

“Lay Your Burden Down”

“For my yoke is easy, and my burden is light.”

The highlight of Old Dan Parker’s day was always when his niece Jessie visited him after school in his workshop. Old Dan and his wife Eloise were never able to have children, but Jessie became something of a surrogate granddaughter to them both and continued to visit her beloved uncle regularly after Eloise’s death. Jessie had always been a very bright, positive, effervescent child whose light shone brightly and always made Old Dan feel better no matter how bad his arthritis was hurting him or how much he was mourning his beloved wife; but lately, Old Dan began to notice a change in Jessie’s demeanor. She still visited him every day after school, but it seemed as if there was something weighing her down and shrouding the light that was always so bright and evident. It began with her outward appearance; while she smiled when she entered his workshop, Old Dan noticed that it had a tinge of sadness in it. Her shoulders appeared to be drooping as if she was carrying a heavy weight, even though her backpack was no heavier than it had been previously. She was not as quick to share what had happened in school as she had in the past, and at times it seemed like she was distracted when he spoke to her. While she was still the same delightful child that Old Dan had always loved, there was something happening in her life that had caused a sudden and disturbing change.

At first, Jessie denied that there was anything that was bothering her and would try to change the subject or force a smile to hide what she did not want to reveal. But finally, with tears in her eyes, Jessie confessed to her uncle why she had changed. It began in school, where the class workload had increased as Jessie was moved into the Gifted and Talented program for advanced students. While she certainly qualified to be in this program, the expectations were far greater than in her regular classes, and she was beginning to feel the pressure of performing at this advanced stage. The girls who had been her friends had begun to ostracize her when she entered the G&T program, dismissing her as one of those “eggheads” who was now “too good” for them. While her family was always supportive, she felt that she had to work harder so their faith in her was not in vain and she became a disappointment to them. “I feel like a weight had been placed on my shoulders that I can’t handle” Jessie cried out to her uncle. “I’m afraid that I’m going to disappoint everyone, and that they will always look at me as a failure!”

With tears in his eyes, Old Dan got up and hugged his niece. “Jessie, you will never be a disappointment to us! You are putting too much weight on your shoulders and worrying too much about what other people expect of you. We want to do everything we can to lift this burden off you so that you can find that joy that seems to be missing from your life. I’m going to do everything I can to help you lay your burden down.” Many of us have been in Jessie’s place, feeling the weight of life’s burdens placing stress upon our bodies and souls and preventing us from living the joyful, abundant life that is God’s Will for us. Some of these burdens are like Jessie’s, the weight of expectation that causes us to strive to “live up to” the trust that others have placed upon us. Other burdens may involve providing for our families, especially in times of unemployment or economic uncertainty. The current pandemic has placed a great deal of weight upon our community and nation, the weights of fear and uncertainty that hold us back from making plans for the future and believing that we live in the “best of all possible worlds.” We live amid many burdens that keep us from the freedom that God intends for us all:

- “Fear is a burden. We fear loss or pain or worse. But fear keeps us locked in a prison cell where our only companion is what we fear the most. Anger is a burden that some of us carry. Most of us never learn that anger is normally a response to being hurt. But anger keeps us miserable, in turmoil, stuck in a place where we re-live that hurt – over and over again. Pride is our preferred form of perfectionism. We don’t just want to ‘keep up with the Joneses’; we have a driving need to be ‘better than’ the Joneses. But that nagging insecurity that it’s never good enough is always around.” – Alan Brehm.

In his proclamation that *“the time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God has come near”* (Mark 1:15), Jesus bring the Word of Good News that liberates people from all that weighs them down, entraps and enslaves them, and prevents them from living the abundant life that is God’s Will for all people. It is a message that he teaches first to his disciples, who will be commissioned to make disciples of all nations and to *“[teach] them everything that I have commanded you”* (Matthew 28:20); but his teachings are not only for those who have been invited into a life of discipleship, but are available to all who will listen. As Jesus taught the crowds in the Sermon on the Mount, he addresses this mass gathering in today’s Gospel lesson, in which he gives thanks for those who have accepted his mission and message – in contrast to those who have rejected it: *“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; yes, Father, for such is your gracious will.”* (Matthew 11:25-26). Those who have accepted the Gospel message are not the “wise and intelligent” (a not-so-subtle reference to the religious authorities who arrogantly believed that their knowledge of scripture and tradition made them superior to others) but “infants,” who place their trust in a parent to provide for and protect them. Matthew affirms that those who recognize Jesus as the divine messenger do so not on the basis of superior religious status or individual intelligence or shrewdness, but on revelation, as a gift of God to those who are open and unpretentious; *“the ‘little children,’ persons without time, ability, or interest in religious learning and who have no religious basis for claiming the knowledge of God, are the ones to whom the divine revelation is given as sheer grace.”* (M. Eugene Boring).

