



ST BART'S

A Sermon by
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The Lighter Yoke

Sermon preached at the eleven o'clock service, October 4, 2020

The Feast of St. Francis

Based on Matthew 11:25-30

Take my lips and speak through them; take our minds and think with them; take our hearts and set them on fire. Amen.

This morning's Gospel contains one of the great consolation passages of all time. "Come to me all who labor and are heavy laden," Jesus says, "and I will give you rest." It is a passage you can find etched on tombstones or worked into stained glass windows or maybe even stitched in needlepoint and hung in the church parlor.

It is a wonderful promise, a comforting promise to which many of us turn when our burdens seem impossible to bear, when our best efforts to cope with them have failed and we are close to collapse. It is a promise that offers hope of help, hope of a God who will lift the sweaty loads off our backs and replace them with a lighter yoke, lighter because it yokes us with one who is greater than we are, and with whose strong help we can bear any burden.

That is what the passage means to many of us today, but it meant something different when Jesus first said it. He had just finished a preaching mission to several Galilean cities, where his welcome had been less than warm. The people in those cities were smart and capable. In spite of Roman occupation, both their local economies and their religious institutions were still working. They were not looking for help from Jesus or anyone else, and whatever gifts he had hoped to give to them, they declined to take.

This Galilean mission was a failure, in other words, and in the passage at hand, we hear Jesus' response to that failure. After heaping some powerful reproaches on those who did not welcome him, he thanks God for showing things to simple people that wise and understanding people cannot see. At least one reason why this is God's desire, apparently, is so that no one gets human wisdom and understanding confused with divine revelation. Those who know God do not arrive at such knowledge by their own natural intelligence or capable efforts. They know God because God has chosen to be known.

Next, Jesus offers to lighten the load of all who are carrying heavy burdens, some of which have presumably been laid on the shoulders of the simple people by the wise and understanding ones. In the first century, this burden might have been literal sticks and bricks, the increasing weight of Rome, or the more invisible load of any life's grief and fear. But since this is Matthew's Gospel, it is likely that Jesus meant religious burdens as well. By the time Matthew sat down to write, the first Jewish revolt had failed and the Temple was in ruins. With the Sadducees out of business and the Zealots in full retreat, the Pharisees were the only religious party left standing, with the future of Judaism in their hands. This placed them on a collision course with Jesus' party, and in many ways Matthew's Gospel is a record of their struggle.

In those days the Jesus party was by far the smaller of the two. It was made up largely of simple people who were stung by the inhospitality of the wise and understanding people to whom they believed they belonged. Both parties shared the same Torah, the same prophets, the same devotion to the same God. Two millennia later, with their separation official and their numbers reversed, it is easy to cast the struggle between them as one between Jews and Christians; but in Jesus' day it was a struggle among his own people, no less bitter than those in some Christian circles today. At issue were not only who had authority to speak for God but also what those authorities said about the kind of yoke God placed on humankind.

Then, as now, some proposed weightier requirements than others. Then, as now, some placed more weight on their own view of those requirements than others. If you follow any news source then you know that such debate did not only happen once long ago in a land far away; it continues to happen right now wherever religious people meet to decide what it means to know God. In this light, Matthew's Gospel is not about a struggle between two different religious traditions. It is about the struggle within one religious tradition over the requirements of faith.

Thanks to the apostle Paul and his gifted interpreter Martin Luther, most Christians identify this struggle as one between works and grace. As best I can tell, the truth is that every human being who longs to know God lives with the tension between grace and works. On one hand, we long to believe that God comes to us as we are, utterly unimpressed by the tricks we do for love. On the other hand, we live in a world where those tricks often work really well—so well that it is next to impossible to give up believing in them too. Follow us around for a day or two and you may discover what we believe most by how we act.

Do you know what I mean? Human beings have a perverse way of turning Jesus' easy yoke back into a hard one again, by driving ourselves to do, do, do more and whipping ourselves to be, be, be more when all God has ever asked is that we rest in the heart of God, belong to God. That comes first; everything else follows that, but we so often get the order reversed. We think there are all kinds of requirements to be met first, all kinds of rules to follow, all kinds of burdens to bear so that we are not yet free to belong to God. We are still loaded down, not only by our jobs and our families and all our other responsibilities, but by something deeper down in us, something that keeps telling us we must do more, be better, try harder, prove ourselves worthy or we will never earn God's love. It is the most tiring work in the world, and it is never done.

We think that the way to find rest for our souls is to finish our lists of things to do and present it to God like a frequent flyer card, but as it turns out that is not the ticket at all. The way to find rest for our souls is simply to stop, to lay down our list of things to do and be, the heavy yokes we have designed for ourselves, and to accept the lighter ones God has made for us instead.

Francis of Assisi, whom we remember and honor today, knew a lot about this. Francesco Bernardone struggled with, and succeeded in, laying down the heavy yoke of his own life and accepting the lighter one God had made for him. Born into the family of a prosperous merchant of Assisi, Francis spent his early youth in revelry and fruitless attempts to win military glory. Various encounters with homeless people and people with leprosy pricked the young man's conscience, and he decided to embrace a life devoted to poverty. Despite his father's intense opposition, Francis totally renounced all material values, all expectations for who he was supposed to be and what he was supposed to do, and devoted himself to belonging to God and living the Gospel. The legacy he left in the Franciscan apostolate compels us as well to rest in God and be good news. Moreover, it lays bare the folly of the wise and understanding ones. Traveling without heavy yokes, these roving monks have been a constant reminder through the ages that the lighter yoke of God makes us neither hostages to, nor rulers over, creation, but the blessed recipients of its bounty, stewards of equitable access to its riches, and advocates for its protection. Francis learned, as we must, that in order to be the radical love that lives for others, we must be grounded in God. To be the voice for all that are silenced, to be the repairers of the breach, to be the instruments of peace, to

dismantle racism and white supremacy, is deeply spiritual work that is sustained only when we belong to and are grounded in God.

If you have traveled around the world or even if you have read *National Geographic* or watched *The History Channel* from time to time, you know that there are two basic kinds of yokes that can be used to bear burdens: single ones and shared ones. The single ones are very efficient. By placing a yoke across the shoulders and fitting buckets hung from poles on each side, human beings can carry almost as much as donkeys. They will tire easily and have to sit down to rest, and their shoulders will ache all the time, but still it is possible to move great loads from one place to another using a single creature under a single yoke.

A shared yoke works quite differently. It requires twice as many creatures for one thing, but if they are a well-matched pair, they can work all day, because under a shared yoke, one can rest a little, while the other pulls. They can take turns bearing the brunt of the load; they can cover for each other without ever laying their burden down because their yoke is a shared one. They have company all day long, and when the day is done, both may be tired, but neither is exhausted, because they are a team.

Plenty of us labor under the illusion that our yokes are single ones, that we have got to go it alone, that the only way to please God is to load ourselves down with heavy requirements—good deeds, pure thoughts, blameless lives, perfect obedience—all those rules we make and break and make and break, while all the time Jesus is standing right there in front of us, half of a shared yoke across his own shoulders, the other half wide open and waiting for us, a yoke that requires no more than that we step into it and become part of a team.

“Come to me, all who labor and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest.” No wonder those words have weathered the centuries so well; no wonder they are still music to our ears. They assured Francis and they assure us now that those who please God are not those who can carry the heaviest loads but those who are willing to share their loads, who are willing to share their yokes by entering into relationship with the one whose invitation is a standing one. “Take my yoke upon you, and learn from me; for I am gentle and lowly in heart, and you will find rest for your souls. For my yoke is easy, and my burden is light.”

AMEN

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