our generation is about binding ourselves to one another as well.

When I look back on that horrible accident and death in our community in Indiana, it was exactly the kind of weight and burden for that widow and her family that could have easily led them to pull back from the community. The weight of embarrassment and shame, the weight of grief were all heavy burdens to bear. But they made the conscious decision in the days, months and years following that it was a burden that they would ask their church community, their pastors, and their family to share alongside them. As a young pastor I was deeply moved by what a very particular witness of faith on their part. Not just faith in God, in Jesus Christ, but faith in the community as well. Faith that we would have the capacity to share the burden with them.

² Lance Pape. Feasting on the Word: Year A Volume 3. Westminster/John Knox Press. 2013.

I am sure many of you have been following along as The New York Times has published a series of pieces on the role of religious communities in people's lives based on 7,000 responses they received from a reader survey. In the final installment of the series Jessica Grose writes about the role of community in a world where religious practice is no longer the norm.

“I asked every sociologist I interviewed whether communities created around secular activities outside of houses of worship could give the same level of wraparound support that churches, temples, and mosques are able to offer. Nearly across the board, the answer was no.”³

One of those sociologists was Phil Zuckerman, a professor of sociology and secular studies who described it this way: “I can go play soccer on a Sunday morning and hang out with people from different races and different class backgrounds, and we can bond. But I'm not doing that with my grandparents and my grandchildren. A soccer team can't provide spiritual solace in the face of death, it probably doesn't have a weekly charitable call and there's no sense of connection to a heritage that goes back generations. You can get bits and pieces of these disparate qualities elsewhere, he said, but there's no 'one-stop shop.'”

Grose also highlights the ways that folks in the survey shared that even though churches like to think of themselves as being a place where they can find any kind of support they need to help carry the burdens of their lives, too many described feeling out of place in their church community after a divorce, or when they were struggling financially, or when their life experiences were out of sync with what the church considered normal.

In contrast to that she has a conversation with Ryan Burge who is a pastor and professor whose writing has focused on those we have come to describe as none's - people without any religious affiliation at all.

“Burge told me a story about his church that illustrated organized religion at its best. He described a section of the service where they asked for “prayers of the people,” where members of the congregation would describe a tough situation and ask for prayers. A young man, probably in his early 20s, with a

³ <https://www.nytimes.com/2023/06/28/opinion/religion-affiliation-community.html>

baby, said he had just lost his job and wouldn't make rent that month, and asked if the congregation would pray for him. Burge said an older man in the congregation went up to the young man after the service and said, "Son, if you need a job, you can come work for me tomorrow." While that might sound like a scene from a Frank Capra movie, church really does wind up being one of the few places that people from different walks of life can interact with and help one another."

When we consider what it means for us to share one another's burdens as a reflection of our willingness to share in the burdens of Jesus Christ here in this community, it is safe to say that at times we fall short. I think that we all want to be a place where we can and do share and support one another in our weariness and heavy burdens, but often folks don't feel comfortable or safe asking their church community to carry their yoke, or frankly even admitting to the burdens that they are trying to bear all on their own.

One of the ways during and since the pandemic that we have worked to help folks find natural and easy places to practice a way of being intentionally bound to one another was in small groups. During that first year of the pandemic over 100 people were meeting weekly not just to study a book together, but to share with one another the weariness of the pandemic weighing on all of us. Many of those folks have continued to meet now three years on, and we aptly changed their names from Small Groups to Connection Groups to highlight for current and future participants that the primary role of the groups wasn't to study together but to help us be better connected, supportive and bound to one another.

I asked one of our connection group leaders to describe for me, for you what that connection means to her and her life of faith: "I look forward to the Connection Group meeting each week as a time of deepening friendships and discussing what it means to live as a Christian. Listening to others and sharing our own thoughts is a meaningful way to lighten our burdens and magnify our joys. Having a regular opportunity to reflect on God's unconditional love and how we are called to respond is a lovely journey in faith. Remembering that we are never alone is a particular comfort and foundation."

Jesus invites us to come to him, to lean on him, to lay down our burdens so that we can be bound to him. We cannot accept that invitation, or fully feel the impact of that type of grace without understanding the deep obligation that it requires - obligation to the redemptive and restorative work of the Gospel, obligation to the way of compassion and justice that he has laid out for us, and obligation to be bound to one another in a way that is unique in this world.

Late Methodist Pastor Ted Loder has written a poem that I have been known to read in various mission committee meetings here at the church, especially when we are faced with the burdens of a world in crisis and need, and it speaks to the heaviness of our days. The title of it is “Sometimes It Just Seems Too Much.”⁴

Sometimes, Lord, it just seems to be too much: too much violence, too much fear; too much of demands and problems; too much of broken dreams and broken lives; too much of stale routines and quarrels, unpaid bills, and dead ends; Too much of darkness, and selfishness and indifference.

He goes on to describe in detail all of the ways that we feel the weariness of the world when everything feels like too much to bear. It is the end though that whether he intended it or not perfectly describes the yoke of Christ and our calling to pick it up. Or is it too little, too little of compassion, too little of courage, of daring, of persistence, of sacrifice; too little of music and laughter and celebration?

O God, make of me some nourishment for these starved times, some food for my brothers and sisters who are hungry for gladness and hope, that, being bread for them, I may also be fed and be full.

Amen.

⁴ Ted Loder. *Guerrillas of Grace: Prayers for the Battle*. Innisfree Press. 1984