

“What to Do with Burdens”

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You have burdens, but your faith shouldn't be one of them.

Matthew 11:25-30

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Valentine's burden

Today's reason I'm grateful for Paul Cummings is that when I laid out this sermon series in Matthew's gospel I didn't notice February 14. I forget which passage I had suggested, but it was probably something like "It will be more bearable for Sodom on the day of judgment than for you" (11:24) or King Herod "had John beheaded in prison" (14:10). Pastor Paul usually says he's good with whatever I choose, but this time he said, "Do you think we maybe need something more appropriate for Valentine's Day?"

St. Valentine was martyred for his faith in Christ in the third century. The specific reason Emperor Claudius had him executed may be that he believed in romance and marriage, even when it defied the emperor. On the day of his death, Valentine left a note for a young woman signed, "Your Valentine." The rest, as they say, is history.

Valentine's Day has become a day associated with loving and being loved. But let's be honest. Any love relationship between two sinners is sometimes a burden. Some who have loved and lost swear never to risk it again. Others who have no one to love romantically find this day more depressing than uplifting.

Apart from love and romance, there are many whose burdens are heavy right now – boredom or politics or masks or insecurity or death and grief. Some are burdened because others are whining about their burdens. Can't we all be happy?

In today's text, Jesus uses the word "burden" twice – once as a verb and once as a noun. The passage begins "at that time," and the run up to this passage includes rising

opposition to Jesus, doubts from John the Baptist about whether he was really the Christ, and unbelief in Galilean towns that should have been the first to embrace him.

It was at *that* time Jesus told us what to do with burdens.

Think like a kid (25-26)

At that time Jesus said, "I praise you, Father, Lord of heaven and earth, because you have hidden these things from the wise and learned, and revealed them to little children. Yes, Father, for this is what you were pleased to do."

Some of you read these verses and want me to explain predestination vs. free will, one of the great mysteries. Or at least to answer the question, "Why is God so pleased with hiding truth from some people? Why is that cause for Jesus' praise?"

I don't think that's the point here. He's not delighting in lack of faith nor is he questioning the value wisdom and understanding.

What God is pleased with is who *does* get it. He's pleased that you don't need position or education to grasp Jesus. You don't need to be on top of this world to get to the next. Recognition and wealth foster pride. I don't need God if I can do it myself.

Instead, Jesus' Father, the "Lord of heaven and earth," reveals himself to "little children." Linda and I have a three-year-old grandson, and in a couple of weeks will find out whether our next grandchild will be a boy or a girl. This is an exciting time of life! We haven't been able to see Arlo in over a year due to the pandemic, but we do get some electronic face time once or twice a week. Of course he's the cutest and smartest kid in the universe, but he also has a strong will – the kind of thing that is much more entertaining to grandparents than parents.

The comparison of faith to childlikeness is not about temperament or character. It's not about how cute they are or how sweet they are or even how innocent they are. It's about one quality only – dependence. Kids depend on their parents for everything – home, food, clothing, direction, affection, identity. They can exercise their little wills all they want, but at the end of the day (and its beginning) they are characterized by need.

Jesus is saying that those who need nothing because they consider themselves independently "wise and learned" carry a much heavier burden. The first step to a lighter burden is to admit that "I can do it myself" is not as true as a toddler thinks.

Remember who Jesus is (27)

"All things have been committed to me by my Father. No one knows the Son except the Father, and no one knows the Father except the Son and those to whom the Son chooses to reveal him."

Once again move your focus from what you can't understand to what you don't know. How and why the Son chooses to reveal the Father is not yours to know or debate. Don't turn this verse into pride – either that you can clarify theology better than someone else or, worse yet, that you're one of the inner circle, Jesus' chosen few.

This verse is not about you. It's about Jesus. It's about his Father. This verse is a gem precisely because this expression of intimacy and oneness between the Father and Son is comparatively rare in Matthew, Mark, and Luke. Cynics say that Matthew sounds too much like John, so maybe this is not original. The same cynics would say that John himself invented that language. But scholars are virtually unanimous that Matthew was written before John, so he didn't borrow these words from the fourth gospel. This is actually evidence that Jesus did say the things that John said he said.

This is beauty and its mystery. It's humbling. Nobody fully gets Jesus except the Father. And nobody fully gets the Father except Jesus. The wonder of the incarnation is that we can now say God gets us because he's become one of us – fully human. But we can never fully get God because, unlike Jesus, we've never been God.

What Jesus is doing here is setting up for the next three verses. What do you do with burdens? You bring them to Jesus, precisely because he knows the Father *and* he knows you. The writer of Hebrews tells us that Jesus is “a merciful and faithful high priest” because he suffered and was tempted like we are (Hebrews 2:17-18). He intercedes for us before the Father, but he also knows the Father.

What prayers have you been praying, forgetting who's at the Father's right hand, knowing both you and the Father perfectly?

Come and learn (28-30)

“Come to me, all you who are weary and burdened, 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.”

Religion is a burden. It's a burden when human beings take the idea of God and create systems and rules that only weigh down the hearts of others. If you're reading through the Bible with us, we've landed on Leviticus. As you read, it feels burdensome – a lot of minute details about sacrifices and feasts that must be carried out with precision.

All of that is intentional. Leviticus is from God as a setup for the Good News of Jesus. But as heavy a burden as it was, in Jesus' time the burden of ritual and regulation had been made heavier still. William Barclay tells a parable from the pre-Jewish rabbinic tradition that illustrates this –

There was a poor widow with two daughters and a field. When she began to plow, Moses said, "You must not plow with an ox and a donkey." When she began to sow, he said, "You must not sow with mixed seed." When she began to reap, he said, "Don't reap the edges of your field." When she began to thresh, he said, "Give me your first and second tithe." She gave everything and then had to sell her field. She bought two sheep and the priests said, "Give me the firstborn." She sheared her one sheep and the priests said, "Give me the first shearing of wool." In order to eat, she said, "I will have to kill my one sheep." The priest said, "Give me the shoulder and the cheeks and the stomach." She said, "Even when I have killed it I am not safe from you." The priest said, "They belong entirely to God." She went away weeping with her two daughters.

