"Lay Your Burden Down"

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

I’ve often noted that I had a wonderful childhood, but I must confess that there were moments when my friends and I did some pretty stupid things:

- We would have contests to see who could stuff the most marshmallows into their mouth at one time.
- We would rake leaves into a pile and then see who could jump off the highest tree limb into that pile.
- We would have races down the muddy slopes of the piles of dirt around local construction sites.
- At those same sites, we would pick up loose bricks and see who could carry the most bricks on their back to the end of the lot.

I would like to say that these were childish behaviors that I have put behind me (as Paul says in 1 Corinthians, “when I became an adult, I put an end to childish ways” – 13:11), but in regard to the last item I still find myself carrying too much weight, bearing overwhelming burdens that unduly weigh me down, hold me back, and at times have threatened to defeat me. And while I no longer engage in such behaviors with my childhood friends, I know that there are many of us who also find ourselves carrying too much weight, bearing burdens that can put us at great risk. Some of these burdens are physical (I sometimes think that I’m strong than I really am), but many of these burdens are not physical but are just as real as those bricks in my old neighborhood. They can be the burdens placed on us by our jobs, or the burden of caring for our families, or the burden of financial distress, or the burden of self-doubt, or even the burdens that we may feel that our faith places upon us. Carrying too many burdens can place our physical, emotional, and spiritual health in great danger.

Speaking as the embodiment of divine wisdom, Jesus’ invitation in today’s Gospel lesson extends to all who are burdened: “Come to me, all you that are weary and are carrying heavy burdens, and I will give you rest.” (Matthew 11:28). The “burden” that is foremost on Jesus’ mind is that 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). The heavy burden they lay on the people is not the Torah itself but their particular interpretation and practice of the Law, which mandated severe restrictions in the manner in which people lived their daily lives:

- Exclusion of persons deemed ritually unclean from communal meals; when Jesus sat at table with “many tax collectors and sinners,” the Pharisees asked his disciples, “why does your teacher eat with tax collectors and sinners?” (9:10-11).
- Restrictions on the Sabbath that ignored human need; when the disciples “began to pluck heads of grain” on the Sabbath, the Pharisees complained to Jesus that “your disciples are doing what is not lawful on the Sabbath.” (12:1-2).
- Placing great emphasis on tithing certain items while neglecting the weightier matters of the Law: “Woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! For you tithe mint, dill, and cumin, and have neglected the weightier matters of the law: justice and mercy and faith. It is these you ought to have practiced without neglecting the others.” (23:23).

The religious leaders were also complicit with the Roman rulers in maintaining the imperial system that oppressed the people of Israel. While the common people struggled under the weight of the Roman
occupation (including the harsh taxes that the Romans imposed upon those they occupied), the ruling elites had secured wealth, status, and power through allying themselves with the Romans. Jesus would later reject this social order as contrary to God’s Will:

> “You know that the rulers of the Gentiles lord it over them, and their great ones are tyrants over them. It will not be so among you; but whoever wishes to be great among you must be your servant, and whoever wishes to be first among you must be your slave; just as the Son of Man came not to be served but to serve, and to give his life a ransom for many.” – 20:25-28.

Jesus’ invitation to those who are burdened by the weights imposed on them by these unfaithful rulers is to come to him, to follow him and instead of them, “and I will give you rest.” “Rest” (anapausis) can refer to Sabbath rest, the rest of death, or rest from war when one’s enemies are subdued. “Rest” also functions as an image of salvation, of what will be when God’s Will is accomplished and God’s people enjoy a full and complete Sabbath. “In promising ‘rest,’ Jesus promises life under God’s reign in the new world that he is bringing into being.” (Elizabeth Johnson).

As Jesus invites his followers to “lay your burden down” in accepting the “rest” that only he can provide, he also issues another invitation:

> “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.

