

Fifth Sunday after Pentecost, July 5, 2020
“Rest for the Weary” (Matthey 11:16-19, 25-30)

In the gospel text for today, Jesus issues a wonderful invitation and makes a wonderful promise. *Come to me* is the invitation, and *I will give you rest* is the promise. This invitation and promise are addressed to whom? To *all who are weary and carrying heavy burdens*. They are addressed to you and me.

So many of us are weary...tired...exhausted. This is especially true during this time of pandemic. We're weary of hearing the daily news that the virus has not been contained, and tired of the limitations it has imposed upon us. We're tired of bipartisan bickering and so much else going on in the world.

Life is already difficult enough without these added burdens. Think about how hard we work. We work hard to earn a living, work hard to raise our children, work hard to get things done in life, work hard to save for retirement. But no matter how hard we work, we can't avoid hardships. We can't circumvent the sorrow and suffering that are a part of the human condition. And it gets old sometimes. Life just makes us weary. We get tired...worn out...impatient. We need rest.

Now, add to that the burden of trying to live our lives in ways that are pleasing to God, and life becomes even more difficult. In the text, Jesus is speaking to those who are weary of trying to please God by their own efforts. He is speaking to those who labor under the law, those who are burdened with the weight of guilt, those who are carrying the burden of not being able to measure up.

And the people of Jesus' day knew all about this. The Pharisees, you see, loaded a heavy weight on the people's backs. The Pharisees thought and taught that if one worked hard enough, the law was something one could keep. Keeping the law, they said was how one was accounted as righteous before God – by their works. And nobody was more righteous than the Pharisees.

Of course, we know that what the Pharisees did was to take God's law and turn it into hundreds of man-made regulations, into a system of minute rules that had to be kept. But your ordinary Joe and Josephine on the street were not educated in all these laws, and therefore, could not keep them – which only made the Pharisees look more righteous. So, believing that only the best and most dedicated Jew could ever hope to live up to these standards, it placed a heavy burden on the people – a burden much more than they could bear.

But that is not the purpose of the law. The law is intended to serve as a mirror into which we can look and see where we have failed to measure up. It is intended to expose our sinfulness and help us see our need for God's forgiveness – our need for a Savior. Through confession and repentance, the law is intended to bring us closer to God.

But the Pharisees used it to distance the people from God. They held it up as a barrier that kept the people from experiencing God's forgiveness. In their minds, if they couldn't keep God's law,

if they couldn't do what was pleasing in his sight, then how could they be forgiven? So they were lost in their sin.

And to be lost in sin is a huge burden. We've all experienced such a feeling:

- something that has been troubling us, continually nagging at our consciences.
- something we really wish we hadn't done
- something we keep reliving in our minds, wishing we could change what we said or did
- something we wonder if God can really forgive.

Keeping all the commandments of God is like carrying an enormous yoke around our shoulders, only we're not strong enough to bear it. The Apostle Paul recognized this about himself. In the reading from Romans, he writes: *For I do not do what I want, but I do the very thing I hate. For I know that nothing good dwells in me, that is, in my flesh. For I have the desire to do what is right, but not the ability to carry it out. For I do not do the good I want, but the evil I do not want is what I keep on doing. Wretched man that I am! Who will deliver me from this body of death?*

Paul himself had been a Pharisee, so he knew something about the burden of the law. In his words to the Romans, we can hear him straining under its heavy weight. He knew he was nowhere near good enough – or strong enough – to carry that load. He just couldn't do it! And if Paul – the zealous missionary for Christ – couldn't do it, then we aren't able to do it either.

This *battle within* to which Paul refers is real in each of our lives. It is the conflict between the part of us that wants to obey God and do the right things and the part of us who wants to serve only ourselves. And it is burdensome.

We know that we are to love God with our whole hearts. We know that we are to love our neighbors as ourselves. We know that we are to keep God's commandments in all our thoughts, words and deeds. Yet as hard as we try, we realize that we can't do these things. We want to, but it's just not in our nature. Then God's law is there, condemning us as sinners and sentencing us to death. And there's nothing we can do on our own to get out from under its crushing weight.

So, Paul's question is as relevant today as it was in the first century: *Who will deliver me from this body of death?* But then Paul answers his own question. He joyfully declares: *Thanks be to God through Jesus Christ our Lord!* Paul tells us it is through Christ that we are delivered; through him that the load is lifted and the burden removed.

That's why Jesus can say, *Come to me and I will give you rest.* Christ is the *only* one who can do this for you and me. He is the only one strong enough to carry the load that is the weight of the law. And that's what he did. He lived the life we cannot live. He never tired of doing God's will. Yes, his body grew tired, and he slept – true man that he was – but only he had the spiritual stamina to endure all temptations, to fulfill the entire law, and live perfectly on our behalf. Only he was *strong as an ox* when it came to bearing the burden – not of his sin, for he had none – but of our sin, the sins of the world.

Then he did something more. The death sentence we deserve for not keeping the law, Jesus took upon himself. The sinless Son of God did the unthinkable: he suffered in our stead and died the death of sinners. Hanging on a cross, suspended between heaven and earth, mocked by men and abandoned by God, he bore the heavy burden of our sin.

In ancient Greek mythology there was a fellow named Atlas. His job was to carry the world on his shoulders. Jesus is our real-life Atlas. He carries the weight of the world on his shoulders, the heavy, unbearable weight of the whole world's sins. He lifts it off your shoulders and mine and puts it on his own. And because of the cross, the weight of your sins and mine has been lifted. The heavy load is gone just as surely as the heavy, rolled-away stone on Easter morning. The millstone of judgment and the tombstone of death have both been rolled away. Sin is forgiven and death is destroyed, for our Lord has lifted these burdens from us.

And now he says to us in warm, inviting tones: *Come to me, and I will give you rest. Quit struggling on your own. Lay down your burdens at the foot of the cross. See my nail-pierced hands? I have done the job for you. You are now free.* Jesus has taken our yoke – the yoke of the law that is too heavy to bear – and born it for us.

But then he replaces it with another. *Take my yoke upon you, and learn from me. and you will find rest for your souls. For my yoke is easy, and my burden is light.* The yoke Jesus gives is lightweight. It is a yoke of grace, mercy, and peace. It is a yoke of unconditional love and forgiveness. It is an unburdening yoke that takes away not just some, but *all* of our sins – even those we fear are unforgivable.

Jesus' yoke is also an invitation to discipleship. *Come to me. Learn from me.* To take his yoke upon us is to be his disciples, to follow him in faith, and to receive from him rest and new life.

My friends, if you are weary from the challenges of life, if you are worn out by the guilt your sins and burdened by the consequences of those sins, if the struggle within you – the battle between spirit and flesh – has left you drained and fatigued, Jesus is speaking to you today. *Come to me and I will give you rest.*