The rabbis understood that when you heap law upon law, it is a burden too heavy to bear. In Jesus's time, religious scholars had crushed the spirits of faithful people in Jesus' day not only with a boatload of rules but with enforcers hawking them constantly. They were more interested in burdening others than with following their own rules. Jesus' frustration with them boils over in Matthew 23: "Woe to you, scribes and Pharisees!" He calls them "hypocrites," "blind guides," and "snakes."

If any version of what you think of as religion pleasing to God is a constant weight, you have misunderstood God. You have burdens, but faith shouldn't be one of them. Jesus uses the "yoke" analogy. At first it may seem like the yoke is another burden, but the image is not one of adding to your burden. It's about having someone to share it, someone who knows you and knows the Father.

A "yoke" is always used in the New Testament of submission. Jews spoke lovingly of the "yoke of the law," but Jesus knew that was not the daily experience of his audience. At the Council of Jerusalem about two decades after Jesus' ascension, Peter addressed the other apostles and elders about the law: "Why do you try to test God by putting on the necks of the disciples a yoke that neither we nor our fathers have been able to bear? No! We believe it is through the grace of our Lord Jesus that we are saved, just as (the Gentiles) are" (Acts 15:10-11).

Jesus gives two direct commands to his listeners: *Come* and *learn*. "*Come to me,*" he says, and "*take my yoke upon you.*" It's different. It's a delight, not drudgery. He means that it's about intimacy, not about duty. Yes, sometimes life is a burden. Jesus never promised otherwise. The whole underlying theme of this passage is that life, even life following Jesus, will bring burdens. But you are not alone if you *come*.

Jesus, we're told, was a craftsman. Isn't this image even more beautiful knowing that Jesus would hand craft yokes for specific oxen? Don't you think they fit perfectly if Jesus chiseled and sanded them with his own two hands? Isn't that the image here?

Second, Jesus says, "*Learn from me.*" The root word is the same as "disciple." Just watch him, listen to him, feel his heart for you. Learn from him how to pray, how to

worship, how to love. Jesus doesn't say, "Do as I say, not as I do." He says, "Watch me do what I say."

You're not designed for "burden." You're designed for "rest," for a burden that is bearable because Jesus knows you, knows the Father, and invites you into his rest.

What to do with ambiguity

Do you know why this season of church and nation feel so burdensome? A friend sent me a blog this week that helps explain it. Published this past Friday, it's titled "[A Global Pandemic and Ambiguous Loss.](#)" Let me explain.

Most of the time when we think of grief and loss, it is traumatic and life altering. Its path is not predictable or easy, but eventually we find some kind of closure and adjust to a new normal. Life goes on, and time heals.

What Pauline Boss calls "ambiguous loss" is confusing and stressful. There seems to be no end, or the goal post keeps moving. It's even worse when everyone across your world and even *the world* is feeling it. With most losses you can reach out to someone who's been there and moved beyond – or at least someone who's currently on solid ground. They can hold you, assure you, stabilize you. Instead, we feel like the psalmist, who said, "We are given no signs from God, no prophets are left, and none of us knows how long this will be" (Psalm 74:9).

What do we do with ambiguous loss? Well, first we name it for what it is. It's a burden. Then we remember that this, like every burden, is designed by God not to taunt us or tease us, but to teach us to lean, to learn, to follow. If it's not this burden, it will be another. Life is defined by burden. It just is. We will never look back and say, "I'm glad there was a pandemic," but those who take Jesus' yoke on them will say, "I'm stronger, more stable, more full of hope than I was."

I want our church to be that as well. I want us to be better than we were. I want us to know more about who we are and why we're here. Your church staff and lay leaders will gather in about a month and reflect on that very question.

Meanwhile, Lent begins this Wednesday. It seems well-timed to me. The purpose of Lent is to prepare us for Easter. As of now, the celebration of Easter feels ambiguous. Last year we did the unthinkable and had Easter services with empty pews. Will this year be much different? Probably not. Most of you will livestream church from your sofas with a coffee cup in hand. And none of us knows how long this will be.

I don't know when we'll gather again in person, when it will feel like the good old days. But Lent is not going to wait until that's possible. Lent starts Wednesday. Let's think about what Lent is and should be all the time anyway.

It's a time of self-denial. Edward Davis, our Southern Conference Minister, has encouraged our churches to observe Lent with fasting and prayer – to pick a day each week for partial or full fast to seek the Lord for our communities, our nation, our world.

Dr. Davis got me thinking – why don't we open our sanctuary for set days and times for you to come and pray? We're not ready for mass gatherings. But there's something about this space that draws you in. You can pray anywhere, of course – even at home. But home has become more associated with work and isolation. This is a place associated with worship and prayer.

This week we'll announce a schedule when you can come. There will be set times when the organ or other music is playing, but most of the time it will just be quiet. We'll provide suggestions and guides for prayer. That idea got me thinking about other reasons and times you might come to the campus – to walk, to play, to give, to take, to learn, even to eat. It's too soon to connect face to face, but not too soon to connect face to place, and start thinking again about the church grounds and buildings as space where you and God meet.

What we need during ambiguous times are reminders that this too shall pass. We need to break out of the monotony of routines and rituals and into the intimacy of more focused time with Jesus. "Come to me," he says, "and learn from me. You will find rest for your souls. For my yoke is easy, and my burden is light." Amen.