

The Burden of Religion
A Sermon for Every Sunday, Pentecost 5A
Matthew 11:16-19; 25-30

“Come to me, all you that are weary and are carrying heavy burdens, and I will give you rest.” It’s one of the best-known and best-loved passages in all of Scripture. And after three weeks of working through the hard sayings of Jesus in Matthew, chapter 10—sayings like, “Don’t think I have come to bring peace to the earth; not peace, I tell you, but a sword,” and “Whoever loves father or mother, son or daughter, more than me is not worthy of me”—it is a relief to come to chapter 11, and a saying like this one. “Come to me, all you that are weary and are carrying heavy burdens, and I will give you rest,” Jesus says. “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.” I like that, don’t you? It’s the next verse I have trouble with, the one where Jesus says, “For my yoke is easy, and my burden is light.” It almost makes it sound as if working for Jesus is easy, and that the burden he gives us is a light one, and yet back in chapter 10 he was saying that whoever does not “take up the cross” and follow him is not worthy of him.

I don’t know about you, but a cross sounds like a heavy burden to me. In fact, I can’t think of a heavier one. But Jesus can. When I did a quick search to see where else he uses the word *burden* I was directed to the 23rd chapter of this same Gospel in which he says, “The scribes and the Pharisees ... tie up heavy burdens, hard to bear, and lay them on the shoulders of others” (vss. 2-4). The burdens he is talking about are all those religious rules the scribes and Pharisees wanted people to follow. Moses came down the mountain with ten commandments, but as the scribes and Pharisees searched the Scriptures they came up with a total of 613 commandments; 248 positive ones and 365

negative ones, a “thou shalt not for every day of the year. “They tie up heavy burdens, hard to bear,” Jesus said. This is the only other place in the Gospel where he uses the word *burden*. He seems to be making a direct comparison between the burden of the scribes and Pharisees and his burden. His may be a cross but theirs is the burden of religion, and as I can testify, that’s a heavy load.

I was thirteen years old when I first picked it up, living with my family in an old, white farmhouse on a hill in rural West Virginia. It was Christmas, and my two older brothers, Ed and Scott, were home from boarding school for the holidays. Scott had accepted an invitation from some of our neighbors to visit their church on a Thursday night, of all things. They warned us when they came to pick him up that they might not be home until late and I smiled, because Scott didn’t seem especially spiritual in those days; the thought of him spending four hours in any church was a bit of a stretch, but what happened later that night was almost unbelievable.

I woke up around midnight and heard Scott downstairs in our primitive kitchen heating a kettle of water so he could wash his feet before coming to bed. He was speaking some strange language, talking in a high-pitched voice punctuated every few seconds by a yelp of laughter, a whoop of joy. It sounded like someone playing a happy record at the wrong speed, only not quite as musical.

Ed and I met at the top of the stairs and went down to the kitchen where we found Scott talking to my mother, pausing every few moments for a giddy whoop and a few more words in this strange language. He was washing his feet in a basin of water as he talked, and I remember that every time he whooped his feet would fly out of the basin and water would splash on the kitchen floor. This was not the same Scott who had gone

out the door so reluctantly a few hours earlier, and I wondered what had happened to him. Was he drunk? Ed and I looked at each other and then back at Scott as we waited for an explanation.

He kept talking about this church he had been to, and about "receiving the Holy Spirit" while he was there. I had no idea what he meant by that, but I remember being so impressed by the sudden change in Scott that I concluded *something* must have happened to him, something strange, and powerful, and . . . holy.

Ed must have come to the same conclusion, because suddenly he leaned forward and asked Scott: "Does God have a message for me?" And Scott got very quiet, closed his eyes, and then began speaking in that strange language again, but slower and quieter this time. He talked for several minutes, and although we couldn't make sense of the words the tone of voice he used was gentle and encouraging, as if God were telling Ed to keep up the good work. I was encouraged by what I heard, so when Scott opened his eyes I asked him if God had a message for me, too.

He closed his eyes again, but this time there was a long pause before he spoke. When he did, his voice was choked and sad, and tears began streaming down both cheeks. I was horrified. This wasn't a word of encouragement at all: it was the pouring out of a broken heart. When it was over a few minutes later I went back to bed without a word, shocked by what had just happened and embarrassed that my mother and brother had seen it, too. For the longest time I lay on my bed wondering what I had done to break God's heart and how I could possibly mend it.

Let me interrupt to say that it isn't wrong for a thirteen year old boy to lie on his bed, wondering what he has done to break the heart of God. There are probably plenty of

things. But if I were counseling that boy today I might say that there could be more than one explanation for Scott's tears. Scott might have been weeping over our own relationship, which wasn't always an easy one. He might have been weeping over some of the things he had said or done to me, or things I had said or done to him. There was really no way to know what he was saying, all I could do was interpret the tone of his voice and the tears on his cheeks. I interpreted them to mean that God's heart had been broken, and that it had been broken because of me. So I lay in my bed wondering what you do when you've broken God's heart. How do you put it back together again?

