

“Come to Me” July 5, 2020

In our Gospel lesson, Jesus says, “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.”

It has been a wearying time to be the church lately. The grief over the loss of so many lives to the coronavirus is a hard weight to bear in our families, in our communities, in our nation, in our world, in our churches. The loss of jobs and livelihoods is devastating. The inability to meet face to face, to congregate, to embrace, to comfort, and to console in person is nothing but a loss – a deep, aching loss. The shutting down of so much and the staying inside so long has felt like a long slog with heavy packs.

The leadership in our churches has been extraordinary. They’ve done amazing work livestreaming worship, recording sermons, creating virtual choirs, checking in with people via telephone, leading online Bible studies, and attending zillions of zoom meetings.

Yet, we also hear how wearying all this has been. Learning new technologies is frustrating. We spend hours upon hours recording and uploading a fifteen-minute sermon or a four-minute hymn and wonder how can this be. Online meeting formats seem designed to suck the life out of people, leaving us depleted.

“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.”

Running throughout all scripture from the beginning to the end is the theme that ours is a burden bearing Christ. He is not just a Lord whom we burden, and we do, but a Lord who actually solicits our burdens; I want to think with you this morning concerning that thought. He who would be effective must first be free from his burdens.

I would suggest to you that ours is a burden bearing Christ who sets us free from the burden of sin, but only after we have seen how much our sin burdens him. James Laney, former president of Emory University, tells of an experience that occurred to him when he was four years old that brought that truth home to him. Jim Laney had an aunt who was stricken with polio at a very early age, so much so that she could only walk with the aid of crutches.

One day she came to their home for a visit. Four-year-old Jim was in the garden tramping on flowers, something which he had been told specifically not to do. His aunt, sitting on the front porch, very gently called out to him, “Jimmy.” He quickly looked up and found himself caught, like Adam in the Garden of Eden, trying to find a bush to hide behind. He then, lashed out in a kind of uncontrolled rebellion that all too often crops up later in life as well, he jumped up and

defiantly shouted: “It’s none of your business you old cripple.” He then ran behind the house, free, or so he thought, from the accusing stare of his aunt.

He later walked quietly into the house, past the door of the room where she was staying. As he walked by, he stared in and saw her lying across the bed--cut and stung by the thoughtless words of a little boy. Totally unprepared for what he saw, he was drawn to her by some strange, unexplained grace. He walked over to her, and she threw her arms around him and embraced him.

Jimmy’s little rebellious heart testifies to the rebellion and indifference of all of God’s children. My friends, we are all blinded to sin. None are guiltless and for those who claim that they can see, will one day be held responsible for what it is that they say they see. There is not one of us this morning who does not need to plead mercy before Christ for the great burden that we have placed upon Him. It is our sin, ours, that placed Him on the cross. Had he not suffered for us, we could not function, for we would be overwhelmed with guilt. But listen afresh to the words of our Lord: “Come unto me all ye who labor and are heavy laden and I will give you rest.”

Not only does Christ relieve us from the burden of sin, he relieves us from the burden of self-righteousness. How hard it is to accept the discipline that Christ places upon us. John Calvin called us Presbyterian not only to a life of justification, but also to a life of holiness or sanctification, and we have been laboring under it ever since. It is an overpowering burden unless we shift it to Christ. He alone can bear the load of holiness.

How many ministers have I known, who undertook the joyous burden of the ministry years ago, only to discover the awesome burden of keeping themselves fit in study, education, and prayer--resisting the kind of temptations that come from a lax ministry or self-indulgence. All are not called to the ordained ministry, but all are called to ministry, and there are disciplines that go along with that. All of us are under the burden of righteousness. Ask Paul, ask, John Calvin, ask Martin Luther, and ask John Wesley. All in their own way attempted a life of righteousness and it almost brought them to their knees in despair.