In physical terms, a “yoke” is what is placed on an oxen or beast of burden to pull a plow or a carriage. In the Old Testament and Jewish tradition, “yoke” was a common metaphor for servitude and obedience; it also had positive connotations, as an invitation to divine Wisdom: “Put your neck under her yoke, and let your souls receive instruction; it is to be found close by.” (Sirach 51:26). In contrast to speaking of the “yoke of the Torah” or the “yoke of the kingdom,” Jesus speaks of “my yoke,” thereby claiming to be an expression of God’s Will (“The Father and I are one.” – John 10:30). The “easy yoke” is not an invitation to a life of ease, but a deliverance from the artificial burdens of human religion, which Matthew sees as a barrier to the true fellowship of the Kingdom of God. The yoke of Jesus is one that is placed upon a person when they accept his invitation to discipleship, when they endeavor to “learn from me” as the one who has “the words of eternal life.” (John 6:68). A disciple is a student, one who sits at the feet of one’s teacher and listens to the teacher’s words; Jesus’ invitation to discipleship is a call for his followers to “go and learn what this means: ‘I desire mercy, not sacrifice.’ For I have come to call not the righteous but sinners.” (9:13).

Jesus’ teaching, his way of discipleship, is not meant to be burdensome but life-giving. In contrast to rulers who act as tyrants over their subordinates, Jesus is one who is “gentle and humble in heart.” Like God in addressing Moses (“My presence will go with you, and I will give you rest.” – Exodus 33:14), Jesus offers “rest” which is not mere ease (he has already warned his disciples that “you will be hated by all because of my name” – 10:22) but a synonym for salvation, associated with the Kingdom of God and eternal life.

> “Therefore, while the promise of entering his rest is still open, let us take care that none of you should seem to have failed to reach it ... For we who have believed have entered that rest, just as God has said, ‘As in my anger I swore, “They shall not enter my rest.”’” – Hebrews 4:1,3.

> “And I heard a voice from heaven saying, ‘Write this: Blessed are the dead who from now on die in the Lord.’ ‘Yes,’ says the Spirit, ‘they will rest from their labors, for their deeds follow them.’” – Revelation 14:13.

In their decision to accept Jesus’ invitation to discipleship, his followers placed their lives in the hands of the Saviour who was able to remove the burdens that were weighting them down, holding them back, and
preventing them from living the abundant lives that God desires for all God’s people. The burdens that God’s people had been carrying were weights that they were unable to lift off their own shoulders, for it is only through Christ’s death and resurrection that these life-threatening burdens – especially “sin, death, and the power of the devil” (Small Catechism) – can be removed so that they have no more control over us. Christ threw these burdens aside through his suffering, death, and resurrection “in order that I may belong to him, live under him in his kingdom, and serve him in eternal righteousness, innocence, and blessedness, just as he is risen from the dead and lives and rules in eternity.” Through our baptism into Christ’s death and resurrection, the burdens that have been placed upon us have been lifted off us “so that, just as Christ was raised from the dead by the glory of the Father, so we too might walk in newness of life.” (Romans 6:4). In our walk as disciples of Christ, we must endeavor to “lay aside every weight and the sin that clings so closely, and let us run with perseverance the race that is set before us, looking to Jesus the pioneer and perfecter of our faith, who for the sake of the joy that was set before him endured the cross, disregarding its shame, and has taken his seat at the right hand of the throne of God.” (Hebrews 12:1-2).

Perhaps the key to understanding Jesus’ invitation are in his opening words, “come to me.” When we turn to Christ, it means that we are turning away from others who would seek our allegiance, who would impose false burdens upon us, who would lead us away from the light of Christ into the darkness of following other gods. As we celebrate the Sacrament of Holy Baptism this morning, all of will once again be challenged to accept the invitation of our Lord to “come to me,” to renew our baptismal promises to “trust God, proclaim Christ through word and deed, care for others and the world God made, and work for justice and peace” (ELW Holy Baptism). In confessing the faith that binds us to Christ and to one another, we also reject being bound to any other force or power that would falsely claim our allegiance, falsely burden us with demands and requirements that have no place in God’s reign, and falsely draw us away from following our Lord Jesus Christ:

- “Do you renounce the devil and all the forces that defy God?”
- “Do you renounce the powers of this world that rebel against God?”
- “Do you renounce the ways of sin that draw you from God?”

