

July 9, 2023
Matthew 11:16-19, 25-30

Pentecost 6
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“Easing Our Burden”

“Come to me, all you that are weary and are carrying heavy burdens, and I will give you rest.”

Weigh stations are a common sight along major highways in Canada and the United States. The purpose of these checkpoints is to conduct inspections for vehicular weights and safety compliance criteria, primarily for trucks and commercial vehicles. If the vehicle is found to be overweight, it may be ordered to stop operating until the situation can be fixed by either acquiring an overweight permit or offloading the extra weight onto another vehicle. Weighing trucks is important for the safety of both the operator as well as others on the road.

For most of us, weigh stations do not affect our travels since they are intended for commercial vehicles that few of us drive. But there are other times in our lives when weight limits and restrictions may have an impact on us. On my recent trip to Pearson airport to pick up our friend, Terri, who was visiting from Long Island, I noticed several people in the departure area transferring personal items from one suitcase to another so that all their luggage would be under the weight limit imposed by the airlines. One time when I was flying from Buffalo to Newark, the airline agent asked each passenger for our personal weight, since we would be flying on a smaller plane that had a limited weight capacity. When I enter an elevator at a hospital, hotel, or office building, I often notice the weight capacity sign next to the door, important information if the elevator gets overcrowded to the point where it may impact the safety of all passengers. Understanding and abiding by weight limits is important to the safety of persons in a wide variety of contexts, both in travel and in everyday life.

While such weight limit regulations are more of a modern phenomenon, our Lord Jesus Christ was aware of the danger of persons of his time carrying too much weight and living under overwhelming burdens. His concern for the dangers that such burdens are imposing on his people may be rooted in the wisdom tradition of the Old Testament and Judaism, in which the personified divine Wisdom calls people to take up her yoke and find rest:

- “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 much serenity. Hear but a little of my instruction, and through me you will acquire silver and gold. May your soul rejoice in God’s mercy, and may you never be ashamed to praise him. Do your work in good time, and in his own time God will give you your reward.” – Sirach 51:23-30.

Jesus’ concern for his overburdened people and his invitation to them to find rest in him is extended in the context of our Lord’s words of judgment against those who have been critical of the ministries of both Jesus and John the Baptist. The preceding sections of the eleventh chapter of Matthew’s Gospel have made clear both the identity of Jesus and John: Jesus is the expected “coming one,” and John is the final messenger promised by God to prepare the way:

- “This is the one about whom it is written, ‘See, I am sending my messenger ahead of you, who will prepare your way before you.’” – 11:10.

But although both Jesus and John were sent by God to extend a call to repentance to all people (“*Repent, for the kingdom of heaven has come near*” – 3:2, 4:17), only a few took it to heart. Jesus directs his message to “this generation,” a favourite description in the gospels of those who are unbelieving, who lack discernment, who fail to recognize both John and Jesus. The phrase has its origins in the wicked generation of Noah’s day as well as the faithless generation of Israel that was denied entrance into the promised land:

- “The LORD saw that the wickedness of humankind was great in the earth, and that every inclination of the thoughts of their hearts was only evil continually.” – Genesis 6:5.
- “When the LORD heard your words, he was wrathful and swore: ‘Not one of these – not one of this evil generation – shall see the good land that I swore to give to your ancestors’” – Deuteronomy 1:35.
- “The Rock, his work is perfect, and all his ways are just. A faithful God, without deceit, just and upright is he; yet his degenerate children have dealt falsely with him, a perverse and crooked generation.” – Deuteronomy 32:4-5.

Jesus will later make these recollections from biblical history more explicit: *“You faithless and perverse generation, how much longer must I be with you? How much longer must I put up with you?”* (17:17).

Jesus follows his opening statement about “this generation” that has proven unfaithful repeatedly to God’s teachings and invitations with a parable that alludes to village life in Palestine. According to customs among children, boys invited their companions to dance at weddings and girls sang laments at funerals and invited their friends to mourn. Here, sounding the flute refers to the call of Jesus, who spoke of himself as a bridegroom enjoying the celebration of a wedding feast (*“The wedding guests cannot mourn as long as the bridegroom is with them, can they? The day will come when the bridegroom is taken away from them, and then they will fast.”* – 9:15). Likewise, the singing of a dirge represents the ascetic witness of John the Baptist, in particular the fasting he encouraged among his disciples. In Jesus’ analogy, the faithless generation of his time are *“like children sitting in the marketplaces and calling to one another, ‘We played the flute for you, and you did not dance; we wailed, and you did not mourn.’”* (11:16-17). In Matthew’s chiasmic structure, the latter option corresponds to the gaunt and ascetic figure of John, whose message of coming judgment was too unworldly for the sophisticates of “this generation.” But when Jesus came in meekness, announcing the peaceable kingdom of unconditional love and forgiveness and celebrating the goodness of life with all, he was rejected as not “spiritual enough.” *“The disagreeable playmates who refuse to dance and mourn are the crowds that declined both the festive invitation of Jesus as well as the penitential summons of John.”* (Curtis Mitch and Edward Sri).