Jesus continues to contrast the knowledge that has been delivered to him directly from the Father and that which comes from human sources when he states that *“all 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.”* (11:27). It is this unique authority that is recognized by the crowds who are the recipients of Jesus’ Sermon on the Mount, who were *“astounded at his teaching, for he taught them as one having authority, and not as their scribes.”* (7:28-29). As the incarnate Word of God, only Jesus can claim that *“all authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me”* (28:18); as the Son of God with whom the Father is well-pleased, only Jesus can announce that *“I am the Way, and the Truth, and the Life; no one comes to the Father except through me.”* (John 14:6).

- “For I am the one who myself built the way or path, and I myself have trodden it and passed across, so that I might bring you and all who cling to me across. But you must put your trust in me, nothing doubting, must venture all on me, and with a joyous heart go and die confident in my name.” – Martin Luther.

Speaking as the embodiment of the liberating Word of God, Jesus extends an invitation to all who are burdened and prevented from coming into God’s loving presence: *“Come to me, all you that are weary and are carrying heavy burdens, and I will give you rest.”* (11:28). The direct reference here may be the burden of religious obligation imposed by the scribes and Pharisees, which Jesus understood as a barrier to communion with God: *“They tie up heavy burdens, hard to bear, and lay them on the shoulders of others;*

but they themselves are unwilling to lift a finger to move them." (23:4). In the Old Testament and Jewish tradition, "yoke" was a common metaphor for servitude, and hence obedience. In contrast to the rabbinic custom of speaking of the 'yoke of the Torah' or the 'yoke of the kingdom,' Jesus speaks of "my yoke," thereby claiming to be the expression of God's Will: "*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.*" (11:29-30). Like "rest," the "easy" yoke of Jesus is not an invitation to a life of ease, but of deliverance from the artificial burdens of human religion, which Matthew sees as a barrier to the true fellowship of the Kingdom of God. Jesus embodies the divine Wisdom that spoke words of liberating hope to God's people as "*a life-giving gift that comes with God's favor.*" (Jennifer T. Kaalund).

- "Draw near to me, you who are uneducated, and lodge in the house of instruction. Why do you say you are lacking in these things, and why do you endure such great thirst? I opened my mouth and said, Acquire wisdom for yourselves without money. Put your neck under her yoke, and let your souls receive instruction; it is to be found close by. See with your own eyes that I have laboured but little and found for myself such serenity. Hear but a little of my instruction, and through me you will acquire silver and gold." – Sirach 51:23-28.

As the Lord promised Moses that "*my presence will go before you, and I will give you rest*" (Exodus 33:14), Jesus offers "rest" to his disciples as a synonym for salvation, associated with the kingdom of God and eternal life: "*for those who enter God's rest also cease from their labours as God did from his. Let us therefore make every effort to enter that rest, so that no one may fall through such disobedience as theirs.*" (Hebrews 4:10-11). Those who are willing to embrace Jesus' invitation are the recipients of a grace that through "*flesh and blood has not revealed ... to you, but my Father in heaven.*" (16:17). It is a promise of spiritual rest that is more than that which awaits God's people in the life to come; it is also a promise of inner peace in this life, the kind of peace that quiets the mind and heart and surpasses human understanding: "*And the peace of God, which surpasses all understanding, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus.*" (Philippians 4:7).