I started by going with Scott to that same church the next night, and over the next few weeks I went every chance I got and prayed to receive the same gift Scott had received—the gift of the Holy Spirit. I wanted to “speak in tongues” as they called it, so that my mother and my brothers would know God's broken heart had been mended, that he and I had made our peace, and that he had given this gift as a sign of reconciliation. But although I prayed (and prayed hard) the gift never came. Finally, exhausted by the effort, I gave up trying, and turned my energy to the reading of Scripture instead, gobbling up whole chapters of the Bible my parents had given me for Christmas, underlining long passages with a felt-tipped pen and making notes in the margins. But that didn't do it either. Instead of mending God's broken heart I only became more convinced that I had broken it. “All have sinned,” the Bible said. “The wages of sin is death,” the Bible said. “Repent and be baptized,” the Bible said.

And that's just what I decided to do.

That next summer I waded out into the river near our house as repentant as I knew how to be. I was truly sorry for my sins, and longed for them to be washed away forever.

My father and a Baptist minister were waiting there to baptize me, and after they had each said a few words they dipped me beneath the surface of those muddy brown waters in the name of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit and I came up to a whole new life. At least, that's how it was supposed to be. Someone asked me afterward, on the way home, if I felt any different and I surprised myself by saying, "No, not really."

What I had been after in all that fervent praying, and all that urgent reading, and even in that desperate baptism, was a means of undoing the damage I had done, to somehow make things right with God again. I was carrying the burden of religion, trying to be good enough to please God. But I think even more than that I was trying to convince my mother and brothers who had been there on that night that God and I had made our peace. And to be completely honest I think it was mostly my mother I was trying to convince. She was such a good Christian; I wanted her to believe that I was one, too. So, when I read my Bible I did it at the kitchen table, where she could see me. And when I went off to boarding school I assured her that I was going to church services on Sundays. And when I came home from college I would try to work into our conversation some detail of my prayer life. I was trying to be good enough to earn God and my mother's favor. But it was a burden I was carrying—the burden of religion.

And then, when I was twenty five, something happened.

My wife, Christy, had just graduated from college, and we were on our way to the beach to celebrate. I was driving south from our home in Georgetown, Kentucky, toward Knoxville, Tennessee, on Interstate 75, and Christy had just dozed off in the passenger seat beside me. I started thinking about all those attempts I had made to mend God's broken heart and how I had never been able to convince myself that I had succeeded. I

thought about the times I had tried to convince my mother that I was a real Christian—you know, that I had been “saved”—and how I had probably failed at that, too. And then it occurred to me: my salvation wasn’t up to my mother. My salvation wasn’t even up to me, ultimately. My salvation was up to Jesus Christ, and if what the Bible said about him was true then what he really loved to do was save sinners. Not *had* to—*loved* to! My heart started beating faster as I thought about it. “Wait a minute,” I said, under my breath. “If Jesus loves to save sinners, and I’m a sinner who needs to be saved, then what’s stopping us? *What’s stopping us!?*” And right there—at mile marker 78—I gave up the struggle. The burden of trying to earn my own salvation slipped from my shoulders, the burden of trying to prove something to my mother slid off with it, and tears of joy began to slide down my cheeks.

“Come to me, all you that are weary and are carrying heavy burdens, and I will give you rest,” Jesus says. “For my yoke is easy, and my burden is light.” I think I would have told you on that day that even if Jesus’ burden were a heavy wooden cross it would be lighter than the burden of religion I had been carrying. Trying to be good enough to please God and my mother had exhausted me, robbed me of every joy.

Not long after I came to Richmond I visited Church Hill and saw people standing in line to get into St. John’s Church, where Patrick Henry had said so unforgettably, “Give me liberty or give me death!” I thought about that indomitable part of the human spirit that loves liberty more than life, the same part that inspired the Declaration of Independence and got us into the Revolutionary War, the part we celebrate when we shoot off fireworks on the Fourth of July. “It’s like that,” I thought. “Jesus is saying that the burden of his cross is lighter than the burden of religion, and easier to bear.

Following him might be the death of you but at least you would be laying down your life for someone you love, rather than laying it down for some law you didn't." And that's the real difference, isn't it? Jesus is asking us to exchange the burden of law for the burden of love, to simply love him and follow him instead of trying to keep all those religious rules. Anyone who has tried it can tell you: to follow Jesus? To love him?

That's no burden at all.

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