We give up. In our own way we say “Lord, we have been going to church for so long and we have been praying so hard, and there seems so little answer, just let us rest and leave us alone.” This Christian life can be a burden.

Let me tell you a story that takes place during World War II. There was a man, John, in a small town who had volunteered to be a salesman for war bonds. It was a thankless job. He had to go around to his friends and ask them to buy more bonds than they already had. One day he was at his desk eating lunch when he received a fateful telegram from Western Union. The news was what he feared the most--his son was missing in action. The moment that he had dreaded for so long was now upon him. He went home and broke the news to his wife and they prayed together. John had an appointment that afternoon to talk to someone about war bonds. Despite his personal depression, he decided to keep the appointment.

He went at 3:00 to the office of a rather prominent and wealthy man in the community. “Bill,” he said, “I will get right to the point. You are a man of some means. You could be doing more and I hope that you do more.” A rather abrupt reply came back, “Now listen. Don’t ask me to do more than I am already doing. I am doing all that I can and I am weary. I will continue at my present level, but I will do no more. Don’t ask me to do more.” “Well, if that is your final answer,” John said. Bill replied, “It is.” So, John left Bill’s office.

That evening the news about John’s son being missing in action was in the paper. The recollection of the afternoon’s conversation echoed in Bill’s mind, “I am doing all that I can do. How can you ask me for more? I am doing all that I am going to do.” The words swirled around in his mind. That night he wrote a message to John. It read: “Sometimes each one of us is a fool and is selfish. Today I was both, I had no idea of the burden under which you labored this afternoon. Whatever is needed, you can count on me.”

All of us feel the burden of righteousness and from time to time we say: “Lord, I cannot take another step.” And we cannot, unless we go to God in prayer and ask Him to remove from us the burden of self-righteousness. When times are hard, we are called upon to do hard things. Yet, we need to be more like this man and realize to whom it is that we are speaking when we declare that we are doing all that we can do and are going to do. We are speaking to our Heavenly Father who gave His only son on the cross.

You see. We might be relieved from the burden of sin but we are not relieved from the burden of the cross. Jesus does not take the yoke upon himself; rather he shares the burden with us. He promises the yoke will be easy around our shoulders and the burden will be light.

Christ relieves us from the burdens of sin and righteousness so that we can then be free to do the real work that he has called us to and that is bearing the burden of someone else. All the Old Testament from the Mosaic Law to the Prophets is fulfilled in one word “love”: in the New Testament we are told, “You are to love one another as Christ hath loved you.”

I remember an old story about a little boy who was out helping dad with the yard work. Dad asked him to pick up the rocks in a certain area of the yard. Dad looked over and saw him struggling to pull up a huge rock buried in the dirt. The little boy struggled and struggled while Dad watched. Finally, the boy gave up and said, “I can’t do it.” Dad asked, “Did you use all of your strength?” The little boy looked hurt and said, “Yes, sir. I used every ounce of strength I have.” The father smiled and said, “No you didn’t. You didn’t ask me to help.” The father walked over and then the two of them pulled that big rock out of the dirt.

There are great and good works to be done at home, at work, and in the world. It may seem impossible that you have been chosen to perform them. But yoke yourself with Christ and the two of you will do them and more.

But strangely enough, there are those who criticize those who attempt to bear the burden of others. They say that the church is not called upon to do this work or they say that it is not necessary for salvation. They say that the mission of the church is to shift the burden of sin onto Christ and that is all. But I agree with James, faith without works is dead. The two are related and inseparable. They go hand in hand. We cannot simply have faith and we cannot simply do works. We have a mission beyond the doors of this church.

I wonder if we are willing to pray hard enough and long enough that the church may be a place where not only the burdens of sin and righteousness are loosened, but where God’s people are called in love to bear the burdens of others. I am convinced that you are willing. Jesus said “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.” It is his yoke that is easy. It is his burden that is light. It is in him we will find rest for our weary souls. In the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. Amen.