- "Jesus' gentle instruction will enable you to find rest for your soul; to find wholeness and completion. Instructors are guides and Jesus' guidance is not harsh or arrogant, and therefore obedience to the word should be easy. Jesus' invitation is instructive. Wisdom enables self-reflection. Getting to know Jesus helps us to know ourselves better. Our pursuit of following Jesus is at the same time a pursuit of wisdom ... We must seek wisdom, be open to instruction so that our paths may become clearer and so that we can live peaceably and find rest from our labor." – Kaalund.

While many of the burdens from which Jesus seeks to liberate us have been imposed upon us by others, there are some burdens that we carry that we are responsible for placing upon ourselves. They may be the burdens of believing that we are wholly responsible for the success or failure of an endeavor, or that we must shoulder the burden of a task if it is to be accomplished. It may be the burden of fear that keeps us isolated and entrapped from venturing forth in confidence, or the burden of pride that fools us into thinking that we can accomplish a task solely through our own knowledge or talents. Burdening ourselves is an act of foolishness, the mistaken belief that we can somehow control our own destiny or the fate of others; wisdom, on the other hand, calls out to us to recognize that such false burdening will not lead us to our goal or destination but will make our journey difficult and our hope of seeing things to fruition impossible.

- “Wisdom cries out in the street; in the squares she raises her voice. At the busiest corner she cries out; at the entrance of the city gates she speaks: ‘How long, O simple ones, will you love being simple? How long will scoffers delight in their scoffing and fools hate knowledge? Give heed to my reproof; I will pour out my thoughts to you; I will make my words known to you.’” – Proverbs 1:20-23.

Jesus offers us liberation from the burdens that weigh us down and prevent us from living according to God’s Will; he also offers us liberation from the mistaken belief that being a follower of Jesus means shouldering great burdens for the sake of the Kingdom. While each of us is called to take seriously the responsibilities that have been entrusted to us as the Church of Jesus Christ, when we believe that we must take all of these responsibilities upon our shoulders we put ourselves in Christ’s place as the head of the church and as the true cornerstone upon which it is built. When we believe that we must be in control, we place an artificial burden upon ourselves that no person is expected or called to carry by themselves. The voice of Jesus that has called us into discipleship is the voice that also calls us to *“come to me and rest; lay down, O weary one, lay down your head upon my breast.”* (ELW Hymn 611). When we are *“weak and heavy-laden, cumbered with a load of care ... [our] Precious Savior [is] still our refuge – take it to the Lord in prayer.”* (ELW Hymn 742). The one who calls us to follow him calls us to *“lay your burden down”* so *“that we, being rescued from the hands of our enemies, might serve him without fear, in holiness and righteousness before him all our days.”* (Luke 1:74).

- “The wisdom of the ages has taught us that the burdens that we carry only trap us in prisons of our own making. The only way to live – to truly live – is to let go the illusion of control – whatever it is you’re trying to control. Jesus says come to me, lay down your burdens, and I will give you rest. When we lay down the fear and anger and pride that imprison us, we can open our hearts to receive joy, and love, and life, and rest.” – Brehm.

Old Dan still looked forward to Jessie’s daily visits, and he still worried about his niece who was still showing evidence of the burdens she had placed upon herself that were robbing her of the joy she had previously known. But slowly, he noticed signs of the old Jessie returning; she smiled more regularly, would go into her detailed accounts of her school day, laughed more heartily, and did not seem bothered by the slightest thing. Through the love of her family and the encouragement of her teachers, Jessie began to realize that her placement into the advanced program wasn’t meant to be a burden on her, but to open her up to new challenges and possibilities in learning. No one was expecting more from her than she was able to accomplish; and one Jessie began to realize this, it was as if a tremendous weight had been lifted off her shoulders. How she was learning that life was meant to be lived with joy and happiness, so that she might fully realize all the potential that others readily saw in her.

The call to discipleship is not a life of leisure, but neither is it one that places onerous burdens upon those who seek to follow Jesus. We do not place burdens upon ourselves, nor do we allow others to place weights of expectations upon our shoulders, that Christ does not intend for us to carry. The good news of Jesus Christ is that he has freed us from the weight of sin, death, and the power of the devil so that we might take his yoke upon ourselves, learning to live and love as a child of God who has been freed to love and serve others with the liberating message of our Lord and Saviour who calls us and all people to *“lay your burden down.”*

Amen.