Jesus’ description of John as one who *“came neither eating nor drinking”* (11:18) refers to his life as a consecrated Nazirite who consumed neither *“wine nor strong drink; even before his birth he will be filled with the Holy Spirit”* (Luke 1:15). For this reason, some people thought him to be exceedingly strange and concluded that he must be possessed by a demon. On the other hand, Jesus attended dinner parties to bring his message to the common people; but when *“the Son of Man came eating and drinking,”* some called him *“a glutton and drunkard, a friend of tax collectors and sinners!”* (11:19), a reference to a teaching in Deuteronomy in which parents bring their rebellious son before the elders and declare that *“this son of ours is stubborn and rebellious. He will not obey us. He is a glutton and a drunkard.”* (Deuteronomy 21:20). This reference suggests that the response of “this generation” is intended as more than an insult; they are identifying Jesus as a rebellious Israelite worthy of stoning, one who should be executed to purge evil from the midst of the covenant community. In the end, it seems that nothing could please the faithless generation of John and Jesus; by concluding that *“wisdom is vindicated by her*

deeds,” Jesus is declaring that heavenly wisdom may not always cohere with earthly expectations; the faithless generation that reject John and Jesus “*wanted nothing to do with the wisdom of the Messiah and his forerunner.*” (Mitch and Sri).

After his lament over the failure of his faithless generation to respond to God’s Word as proclaimed by John the Baptist and Jesus, our Lord turns his attention to coming before God in prayer. This is a rare opportunity for readers of Matthew to hear Jesus in prayer; the only other times when this Evangelist offers episodes of our Lord praying is at the Garden of Gethsemane and on the Cross at Golgotha:

- “And going a little farther, he threw himself on the ground and prayed, ‘My Father, if it is possible, let this cup pass from me; yet not what I want but what you want.’” – 26:39.
- “And about three o’clock Jesus cried with a loud voice, ‘Eli, Eli, lema sabachthani?’ that is, ‘My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?’” – 27:46.

Using the form of a Jewish prayer of thanksgiving, Jesus praised the “*Lord of heaven and earth*” for the favours God has bestowed on God’s people, “*because you have hidden these things from the wise and the intelligent and have revealed them to infants; yes, Father, for such was your gracious will.*” (11:25-26). Despite the rejection of many, some persons accepted Jesus’ mission and message, and for this he gives thanks. Those who accepted are not the “wise and intelligent,” but the “infants.” Those who recognize Jesus as the divine messenger do so not based on superior religious status or individual intelligence or shrewdness, but by revelation as a gift of the God to whom they are open and unpretentious. These “little children” (NIV) are the one to whom the divine revelation is given as sheer grace; as he will later teach his disciples, “*truly I tell you, unless you change and become like children, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven.*” (18:3). The disciples’ willingness to embrace the mystery of Jesus has nothing to do with their intelligence or level of education; rather, they are recipients of a grace that comes from their Father in heaven, as is apparent when Jesus praises Simon Peter after his declaration that Jesus is “*the Messiah, the Son of the living God*”: “*Blessed are you, Simon son of Jonah! For flesh and blood has not revealed this to you, but my Father in heaven.*” (16:16-17).

Jesus turns his attention from his prayer to the Father to the crowds gathered in his presence as he declares 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). Jesus declares

that his knowledge is delivered to him directly from the Father, in contrast to the scribes and rabbis, whose tradition is on the human level alone (*“Now when Jesus had finished saying these things, the crowds were astounded at his teaching, for he taught them as one having authority, and not as their scribes.”* – 7:28-29). Jesus is not pictured by Matthew as a religious genius who has discovered the divine mystery, but as the beloved Son who is on intimate terms with the Father, who has given “all things” to the Son (*“All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me.”* – 28:18). Jesus’ statement claims exclusive knowledge between the Father and the Son; this mutual divine knowledge would have remained hidden forever were it not for the will of the Father and the Son to reveal it to the world.