It is through these renunciations that “evil is thus rejected in order to make room for the affirmation of God: they are two sides of the same action … having rejected evil, the evil one, and all his empty promises, [God’s people] turn and profess the faith of the Church as summarized in the ancient biblical creed.” (Philip H. Pfatteicher and Carlos R. Messerli, Manual on the Liturgy).

Yet even as we rejoice that our burdens have been lifted off our shoulders through Christ’s death and resurrection, and even as we resolve to renounce all forces that seek to place those burdens upon us again, we often find that our lives are constantly being burdened by weights that are neither of our own doing nor are the will of God for God’s people. While the type of religious restrictions of Jesus’ time may no longer be a factor in our lives, there are many other burdens that keep us from the freedom that God intends for all of us: Fear. Throughout the Bible, God calls upon God’s people to “have no fear,” to “cast all your anxiety upon him, because he cares for you.” (1 Peter 5:7). But we continue to be overwhelmed by the burden of fear: fear for our safety, fear for the future of our children, fear over the course of world politics, fear over our financial security, fear for our health, fear for the future of the church. Fear is a burden that “keeps us locked in a prison cell where our only companion is what we fear the most.” (Alan Brehm).
Anger. While Jesus did display a form of “righteous anger” when he turned over the tables of the moneychangers in the Temple (John 2:13-25), most forms of anger are destructive – to ourselves and to others. Anger destroys lives, relationships, communities, and left unaddressed can be as infectious and destructive as a physical disease. Anger “keeps us miserable, in turmoil, such in a place where we relive that hurt – over and over again.” (Brehm). If we keep “carrying that anger, it’ll eat you up inside.” (Don Henley, “The Heart of the Matter”).

Pride. While it is noble to have pride in one’s work and one’s accomplishment, pride can also lead to perfectionism, which burdens us with a goal that is unattainable for any human being. Pride is considered one of the “Seven Deadly Sins” because it can lead us to rely on our own understanding or ability instead of trusting in God – it becomes a false idol. Biblical wisdom warns us that “Pride goes before destruction, and a haughty spirit before a fall” (Proverbs 16:18); Jesus lists pride as one of the “evil things [that] come from within, and they defile a person.” (Mark 7:23). Luther teaches that “one must pray God to give us a conscience unafraid, which is assured that its sins are forgiven,” so that we do not “get stuck in the mire of being proud and thinking that we are thoroughly holy people.” (Sermons of the Catechism).

It is when we find ourselves overburdened – by fear, anger or pride; by the weight of worry for ourselves, those we love, and the world; by responsibilities that may appear to be too much for us to bear – that the words of Jesus come to us as a breath of fresh air, as water to quench our thirsty souls, as a light that shatters the darkness of doubt and despair. It is the Word of Good News that is at the heart of the Gospel of Jesus Christ, the invitation to “lay your burdens down,” to cast our cares and anxieties upon our Lord who cares for us and loves us so much that he took the burdens of sin and death off of us through his death and resurrection so that we might walk in newness of life. Jesus’ words are “an invitation to all who know themselves to be burdened and in need of salvation, an invitation to learn and become Jesus’ disciples.” (M. Eugene Boring). It is an invitation to allow Jesus to take the false yoke of slavery off our shoulders so that the true yoke of discipleship might be placed upon us, a yoke that “calls us to a life of humble service, but it is a life of freedom and joy instead of slavery. It is a life yoked to Jesus under God’s gracious and merciful reign, free from the burden of sin and the need to prove oneself, free to rest deeply and securely in God’s grace.” (Johnson). “Glory, glory, hallelujah, since I laid my burden down.” (American spiritual).

I’ve given up a lot of my stupid childish practices like jumping into leaf piles, stuffing marshmallows into my mouth, or trying to win a brick-carrying contest. But I still carry to many burdens that foolishly weigh me down, hold me back, and prevent me from living according to God’s will for my life. As we celebrate our freedom in Christ through baptism, may we endeavor to cast our burdens upon the Lord who loves us and lifted us, so that we may be free to “serve him without fear, in holiness and righteousness before him all our days.” (Luke 1:74). Amen.