- “The perceptive reader is stunned by this section of Matthew, in which all those who should recognize the definitive revelation of God taking place in their midst instead fail to ‘get it’ ... The scholars and the wise, who could explain much but missed the revelation in their midst, did not get it. Those who did get it were the ‘babies,’ the unpretentious ‘little ones’ who made no claims but could be given the gift of revelation, which comes from God alone.” – M. Eugene Boring.

Speaking as the embodiment of divine Wisdom, Jesus extends an invitation to *“all you that are weary and are carrying heavy burdens, and I will give you rest”* (11:28). Jesus’ invitation is directed to those who are struggling under the burden of religious obligation imposed on them by the scribes and Pharisees and the pretensions of human religion (*“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 benefit of answering Jesus’ call is spiritual rest, a promise of everlasting repose in the life to come and the promise of inner peace in this life, *“the peace of God, which surpasses all understanding, [that] will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus”* (Philippians 4:7). Jesus invites those who come to him to find this rest that only our Lord can provide to *“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”* (11:29). In the Old Testament and Jewish tradition, “yoke” was a common metaphor for servitude and obedience as well as religious instruction (the “yoke of the Torah”). Peter speaks of such a “yoke” in his address to the Council at Jerusalem in Acts:

- “And God, who knows the human heart, testified to them by giving them the Holy Spirit, just as he did to us; and in cleansing their hearts by faith he has made no distinction between them and us. Now therefore why are you putting God to the test by placing on the neck of the disciples a yoke that neither our ancestors nor we have been able to bear? On the contrary, we believe that we

will be saved through the grace of the Lord Jesus, just as they will.” – Acts 15:8-11.

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When Jesus speaks of “my yoke,” he speaks of his teaching as bringing to perfection the deepest intentions of the Torah (“*Do not think that I have come to abolish the law and the prophets; I have come not to abolish but to fulfill*” – 5:17) as well as the “*living embodiment of a new Torah for the people of God and the incarnation of divine Wisdom for all who seek spiritual fulfillment and rest*” (Mitch and Sri). As the Lord promised Moses that “*my presence will go with you, and I will give you rest*” (Exodus 33:14), Jesus offers his followers a rest which is not mere ease but a synonym for salvation (“*Blessed are the dead who from now on die in the Lord. ‘Yes,’ says the Spirit, ‘they will rest from their labours, for their deeds follow them.’*” (Revelation 14:13). Having been unburdened of the “yoke” of human interpretations and expectations – a burden not imposed by God but humans – Jesus invites his followers to take up “*my yoke [which] is easy, and my burden is light*” (11:30). The yoke of Jesus is the call to discipleship, to submit oneself to the instruction of the Messiah. Discipleship under the yoke of Jesus is not effortless, but neither is it meant to be an exhausting burden; for it is “*for freedom Christ has set us free. Stand firm, therefore, and do not submit again to a yoke of slavery*” (Galatians 5:1).

- “Christ has not freed us from human duties but from eternal wrath. Where? In the conscience. That is the limit of our freedom, and it must go no further. For Christ has set us spiritually free; that is, he has set us free in the sense that our conscience is free and joyful and no longer fears the coming wrath of God. That is true freedom, and no one can value it highly enough ... Truly, it is a wonderful freedom, above all understanding, that God’s high majesty is gracious to us.” – Martin Luther.

Weigh stations are placed along highways to keep both the operators of commercial vehicles and those who share the road with them safe from the dangers of overburdened transports. This life-threatening yoke of burden for travelers is also present whenever we are overburdened by inappropriate or unnecessary expectations that weigh us down, threaten our physical and spiritual health, and deny us the freedom and abundance that are God’s Will for all people. Our Lord Jesus Christ has come to free us from the burdens of “*sin, death, and the power of the devil*” as in his death he destroys the power of death that weighs upon us and in his resurrection lifts us up to live in joy and hope as God’s beloved children. The yoke our Lord invites us to take upon ourselves is the same yoke that Christ bore for the sake of others; in accepting Jesus’ invitation, we take upon ourselves the yoke that serves to liberate others and to share the good news of Jesus Christ with all people.

The yoke of Jesus is the yoke of discipleship, our call to share Christ's liberating Word so that all people may be "*free to worship him without fear, hold and righteous in his sight all the days of our life.*"

Amen.